

# 2025 ACC Football Championship Game: Virginia vs. Duke

Sunday, December 7, 2025

Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

Bank of America Stadium

**Duke Blue Devils**

**Coach Manny Diaz**

**Darian Mensah**

Postgame Press Conference



Duke 27, Virginia 20 (OT)

MANNY DIAZ: All right, thank you. Immensely proud to be the head football coach at Duke University. My mind instantly goes back to the interview process, on a Zoom with President Vincent Price talking about Duke's ambition to be a major player going forward in college football, and the assurance that Duke wants to be excellent in football as they are in everything else was a big part of why I came, and the leadership of Vincent Price, Nina King, the support we've gotten from our administration, from Iron Dukes, it has put us in position to have the result that we had today.

So I just feel very humbled by the people who support us. They allowed the players that we can attract, that are drawn not just in terms of the football aspect of what Duke can offer but what Duke can offer in terms of the experience of our guys when they come on our campus.

The fact that this guy sitting next to me chose to come to Duke is a big part of why we're sitting on this podium here today as champions in the ACC.

We've got a senior class that was probably recruited mostly by David Cutcliffe's staff and David Cutcliffe is the guy who really got the momentum back, got the wind back into the sails of Duke football.

Thankful for him. Thankful for Mike Elko for taking it to another level. Thankful for David Feeley for staying and being really the backbone. When we talk about the resiliency of our football team, that's where it's taught and that's where it's learned.

All those things you need to have on a stage like this. We've got through a lot of adversity this year, maybe more so than any other team in the country, but we learned from it. It wasn't frustrating, it was all part of the process of what it takes to build a big time program, and I think that has a lot to do with why we were able to overcome the adversity the last two minutes of regulation tonight. We said we were going to win the game on the last play of the game and we did it in a very Duke fashion.

The trust I have in this guy here to go for it on 4th down, to me it's not even a gamble. I'd do it 100 times out of 100.

And then for the defense to go out there and get a stop, Luke Mergott, kind of the story of our defense, right? We've been besieged by injuries in the back seven, a guy who probably thought he would have a limited role most of this year playing behind Nick Morris and he makes arguably the play of our season, one he will never forget. I know he is still holding the football, I'm sure he'll ever sure relinquish that football.

Super proud of our guys. Proud to be an ACC champion. Know it hasn't been done in a long time, and the pride we have of doing things at Duke that haven't been done in a long time.

With that, let's do questions.

**Q. Manny, you talked about this week with the playoff situation in terms of hypotheticals. If we win, we'll have this resume. Now that you've accomplished this, do you want to state your case more? Also, what kind of message do you think it would send if the committee did not pick the ACC champion for the playoff?**

MANNY DIAZ: Well, they have new information, right? No one should make a decision based off incomplete information, which is why I always feel like the weekly polls are kind of a farce anyway.

Now the full resume, the full information is available. We play 10 Power Four teams, comparing us so James

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Madison, for example, who had a fantastic season, right? Their schedule of strength is in the 100s; ours is somewhere in the 50s. Seven wins in our conference, seven Power Four wins as opposed to zero Power Four wins. 0-1 versus the ACC as opposed to seven wins in the ACC and ACC champions.

And this guy, right? This guy should be quarterbacking the Duke Blue Devils in the College Football Playoff because of the player he is. Yeah, we had to learn through some of those losses and those losses are the reason why we're a champion today.

Without them, I'm not sure that we would have had the wherewithal to recognize what it takes to pull out a game like this against an outstanding Virginia football team.

The ACC conference champion should go to the College Football Playoff this year and every year, and we'll be very excited to find out how they rule on that tomorrow.

**Q. Manny, I'm curious how many Gatorade/ice baths you've gotten in your life and what that experience was like for you?**

MANNY DIAZ: I've been fortunate; I've gotten a few. None quite happened like tonight because I thought I was wise enough to duck out of the way, and it kind of hit me sort of in the lower back down. So I'm pretty cool from here up, but from here down, it's rather uncomfortable.

But it does feel like victory, so I'll take it every time.

**Q. Darian, can you take us through the last throw, the 4th down throw, and what your reads were, and when you saw Jeremiah pop open in the end zone?**

DARIAN MENSAH: Yeah, I'm trying to get the ball to my slot receiver, Queso. I motioned him over in the boundary to the field. He was like a quick out, trying to get a little pick action, and they covered it well. Virginia has a really good defense, and the challenge was could we run the ball. We don't get in that situation if we don't continue to choose to run the ball and be the most physical team on the field and get down to the 1-, 2-yard line like where we were. They covered Queso and Jerry slipped over, and by the grace of God I found him.

**Q. Coach, you were pretty candid about y'all's performance the last time you faced Virginia three weeks ago. Talk about how you used the feelings and emotions you were feeling after that game, that loss, and how you used that coming into tonight?**

DARIAN MENSAH: Yeah, they definitely got after our

butts a little bit last time we played them. They really just dared us to run the ball. We knew that was going to be the challenge heading into the game.

My front five did an exceptional job of creating holes for our running backs all game long. So super proud of that unit. Our tight ends did the same thing as well. Jeremiah played an awesome game running the ball and receiving.

He makes those plays that you don't really see in the stat sheet, but if you watch the tape back, you know that he's probably giving the most effort on the field from a play to play basis.

Like I said, I'm just super proud of our unit tonight offensively; faced a lot of adversity. My defense also played exceptional. When I threw the pick over there, they rallied behind me and they just told me that they got me. That means a lot to me.

MANNY DIAZ: And I would just say from my standpoint, we're not the same team we were that day. We were out of character. I think we were uptight. I think this is part of dealing with expectation and letting all that go and playing this week as if we did belong here on this stage.

No matter what people said we earned our way in this game and now we've earned our way to being ACC champions.

**Q. Coach, last game against UVA time of possession was on your side. This time two of the longest possessions in ACC Championship history. Can you talk about that being a part of your scheme, keeping UVA off the field? Darian, great performance tonight, bread and butter, you and Cooper Barkate seemed to have great chemistry. Can you talk about y'all's chemistry?**

DARIAN MENSAH: Yeah, I think it started when he first got here in the fall. We were roommates and during fall keep and we developed an unbreakable bond and friendship. We've both from California so we have a lot of similarities.

But we knew also the two challenges of the game were to run the football like I just said and to challenge them down the field vertically because last time I didn't connect on them, and that was the difference in the game.

Had dudes wide open last time we played and I just wasn't able to connect. Tonight I think the result is just because we can run the ball and throw the ball down the field vertically.



MANNY DIAZ: I think your point to the first drive of the game, I think it was 5:22 left on the clock when we scored. It was almost a 10-minute drive. It was almost the exact opposite of the way the last game started. Virginia went on a really long drive to start the game. We almost completely flipped it. I thought our performance on 4th down in the first half was so key, right? We got them to jump offsides on a punt, then we converted a 4th down and short, we faked the punt later in that -- so we got 14 points off of 4th down conversions and that allowed us to control the ball.

**Q. Coach, you mentioned Luke Mergott's big impact on the game today. Can you talk a little bit more about the growth you've seen from him and the tenacity with all the uncertainty in the linebacker room?**

MANNY DIAZ: Yeah, like I said, he's the poster child for the adversity we've had on defense this year. He's played really, really well. He's become more comfortable now with being an everyday, every down player. Reason I say every down is we almost can't take him off the field because we're so thin at linebacker.

And he's got a knack. Last week he has the fumble recoveries, and now with the big interception. It was fascinating, because when the play happened it was a trick. First of all, just the fact that he could turn and find the over route was pretty elite linebacker play. And so I looked back at the quarterback Wes Williams had an elite play, he stayed home on the throw back so the quarterback just didn't have all the time in the world, and he decided to throw it.

The fact that Luke had not just break it up but punish it with the interception right in front of our sideline is a moment I know no one will ever forget.

**Q. Darian, take me back to right at the end of regulation, you get the lead, you kill the clock to go to overtime and you're bouncing around off the field come off the field getting ready for overtime. That could have been a gut punch for you guys but what was going through your head at that point?**

DARIAN MENSAH: Yeah, those are the moments I live for. I love winning, and we knew this game was going to come down to the last play. We knew it was going to go to overtime. We knew Virginia was a great team.

I'm just trying to get my guys excited. We all live for these moments, and there's no better feeling than winning a championship, so why not go full face into adversity and challenge the dang thing.

MANNY DIAZ: From my standpoint we preach the next

play mentality and that's all it was, it was just next play. We said, hey, guess what? We get to go play overtime to win the ACC. Everybody was like, yeah, that sounds pretty fun. Let's go do it.

It's neat to say things. I thought the first play when we ran power and I think Nate ripped it for eight or nine yards I thought was a statement, because they had all the momentum, the crowd was into it, and all of a sudden it was like, oh, okay, this is how this goes.

Just the fact we ran the ball I think every down down there until we got down to like the one or two yard line was a huge statement by our offensive line.

**Q. Manny, as a follow-up to what Aaron asked you, you said you were confident all week that if you won, you would make it into the field. I'm wondering if you still feel confident right now and why?**

MANNY DIAZ: I do. I sat there and I watched -- again, I'm not going to take anything away from James Madison's season. But I am watching them play Troy at home last night and Troy has got a backup quarterback in for most of the game, right, and it's a three-point game until really the last few minutes of the game where they were able to pull away, which is important. They won the game, they won their conference.

But you can't compare going through the Sun Belt this year. The Sun Belt has been a really good conference in years past, but most of their top teams are just having down years, so they're probably just not challenging the way they would have been going through a normal Sun Belt season; sometimes that happens.

So when you start comparing strength of schedule, when you start comparing if you can just simply go into wins and losses, well, you've got to look at who you're playing against, right? And that's the whole point of why you play a Power Four schedule.

There is a reason why these coaches are all leaving to go take Power Four jobs. There's a recognition that that's where the best competition is, and that's no different than it is in our league.

The reason why our league is really hard, you know why our league is really hard? Because Duke is really good. That's what's changed in college football. When Duke is really good the league gets really hard to go against because everybody can play now because everybody can attract players.

It's hard to recognize that because the brands used to

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make the players and now the players have the ability to make the brands. So our strength of our conference is in direct correlation to how Duke has raised its football profile.

**Q. To follow up a little bit on Manny's players make the brands, Darian, when you chose to come to Duke, did you have some folks, like, Duke, really? That's where you want to go? Because you had a lot of options I'm sure. What was it about this place that sold you on a vision of what you could do here and how does it feel now that you've done some of it?**

DARIAN MENSAH: Yeah, just watching them last year I think they had a really good defense and like they say, defense wins championships. So I just wanted to be a part of a team that really just gets after it on that side of the ball, and I felt like Duke was the place to really showcase my talent as far as getting to the NFL.

So those were two key things as far as getting me here. But also just the people at Duke. Everyone at Duke is so special. I've been saying this, but I wasn't recruited a bunch in high school, so just to feel that love and just to have -- you hear him talk about how confident he is in me; I never really had that.

Just having all that, I felt like Duke was the perfect place for me, and I definitely did have some people question my decision.

**Q. Everybody talks about the College Football Playoff, but Duke hasn't won an outright ACC title in 62 years. Just wonder if you can address what that feels like to get the monkey off the back or whatever you want to call it, just to win a championship after such a long drought and bring it to the care?**

DARIAN MENSAH: Yeah, there's no better feeling. That's exactly why I'm at Duke. Me and Coach Diaz talked about it when we first met. To bring a championship to this school who's primarily known for basketball on the football field, I think it's a statement that me and the seniors on this team really have tried to make, and like I've been saying this, I'm just a piece of this puzzle. Duke is extremely special, and I'm just glad to be a part of it.

**Q. For both of you guys, Coach, Darian led the ACC in passing yards and passing touchdowns this season. From your perspective, what has his development been like since getting on campus? And Darian for you if you heard that you would lead the conference, the ACC in both passing yards and touchdowns and win the title a year ago, what would your reaction be?**

DARIAN MENSAH: I wouldn't be that surprised to be

honest. I'm just that confident in my ability and my guys around me. As soon as I stepped on campus I knew that we had something special, and it starts with Coach Feeley, starts in the weight room.

We do stuff that not a lot of people in the country are doing as far as workouts and weight room stuff. Just getting that made me extremely confident, and I knew that we'd be sitting here come this time of year.

MANNY DIAZ: That's why I love this guy, because he is what we aspire to be. He's extraordinarily humble Monday through Friday and he plays with elite confidence on Saturday. His confidence is a reason why everybody around him has confidence in him.

Our pathway to win championships at Duke going back to Coach Spurrier, the last time Duke won an ACC Championship, was get elite quarterback play, no different than Coach Cut with Daniel Jones and some of the quarterbacks he had, and now it's Darian and we're conference champions and this is our pathway, this is our model to success going forward. Everything school.

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