

# Atlantic Coast Conference Football Kickoff

Thursday, July 24, 2025

Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

**North Carolina Tar Heels**

**Coach Bill Belichick**

**Thaddeus Dixon**

**Will Hardy**

**Jordan Shipp**

Press Conference

**BILL BELICHICK:** Appreciate everybody coming out today. It's really exciting for me to be here.

Start with chancellor Roberts, he's made such a huge difference, and the opportunity to come to North Carolina, been very supportive. Has given us a great opportunity at a school that's already a great school with a great brand.

Obviously Bubba Cunningham, Steven Newmark, those guys have been great. Our alumni, Mike Lombardi and I, we're into the double figures on the donor events and alumni events, things like that. The support's been overwhelmingly tremendous. Not only supportive, but engaged and very excited.

We want to match that excitement and put that on the field. Mike and I have worked together for a long time, going all the way back to the start of Cleveland. Mike in the general manager role and myself in the head coaching role, we have a lot of experience in dealing with kind of what the college football landscape is now, similar. Not the same, but similar in terms of NIL, revenue sharing, free agency, if you will, and recruiting post-draft type recruiting as opposed to drafting.

Mike has done a great job of -- it's reinforcing the roster. We had a number of players here that have been here that we're excited to work with. We have two of them here in Jordan and Will. But also we brought in a lot of players. We have 70 new players from last year that weren't on the roster last season.

That's a lot of people and a lot of turnover. It's also been that way with our coaching staff. Some of the players or some of the staff members on the coaching end, and then



on the support end in scouting I've worked with in the past, but there are a lot of new people there. So when you combine all the scouting, support and player transition into the program, it's a lot.

We're very much looking forward to getting out on the field next week and seeing it all come together. I've been super impressed with the way our players have competed. They've worked really hard. I think they're in good condition. We've hit a lot of personal -- they've hit a lot of personal high marks, whether it be strength, speed, explosion, different measurements that we've taken through the course of training, beginning through the end, and looking back on their career from previous training years, these guys have really worked hard and they have a lot to show for it.

We're almost to the point where we can get out there and start putting together the chemistry, the timing, the execution, the communication that we need to have on the field.

But Mike and his scouting staff have really -- between the scouting the freshmen, or the incoming recruits, the '26 class, which is already looking like that'll be a pretty positive group, and two transfer portals, the roster is very competitive, and I look forward to seeing how all that plays out.

Everybody has got a lot of focus, obviously, on the TCU opener, which is in our sights, but really right now the big thing for us is just stacking good training days one on top of another, one at a time, and being ready to go, not only for the opener but for the entire regular season and the ACC schedule.

That's our outlook. Just put good days together, take advantage of every opportunity, don't let any days go by where we don't continue to improve, get better, and get closer to becoming the most consistent and best football team we can be when we step out on to the field, and that'll hopefully continue every week that we'll continue to improve as a team all the way through the course of the season.



That's what we've always tried to do, so that'll be our goals this year.

**Q. Coming to this specific institution and developing these players off the field, why it was right for you to come to North Carolina and develop these Tar Heels?**

BILL BELICHICK: Developing players, that's really what coaching is, and that's what we do. We take great pride in that, myself and our staff, and players who want to be developed. A Carolina player is a player who wants to be a good football player, who wants to work hard, to wants to make a commitment towards improving on a regular basis, towards training and team execution on the field. So when we get those players, we see a lot of improvement, a lot of development. And that's going back, whether it was at Cleveland, where Mike and I put together an offensive line where four of the five starters were free agents, or at New England where we had a number of low draft choices or high draft choices, I should say. I'd say Brady and Edelman, players like that, who turned out to be great players, as well as some of the other players are higher picks that developed like Gronkowski and so forth.

Development is a big part for us, and players that want to come in, work hard, be good players, learn, compete. Competition is what makes us all better. Again, the best competition for me, I learned the most from going against great offensive coaches like Andy Reid and Kyle Shanahan, Mike Shanahan, Joe Gibbs, and all those guys that I competed against. That's what made me great as a coach, or made me work the hardest as a coach, was to compete against those people.

Same thing for the players. Internal competition, the competition we have daily on the field will get us most ready for the competition that we'll face on Saturdays or whenever the games are.

**Q. I have a two-part roster building and general football question for you. Do you believe the evolution of the fullback position kind of being turned into an H-back role was more due to roster flexibility and player versatility, and with the cyclical nature of football, do you see that position being revitalized now that defenses are more finesse driven?**

BILL BELICHICK: Well, hopefully we won't be in the finesse driven category. We're certainly not shooting for that. But thanks for the question.

The fullback question is an interesting question. It really picked up a lot of momentum when Coach Coryell started with that and then Joe Gibbs brought it to Washington and ran a one-back offense with Riggins and those guys, all the

backs that he had there, they kind of rotated them through, George Rogers, all those guys.

Then that became -- they caught on definitely throughout the NFL, and at the Giants we faced that twice a year. So pretty familiar with the way that one-back offense evolved, and now as offenses have gotten into more spread formations, where there's a lot of 11 personnel and almost all college defenses and pro defenses, for that matter, are nickel based, with maybe a six defensive back in passing situations, but most everybody is playing five defensive backs. I think that reflects on the lack of a fullback, and even in 12 personnel where usually one of the tight ends is a receiving tight end.

How that trend will continue, I don't know. I'd say for us, we'll do what we feel like is best for the football team, like we always do, and just see how that plays out.

It's been an interesting evolution that's gone from everything being all two-back. I remember when I first started with the Colts, we went through all the defensive adjustments, that there was always one little box in the very bottom corner of the page that had a one-back set on it. Everything else was in two-backs, whether it was brown, blue, black, I, green. Depending on where the backs were set there were different color codes for the formations, and there was one box for the one-backs, and now there's no two-back sets, so that's been an evolution.

**Q. Talking to Dabo Swinney earlier, he said how much he's learned from you since you made this move to North Carolina. How has your relationship with him grown, as well as the other coaches in the ACC?**

BILL BELICHICK: Yeah, we're all learning from Dabo. That's very nice of him to say that, very complimentary. Dabo has been a friend for a long time. We've scouted his players from the NFL down. Some of the players that are here today, I actually thought, maybe we'll be drafting one of these guys, and now here we are going to be playing against them.

But Dabo has been great. I have so much respect for him and the Clemson program, what he's done, the way he runs it. It's high quality. Kids are high quality. He came up to New England, got probably the top player out of New England in the last probably decade, Christian Wilkins out of Springfield, Suffield Academy.

I think that says a lot for the program that he runs and what he's done for not only college football but all the student-athletes that he's coached there. They've gone on to represent him and the school very well.

Again, I have a ton of respect for Dabo and what he's done. Great opportunity to spend some time with him at the ACC coaches' meetings, and he's always been a really enjoyable guy to be around. I don't know if that'll be true on Saturday afternoon. Probably not. But at least in these meetings it is.

**Q. One of the biggest differences between the pro game and college game is you're dealing with 18 to 23, 24 year olds as opposed to full-grown men with families and whatnot, and with an off-season that's seen a little bit of controversy, how have you ushered them through blocking the noise and keeping the main thing the main thing?**

BILL BELICHICK: Yeah, well, the great thing about working with the college players is just the growth and the development that we've seen, that I've seen with them. I saw a little bit of that last year when I was at Washington with Coach Fisch and Steve out there to see how much the players improved from the spring until the start of training camp.

This year, of course, we haven't started training camp yet, but through the course of the spring, the amount of improvement that our players made in those 15 days, most of which were in pads, was something you never saw in the NFL because we never could wear pads in the off-season. So how much better the players got and their fundamentals, their footwork, their hand placement, leverage, tackling, so forth, all the physicality things that come with different positions, whether that's press release, jams, so forth. Their improvement was tremendous.

So I'd say on the college end, you're right, the players are a little bit younger and less skilled. Sometimes that's an advantage. There are fewer bad habits to break. But also, I'd say the players are much more receptive to the coaching. They haven't had as long with the way that they were doing it through a college career maybe, and through some pro years where they were starting to develop some habits that they were comfortable with and maybe were a little harder to change. I'd say with our players, they've been very receptive to everything we've asked them to do. They've trained extremely hard, as I said. The personal achievements between their strength, their speed, their explosiveness, all the different body fat percentages, all the different things that we measure is in the high 90 percent range. There's only a couple guys that haven't had the improvement, but really, it's been pretty much the whole team.

That's been -- as a coach, it's fun. It's fun to see players get better, and then that gives them more momentum to keep working. I know we've given the players a couple

weeks off in the training cycle from time to time, and in a lot of cases they come back, even a little bit further ahead of where they were when they left, which kind of indicates they continue to work hard in their training. We're excited to see all that manifests itself out on the field when we actually start playing football, but I think we'll be ready to start when we get going next week.

**Q. Thad, you're obviously no stranger to big games. You've played in the College Football Playoff when you were at UW. What can you tell some of the players that are less experienced with that kind of stage, just how different the game is, because the TCU game Week 1, national TV, primetime, there's going to be a lot of people watching that game?**

THADDEUS DIXON: Yeah, I can tell the young guys that it's the same game. Football is going to be football, no matter how big the stage is. You've still got to go out there and play. I would just tell the young guys, don't look at it no different than what it is. It's just another game you've got to go out there and perform.

**Q. You're going into a system now which is getting hype with Bill Belichick. He's coached several amazing cornerbacks. How is it being a part of that system at North Carolina?**

THADDEUS DIXON: It's special. It's been a lot of great cornerbacks that Coach Belichick has coached. Dudes like Ty Law, Darrelle Revis. To just try to be a part of that pedigree, it's honestly special. It's something I look forward to every day, just getting better every day, and hopefully my name can be with those guys' names.

**Q. What have you learned about yourself in this particular training session as it relates to a former NFL coach getting you to the point where you want to be? How much better do you think you've gotten in this period of time?**

THADDEUS DIXON: Man, I've gotten a lot better. The main thing is really just my attention to detail. My attention to detail on little stuff, just taking everything serious as far as stretching, taking care of my body, eating, lifting weights hard, stuff like that. Really just keying in on all the small details, propelling my game to the next level.

**Q. You have to be answering a million questions about your coach and his personality, and there's a lot known about his personality. Can you tell me a little bit about the personality of the Tar Heels and your team and what we can expect from them this year?**

THADDEUS DIXON: Yeah, you can expect a tough,

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

smart, dependable team, a team that communicates a lot, a team that's well put together, well driven, a team with a chip on their shoulder. Honestly, everybody got something to prove. Everybody is trying to get somewhere. That's what you can expect out of us.

**Q. Thaddeus, you're a guy that's played in some really big games in your career at UW and now you bring that experience to North Carolina. Going into a DB room that has been listed as questionable over the last few years, what is your message to them on heightening the production and getting the best out of each player in that room?**

THADDEUS DIXON: It starts every day, just attacking each day, trying to go 1-0 every day. You can't make plays on Saturdays until you make plays in the off-season, working hard.

I just tell guys, keep the main thing the main thing. Everybody strive every day, try and get better, and then on Saturdays, everything is going to take care of itself. I mean, it's football.

**Q. Just what it's like working with defensive coordinator Steve Belichick and what you've taken away from his leadership so far?**

THADDEUS DIXON: Man, I've taken a lot. I've built a very close relationship with Coach Steve. He's been with me pretty much every step of the way going back to last year when he first touched down at Washington. Being able to learn from a guy like that who has so much football knowledge and so much knowledge of the game and scheme and stuff like that, I feel like it's really propelled my game to the next level as far as understanding the game and other offensive coordinators and kind of, like, just the ins and outs of the defense.

**Q. Can you talk about the importance of disrupting a receiver on their stem and what you're looking to do at the top of the route to turn some of those pass deflections into more turnovers this season?**

THADDEUS DIXON: Yeah, so it's football; offense, everything is about timing. So just being able to disrupt timing. It could be a slight half a second; the quarterback is going to come off the read. So just being able to disrupt timing and not really see some of the balls that I'm seeing, and the balls that I do see, we've got to go intercept them.

**Q. Will, you've been on this team for a number of seasons now. You've seen the ups and downs. What is it for you as a guy who's been with this team for a while to see Bill Belichick come in and be your head**

**coach and how the aura of the team and the mindset of the team has changed over the last seven, eight months now?**

WILL HARDY: Yeah there's going to be a lot of new this year. I'm excited for the new change, the new spark, the new energy that this season is bringing to the team, to the players on the team that stayed, but also just to the whole fan base and the community of Chapel Hill. I think everyone is looking forward to it. I'm no different. I know all the players on the team that were here last year are excited for this new change. When we got the news that Coach Belichick was going to be our new coach, we were all pumped for it. Shocked at first, but ready to get to work, and that's exactly what we've been doing.

**Q. We're obviously in this new era of college football where the transfer portal is ever prominent. UNC was one of the teams that was more active this year. Being a guy who stayed, what has been your role in keeping these guys -- getting these guys used to life at Chapel Hill and getting them accustomed to Tar Heel culture?**

WILL HARDY: Like you said, we've got a lot of new players on this team because we brought in a ton of new guys that have a lot of talent. Anytime there's change, it's good, especially in this day and age.

As a leader on the team that's been here, it's one of my roles to get everyone established, learn everyone's names, but just learn everything about these guys and really create a team chemistry that can go win on Saturdays.

It's hard to play successful football when you've got a bunch of individuals out there playing for themselves. So this summer and fall, our mindset is how can we play successful, play fast but play together so we can have success on the field?

**Q. Kind of building upon that, what's been your leadership style over the spring, over the summer, now heading into fall camp, and how are you getting the rest of your defensive unit ready to hit the ground running in the 2025 season?**

WILL HARDY: Yeah, we've got a competitive group of guys, especially in the defensive back room. Everyone wants to improve themselves and just build a unit.

As a leader for that unit, man, it's been important for me to be an encourager. We have some hard days, maybe some days where we didn't practice as well as we wanted to or some hard workouts that are tough to get through. Being a guy that people can know that they'll get some encouragement from, it's important for me. I think





leadership, it'll come in all shapes and sizes, but being someone that people can count on and can trust, that's important for me.

**Q. Defense was a spotlight for not the best of reasons last year. What have you learned in the time you've trained leading up to this season that would lead you to believe you're going to be a better defense in 2025?**

WILL HARDY: Yeah, new coaching staff with a great scheme and great new players, which is very exciting. But the thing about defense and football in general is you need all 11 playing on the same page. One guy messes up, and an explosive can happen. Building that team chemistry and really holding each other accountable through practices and everything, that's important, and that's on the top of our minds, playing all together, all 11. That'll help us this year.

**Q. That development off the field from Bill Belichick and the coaching staff, just speak to that. On the field, obviously there's a lot that's going to happen, but off the field, building into a stronger young man in society. Just talk about that.**

WILL HARDY: Coach Belichick has brought former players to talk to us just about what else is there outside of just football. It takes a lot to be a great football player, and that's not just on-the-field stuff, that's nutrition, that's sleep, that is recovery. And so when you pour all this into football, man, anytime -- we're all going to end football at some point, so how can you pour all that investment into something else, whether you're a dad, whether you're a spouse, whatever it is, how can you pour everything into a relationship, so we've learned that. He's brought many guys, former players to come and speak on that.

**Q. Jordan, what's one piece of advice that you got from your dad when you landed in Chapel Hill two years ago, and also, I know your nickname growing up was Duke, and as a Tar Heel right now, is your nickname still Duke?**

JORDAN SHIPP: First, I want to start off by giving praise and glory to my Lord and savior Jesus Christ; without Him I wouldn't be here, so I want to start off with that.

He might call me that here and there off the record, here and there. But like you said, the biggest advice that he gave me was where would you go if you couldn't play football anymore. That was the biggest thing he said to me was where would you go if football was taken from you, you're comfortable with the school, if distance plays into it, anything like that.

Another thing that drove me was just wanting to be better than him. I always grew up just kind of like in his shadows a little bit, and it was always important to me to overcome that, so I feel like that's something that motivated me day in and day out, just wanting to be better than him and just wanting to have my own name because a lot of times when people say Shipp they're talking about my dad, but now I feel like I've kind of swapped that narrative and I've been able to put myself over and just being able to work hard just to try and surpass it.

**Q. During the off-season, Kobe Paysour initially entered the transfer portal but he took his name back out and now he's with you guys. How big was it to retain him not just from a skill perspective but from a leadership perspective?**

JORDAN SHIPP: Yeah, we have a young receiving room and Kobe brings experience. Kobe is a great player. Kobe is a great friend. I feel like that's something that gets overlooked. When you're in a room, you just want to be surrounded by great people, and Kobe is a great guy. Kobe is a great person. Kobe is somebody that I know I can rely on off the field and on the field as well.

I personally, Kobe, JJ and Nate, last year they really took me under their wing and helped mold me into the college athlete I wanted to be and set the foundation for me, so just being able to still have him, me still being able to look up to him and shadow him a little bit, that's definitely important.

**Q. Jordan, you went from one Hall-of-Fame coach in Coach Grier to now Coach Belichick. What type of conversations have you had with Coach Grier about advice going on to Coach Belichick? And two, has there been any conversations about bringing your former quarterback in Jadyn in Carolina blue?**

JORDAN SHIPP: Definitely, I talk to Coach Grier a lot. Coach Grier is a huge reason why I'm here. Coach Grier poured into me, his family, Ms. Nila, Will Grier, all the Griers, they all poured into me a lot. I talk to Coach a lot. A lot of the conversations that I've had with Coach Grier in high school are kind of similar to what Coach Belichick brings. He wants you to be tough, smart, dependable, and Coach Grier echoed that same thing when we were in high school, and I feel like that's why we were so good at such a high-level high school program because of the way he carried himself and the things that he poured into us.

Yeah, I just feel like Coach Grier is a great coach, but then you look at Coach B and he takes that to a whole 'nother level. You're going to be tough, smart, dependable, and you're going disciplined, and we're going to do everything



right. We're going to play to his standard, and that standard is not going to drop off for nobody. You can't obtain it, just get out the way, next guy up.

**Q. I want to talk to you about Freddie Kitchens, a guy in the tight end room over the last couple seasons. Now he comes over to offensive coordinator. Talk about some of the things he's brought as a coordinator to you guys and some of the strategies that he's got for you guys.**

JORDAN SHIPP: We're definitely going to be a unique offense. Don't want to give too much out, but we're going to be unique. We're going to do a lot of different stuff, and we're going to get a lot of 1st downs, going to score a lot of points. Coach Kit and I, like I said, Coach Belichick, he kept him here for a reason, so obviously he liked what he was doing, so there's no reason not to trust him 100 percent, but like I said, we're going to be unique, we're going to move the ball, we're going to do different things with different personnels and a lot of different people.

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