

Atlantic Coast Conference Football Kickoff

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Duke Blue Devils

Coach Manny Diaz

Darian Mensah

Chandler Rivers

Wesley Williams

Press Conference

MANNY DIAZ: Good afternoon. It's good to be back in Charlotte. As I'd imagine every other coach who's been up here the last three days, the whole goal is to end up back here in Charlotte the first weekend in December.

The big thing in our program, the big message in our program this year is really, don't tell me a lot about your goals, about your expectations, tell me about your standards to reach those goals. The one thing I will say about what our guys have done since we returned to school in January is they have worked with an intentionality, a business-like demeanor, where they feel like they can do more.

We just met as a staff. We went over all of our numbers from the summer, running and conditioning and lifting period. This is the strongest team we've had at Duke in the last four years. This is the fastest team we've had at Duke in the last four years since our strength coach David Feeley has been around. Really with those two things being together, if we get challenged into an arm wrestling competition, we should expect to come out on top, and if anyone wants to run relay races against us, we feel confident we can win relay races.

The issue is we have a football season coming up, and I think the question now will be will our football team be able to sustain their standard of work, which they've done an amazing job up to this point. Can you sustain that over a four-week training camp period? Then I think the biggest challenge in college football is can you be the same team for 48 consecutive quarters, right? You get assigned 12 games. You've got 48 quarters in those 12 games. In a league that's so tightly packed, that's so competitive, you think about all 48, it can be two or three quarters that



dictates who's back here in December and who's not.

So I think our players understand that. I am proud of the way that they've worked and the way they've prepared this off-season, and we will open camp, we report Sunday night. We'll have our first practice Monday morning. It will be great to get the guys back on the grass and now see from a football standpoint, can they put it together where we can challenge to win shiny things at the end of the year?

With that, I'll open it up for questions.

Q. Do you have any key position battles that you're looking forward to seeing get resolved or get worked through in fall camp as you guys get under way?

MANNY DIAZ: You want to come in with a sense of competition at all the spots, right? You want guys to feel that they're being pushed at all times. You have the experienced guys like you have on the stage, like a Chandler Rivers or Wesley Williams, but you still have guys behind them.

Everybody's competing for something. No one can play at the same level they played at a year ago for us to have the kind of success we want to have. It's how do I be a better version of what I was in the past?

If you look at where we had losses from our team a year ago, certainly we've got some wide receivers, some new guys, we have some younger guys, a lot of those guys weren't on -- our skill positions, our wideouts and tight ends, weren't available for us in the spring, either through transfer or through rehab. So that will be time for us in the next four weeks to really develop that continuity and chemistry in our passing attack.

On offense, it's certainly depth in our secondary. Losing some of the guys that we lost. We're proud of what we have up front, but defensively you're only as good -- when I talk about sustaining a level of play for 48 straight quarters, you're only as good as your two-deep. It's important that whatever we think about Wesley Williams or V.J. Anthony, Tyshon Reed or Semaj Turner, Kobe Smith, whoever's



behind them, Kevin O'Connor, that those guys are all fighting as hard.

That's something we've got more of this fall than we did a year ago is we've got proper competition. Whether it's something that appears to be an opening on the depth chart. I expect everybody on Monday competing as if their job depended on it because, to be honest, it does.

Q. Coach, can you just speak on how valuable Chandler Rivers has been under your program? I believe last year he allowed a season high 13 completions, which is unheard of. A future first round pick in the NFL, in my opinion. Nine pressures from the quarterback position, just how valuable has he been in the Duke program?

MANNY DIAZ: Well, he's been extremely valuable because he affects winning in so many ways. I think with what we do schematically, I think he's a great fit. Whether he's playing outside on the corner and his ability to bump and run against the bigger receivers there or come out of the slot and shut down the slot receivers like he did last year in Raleigh.

Where he's also really special, he's got a phenomenal knack for being a great blitzer, and not everybody will do that. Some guys will get back there, and they can't find a way to make a play. As you know, we like to get after the quarterback in our system. You want him covering and blitzing on the same play. There's only one of them on the field.

That's what I talk about in terms of we're proud of what he's done. We know he wants to step his game up to another level to reach some of those goals he has. Again, it's more about what your standards are. But I also want him to inspire the younger guys in his room to take the same type of leap he did coming from his first to second to third year for us to really be a complete defense.

Q. A year into establishing the culture that you want at Duke, what have you seen from this team and kind of those foundational pillars that you've been looking at put up here with the Blue Devils and how you've seen the house essentially come together?

MANNY DIAZ: It's funny, if you go to Media Days, you can take a shot every time the coach says the word culture. It's all everybody talks about is culture. I really do believe at Duke the locker room sets the culture. It's one of the things I've learned in my 18 months at the university. The school attracts such a unique subset of individuals, and when those individuals get in the locker room together, there's a like mindedness.

What is culture really? Culture is supposed to be the fancy thing that coaches say that you put up on the wall that makes people act a certain way for and to one another. These guys already do that. A coach wants the team to be hard working and wants them to be disciplined and wants them to sacrifice. These guys couldn't get into Duke without being raised in that manner.

Guess what? When you come into a locker room at Duke, there's already an expectation from your teammates that this is how we work. There's going to be expectation that we're going to be disciplined. There's expectation that we're going to sacrifice for each other, we're going to be unselfish. I've been more in awe of them. Certainly as a coach, we have to lay out the vision and how we do X, Y, and Z.

But when I watched us play last year, I was more in awe of just watching how our guys play so hard for each other. And in an era where the sport is becoming more and more transactional and you see almost like independent contractors, I really do believe that we have a chance to build a proper team. I think that's why we prevailed in so many close games a year ago, because we were a team that didn't flinch, that was mentally tough, and believed in one another, seeing that, you know, whether it came down to the last play of the game, that we had each other's back to do it. Again, a coach will say, that's because of me and all my great -- it ain't because of me. It's because of who they are and how they were raised.

Q. You're coming off one of your best recruiting classes in Duke history. How have you pitched the Duke vision to the incoming recruits, and how do you think that's been seen by the new generation?

MANNY DIAZ: I think what we have been able to accomplish because of our administration giving full support to make Duke football excellent, is for a long time the decision to come to Duke was you know you're going to get the elite academics. With those elite academics, that's going to set you up for life after football, which everyone is going to face life after football at some point. And those two things are still true.

The question was can I compete for championships and can I get to the National Football League? Maybe there's an idea like, well, you know what, I'm going to go for the academics, and maybe I'm going to settle a little bit on the football side. I think, whether it's this past recruiting class, but most importantly it's the guys in our locker room, guys on the stage, they believe that you can accomplish all four things now here at Duke. To be honest, there's not very many schools in the country where you can really go 4 for

4. You can compete for championships and go to the National Football League, but you're not getting an education that's going to help you in life after school. You may get a piece of paper that says you graduated from college, there's plenty of those getting passed out, but that doesn't mean you have a proper education.

I think the experience we have here at Duke and being able to meet all four goals really puts us in a unique place. Then the fact those guys that come for those four goals want to stay here over the course of their whole time is why we have some of the fewest amount of exits in the transfer portal, because are guys want to be around and they want to accomplish all four of those things and they know that they can.

Q. Coach, how has the transfer portal reshaped your approach to roster building?

MANNY DIAZ: Probably about the same as everybody. You have the ability to reshape your roster, but you can reshape your roster -- again, that word I mentioned before, you can also reshape your culture if you're not careful.

I always say this is not fantasy football. You have to look at not just the impact of what the player does on the field, but what they do in the locker room, and you've got to make sure you bring the right people into your program. So the first question we ask any time you're going to take a transfer is, when that guy walks into the building, do the players say thank God that guy's here?

When a guy walks in and they say why did they bring him in, in theory, that's going to lead to a problem. It doesn't lead to a problem when they first shows up in the off-season. It may lead to a problem in the fourth quarter of a key game. So morale is always above everything in every decision we make, and we have to make sure that the team knows when we do have the ability to add a couple of guys, they're there for the right reasons because of the right people. We want to be a developmental program because we can be. As I mentioned in the last answer, we want guys to stay at Duke for four years to meet their goals, but it is nice to have the portal to make more surgical type of cuts to your roster.

Q. You stated the non- transactional philosophy for NIL, besides being a sustainable program, like the right people and the right values. How do you ensure substantial NIL deals align with and reinforce your non- transactional culture rather than just purely financial incentive for players?

MANNY DIAZ: Well, because they're not mutually exclusive, right? The revenue sharing era is here. The

guys are getting what they've been long overdue, their just reward, and so you can have that. So you just have to decide how are we going to have this culture?

By the way, it's not like you have to invent this. That's the same way in any organization the way that everybody works. There's a way that people are compensated for their work. I don't know why it would be any different. You want to create a culture where the people who have the best work are compensated in the best way, and the people who offer the greatest value are rewarded in the proper way.

Like, I said, it's new to college football. It's not new to capitalism and economics. I think it's still a relationship business. The players are still watching to see who you are and how you treat them. If it's simply just services rendered and services returned, I think at some point that's going to crack under the pressure of the season.

You don't have to be Sherlock Holmes to look at some teams around the country the last couple years who had high expectations at the Media Days like this and ended up not being what everybody thought they were, and that's probably something where you can dust for fingerprints that area.

Q. After Mike Elko's departure, you prioritized building trust with players through one-on-ones and open communication. How has that trust translated into team cohesion, and what's the culture like going into this season?

MANNY DIAZ: It's funny, I think back to that, I remember the one-on-one I had with you, Wes, and I imagine I met with you, too, Chan. Yeah, it's crazy. We say trust is consistency over time, so no matter what I said on that first day -- I don't know if Wes remembers what I said at all -- they're still going to watch you.

You come in, you have a first meeting and say, hey, here's how we're going to do things. The players may in their head, but they want to see, are you the same guy tomorrow, the next week, whatever? And then are you the same guy as you go through a season? You don't really get to know more until you get into more high stress environments like the with what football season brings.

I think that's what I'm really proud of is how we grew through the fall, last fall, winning some of those close games in the beginning of the year that really kind of kicked us off to have a really good nine-win season.

I'll close that answer with this. I do remember what Wes said to me. He said, we go on campus, and we feel like



we're around the best of the best, talking about the Duke student body. So when we come into the locker room, I feel we have the best locker room of anywhere in the country. And he laughed and said, I know I can't prove that because I haven't been in the other locker rooms, but I believe we have the best locker room culture anywhere.

That's why when I talked about who sets the culture at Duke, they're the ones who set the culture. As much as they learned about me and what my vision was, I really had to learn how to do it here at Duke, and I'm humbled to have that opportunity. I'm proud of these guys that I get to coach. I'm grateful for the support that I get from Nina King and Vincent Price, our president, and we're ready to roll. Now it's a matter of can we hold it together, and can we be the same people for the next four weeks, and then can we do the same thing for the next 48 quarters?

THE MODERATOR: We'll now spend time with Darian.

Q. Darian, what made Duke the right fit for you when you were deciding on where you wanted to go when you transferred?

DARIAN MENSAH: I think just the opportunity to compete at an elite conference like the ACC, an elite head coach with Manny, and an offense where you spread people out and throw the ball vertically. I think those were some of the key factors that, including a defense where we've got Chan and Wes, V.J., we've got an elite defense, too. That's the pieces that went into my decision.

Q. You play against your former team, the Tulane Green Wave in Week 3. Looking back at your time in Tulane, what are the moments that stand out to you the most about that?

DARIAN MENSAH: Yeah, those are my guys over there, I'm excited for that. Just being with the guys, I feel like Tulane was one of the hardest parts of my life. I'm a momma's boy, and moving across the country was something that wasn't easy for me.

Ever since then, I feel like I've just been hunting challenge because that's where you grow. I'm excited for that matchup with Tulane. They've got a talented squad. But I'm just going to approach it like any other game.

Q. You led up the conference last year at Tulane. However, you talked about seeking challenges, seeking growth. You're jumping up to the Power 4 and in a system that you have not played in before. What are some of the challenges and growth opportunities that you've seen so far, and what are some that you're expect to go face during the season?

DARIAN MENSAH: It's been my dream to play Power 5 football since I was a little kid. That was something that I wanted to do for sure. It's definitely not easy getting to know a new team when you had an old team just before, and then moving to a new place that you're not familiar with.

I'm excited for the challenges because I know that's where I'm going to elevate my game and my teammates, as well.

Q. Working with Jonathan Brewer, offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach, what is it about the way that he leads that you really have enjoyed, and just what you've seen as you're getting into this new offense?

DARIAN MENSAH: I think he's very passionate about what he does, and all the guys on offense will tell you that. I like how he -- the offense is fast-paced, and we air it out a lot. I feel like at Tulane we were more run heavy, and this year will be more pass heavy. So just the opportunity to showcase my talents even more than I did last year.

Q. Coach mentioned it a little bit at the beginning, but a lot of people at Duke talk about the David Feeley workouts. Can you talk about your first Feeley workout and how the off-season has gone for you so far?

DARIAN MENSAH: It was interesting for sure. He's a great dude, and he cares about this program. I think he does a phenomenal job in the weight room, and I feel like our culture is absolutely built on what he does in the weight room, and the guys rally off that. Everybody in the Duke program is wired the same, and so they feed off his energy.

Q. Follow up a little bit more on that, describe how you have been stretched, learning a new offensive system, learning a new culture in the state of North Carolina? Describing a momma's boy, how is it you have been stretched?

DARIAN MENSAH: I feel like my teammates have done a great job. I've just tried to immerse myself in the culture at Duke. They welcomed me with open arms, and the guys sitting next to me pushed me to be my best every single day.

Coach Feeley in that weight room is something that I feel like my body needs, and it's going to help me further down the road when I want to use my legs or I feel like I'm stronger, faster, I jump higher. Those are just some of the things that are a challenge for me.



Q. I know you played some basketball at St. Joseph. You got welcomed by the Cameron Crazies when you went out to Duke the first time. I want to know, what was that like to walk out on that basketball court as a hooper?

DARIAN MENSAH: It was awesome. It lives up to the hype for sure. A surreal moment for sure, you see it on TV all the time. Those boys were amazing this year.

I feel like we can bring that same hype with football. I'm excited to go out August 28th and show what we can do.

THE MODERATOR: Darian, you and Chan can switch spots. We'll spend time with Chandler Rivers.

Q. Chandler, in the era of the transfer portal, what kept you rooted here with the coaching changes and everything that was involved and the current college landscape?

CHANDLER RIVERS: Honestly, it was the people in the locker room. Like Coach Diaz said earlier, just the culture, I guess. It's created by the players, and that's just how it is here at Duke. I couldn't leave that for anything.

Q. We heard your head coach say don't tell me about your goals, tell me about your standards. Just what that means to you and how you embody that.

CHANDLER RIVERS: Yeah, it's just like we talk about it every day as a team, what do you hold yourself to? And every day working to be better than that the next day and stuff like that. I mean, to me, that's just like my position coach. I have a great relationship with him, just him holding me to the standard of, oh, this is your goal or this is what you want to do. What you did yesterday, that's not the goal you set.

So just him holding me to that standard every day and my teammates holding me to that same standard, that just helps me get better every day and keep holding myself to that same standard knowing that people are watching me.

Q. Chandler, you have played through what is objectively the most successful period of Duke football from Elko up through now. What does it feel like to kind of -- obviously I wouldn't say take the moniker of Duke from a basketball school to a football school, but to make football more relevant than it's ever been at a high level at Duke?

CHANDLER RIVERS: It feels great, honestly. The '22 class that came in that we had, that's what we expected it

to do. That's why we came to Duke. In group chats when we committed, we were like, we're going to change Duke for the better. We're going to stick to all four years and have fun doing it. So it's something we expected to do.

Q. You've had back-to-back pick sixes against Florida State. In 2024, you were part of the team that snapped a 23-game losing streak against the Seminoles. How big was it for you being a part of that moment?

CHANDLER RIVERS: It was amazing. It just shows that, like, our preparation throughout the years and throughout the season just helped us. It was amazing to be a part of that.

Q. ESPN has ranked you as the No. 7 cornerback going into the season. Can you talk about your mentality going into this year and any personal goals that you have?

CHANDLER RIVERS: Just being better than I was last year. Take it a day at a time, just be better than I was yesterday. That's really my goal, keep my head down, prepare to the best of my ability because, ultimately, we're a team that believes our preparation, that breeds our confidence. That's my mindset.

Q. Just hearing your name through all the preseason awards and all the compliments that you've had, what just keeps you humble, keeps you striving and playing for Coach Diaz and the Duke program?

CHANDLER RIVERS: Honestly, it's my teammates, my teammates and my coaches, they keep me grounded. It's not hard to miss all the outside noise we get, all the hype we get, whatever. Just my teammates and coaches, they keep me humble every day, they keep me grounded. They know my goal, our goal as a team, so holding me to that standard every day, that keeps me grounded knowing there's more to work for and more we've got to accomplish together.

Q. Growing up in Texas, you came from one of the most competitive football cultures. How did growing up in Texas shape your college football experience?

CHANDLER RIVERS: Honestly, I feel like playing football in Texas, it prepares you better for college football than any other state. That's my honest opinion how I feel about it. I feel like whenever I got to North Carolina, just got into college, I felt like I was in the best situation to succeed ultimately because like playing in front of big crowds, like doing stuff like that, a lot of high school students aren't really used to at that age.

I just like doing that back in Texas, back home, it prepares you for the best.

THE MODERATOR: You can switch spots with Wesley, and we'll spend the last few minutes with our D-lineman.

Q. Working with a coach like Harland Bower, just a legend of the defensive end and the defensive line in total, how has that helped guys like you and Vincent Anthony develop these years under him?

WESLEY WILLIAMS: It's been essential to mine and my teammates' development. Coach Bower is an intense guy. He's passionate, he's caring. I don't think -- where do I even begin? He's really special. If he could go out there and put the pads on right now and play, he would. He loves ball. He cares about us as individuals and as men.

I just feel really comfortable and taken care of in that room. He's going to push us every day, holds us to a high standard. I don't think there's a better position coach that I could ever ask for than Harland Bower.

Q. Everybody talks about how well Coach Diaz schemes up and disguises things and how the secondary and Chandler have done their thing, but we all know the front end affects the back end before the back end affects the front end. Talk to me about how the defensive line and guys who have come and gone like Aeneas Peebles, DeWayne Carter, and yourself kind of set the tone for what the defense overall is.

WESLEY WILLIAMS: Definitely. On any side of the ball, it starts up front. Our level of intensity, our attention to detail, it's something that it was here before me and I'm doing my job to make sure it's here after me.

There's a powerful D-line lineage at Duke. It means a lot to me, and that's part of the reason that I committed. Really with myself and V.J., we're trying to uphold that standard of being the nasty, physical Duke D-line that we're used to having.

Q. What is it about your eye, what is it about your sense of football that allows you to track on the football as quickly and as well as you do?

WESLEY WILLIAMS: I guess maybe the grace of God, I don't know. Just studying the game and going along throughout the year, just trying to become more of a student of the game gives me the opportunity to kind of locate the ball sooner. Following the scheme, putting me in the right positions.

Yeah, there's nothing necessarily special or different about

me. I think it's just effort and watching film.

Q. You've been known as an impact special teams player, blocking the kick, the punt, and a field goal as well. What is it about the special teams work that is so cherishable for you?

WESLEY WILLIAMS: I think it's about what I just said, it's about effort and want to. A lot of people see those plays as free plays or take that play off. Especially a field goal, there's points on that play, and you need to go after it and go get it.

I think just kind of the way we do things at Duke has led us to be in those positions. It could have been any one of us on the line. We're all straining to make a play. I've been fortunate to make those plays a lot of the time, but just the effort we play with as a unit and as a team.

Q. You heard your coach say can you be the same team for 48 consecutive quarters? Why do you believe that this Duke team can do that?

WESLEY WILLIAMS: We train for three-quarters of the year with that in mind. We know what the goal at hand is. We know what it takes to be a 48-quarter team. We know that last year or years prior we weren't there yet. So just keep augmenting that ability to keep going week in and week out, doing what it takes to get your body back in recovery, that's a part of it. Keeping your mind sharp, watching film. There's a lot that goes into it. More than just playing hard and wanting to, you've got to do the details.

Q. Do you have to win a championship in order to call it a successful season?

WESLEY WILLIAMS: Our standard is the championship, absolutely, and we work every day towards that standard. With everything we do, every rep is championship standard. So with that in mind, we don't have to worry too much about the result. Right now we're just focused on our standard and the process day to day.

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