

Atlantic Coast Conference Football Kickoff

Friday, July 17, 2026

Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

North Carolina Tar Heels

Coach Bill Belichick

Melkart Abou Jaoude

Christo Kelly

Jordan Shipp

Press Conference



but it's going to take a little bit of time. They're certainly working hard. If they can follow the lead of the guys we have up here, they'll do well.

Looking forward to opening the season in Ireland. That will be a great trip. Some of our players went over there to kind of preview, promote the game. It will be exciting to go over there. I've been involved in some of those international games myself from my time in the NFL. Those are experiences that you remember.

You remember a lot of games. Certainly I remember a lot of the championships and Super Bowls that I've been involved in, but certainly the international games have kind of a special flavor to them. I'm glad our team will have the opportunity to experience that as well as going up against a good TCU team.

This conference is extremely competitive. I've spent quite a bit of time getting to know the coaches in this conference as well as the administration, Jim Phillips, Mike Strickland, those guys. Al Riveron has passed the torch on the officiating side. I think that he did a great job there, and I'm glad to see him helping the transition in that area.

Overall excited to get the season started, get back on the field and build off a good spring that we had, a good summer offseason conditioning program that we're wrapping up now and start to block, tackle, run plays, and so forth and look to make some significant strides with bringing the team together, which, again, we're so far ahead of where we were last year when we kind of started all over in training camp. This year we've got a much better base to build off of.

Again, a lot of that's a result of the leadership that these guys have given us here to my left.

Q. After the new regulations with the transfer portal only being down to one window, and you've talked about already that this team is already way farther ahead than where they were last year, what's your confidence level with this team and with this recruiting class coming in, now having a whole year up under your belt? You have some established guys up here.

THE MODERATOR: North Carolina is now in the room with us. Head Coach Bill Belichick will take the podium and offer some opening comments. Coach, the podium is yours.

BILL BELICHICK: Thanks, appreciate it. Great to be here. Appreciate everyone being here as well. It's really exciting to be here for the start of the season. This kind of gets things kicked off, even though we've been in summer workouts and getting ready to head into training camp next week.

First, I want to thank all the people that have been so supportive at North Carolina. Certainly Chancellor Roberts, Steve Newmark, our new athletic director, they've been fantastic. You know, our alumni have been awesome. Guys like Jim Coleman and Josh Clark, Vaughn Moore, guys like that that have really been supportive of the program. And most of all our players.

These guys have really worked hard. We have three outstanding players here that have done a great job for us. They've given us a lot of leadership. Jordan Shipp has been here. Played a little bit his freshman year, but last year really was his first year of playing. Melkart and Christo both transferred in last year, and they've given us great leadership and done a great job with our program developing the culture that we need.

We have a lot of new players here. We have about 60 new players, so over half our team from last year. Excited to see how that comes along. It was a big freshman class because we kind of didn't have much of a freshman class in '25 group. So we kind of combined those two and brought in a lot of young players that are going to be good,



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What's your confidence level in this team, and what are some things that you are excited about moving forward?

BILL BELICHICK: Yeah, well, we're just going to keep grinding away every day. That's what we try to do is string good days together and keep stacking them up and see where that takes us.

The expectations are to be prepared, to come in and have a good day today and rest, recover, refuel, rehydrate, and put another one together tomorrow. We'll see where that takes us.

I expect everybody to come in and perform at their best. I want to do the same thing I can to help the team in any way I possibly can, whether that's training or Xs and Os, strategy, fundamental, whatever it is and just continuing to keep improving.

We have a lot of good competition on the team, as I said, a number of young players. We'll see how quickly they come along or don't. We'll see how that goes. Expectations are to have good days and stack them together.

Q. Bringing in Bobby Petrino, who obviously has a history in the ACC, a history of being a head football coach, what does it mean to you to have him on staff running your offense and just his expertise?

BILL BELICHICK: Yeah, it's been great having Bobby. I've known him for a long time from the pro to college side but also when he was in Atlanta. A lot of things he does offensively are similar to what we did in New England. We've kind of been able to merge those together -- protections, routes, play actions, balanced attack, things like that. Yeah, it's been great.

A lot of our spring has been foundational, teaching fundamentals, terminology, installation of basic plays, things like that. We'll get into more situational football and I'd say more game plan-type adjustments as we move forward here through the month of August.

You know, defensively it's been very competitive, a good challenge for our defense to see, you know, the schemes and things that we're doing offensively and vice versa. I think our offense has benefitted from seeing the multiples we have on defense, and competition has been good.

But Bobby has been great to work with. Love having him on our staff.

Q. Going into this second year, we saw great strides from Carolina towards the end. What have you taken

from the previous year and brought it on into the second year, Coach?

BILL BELICHICK: Yeah, again, I think the biggest thing has been to see the improvement that we made. Our players that carried over from last year saw the improvement that they made. We're stronger. We're faster. We're better football players fundamentally and with technique and so forth and just to continue to do that.

Those guys, you know, we had a lot of PRs, personal records, after practice with speeds, lifts, and so forth. I think it's an indication of our work ethic and the culture that we're establishing, and the guys who are leading the pack are doing a great job of setting the pace with their work ethic and establishing that culture.

Q. Last year was a bit of a struggle, to say the least there. When you look at what happened in its totality, what are things you took away, you learned as a college coach that, you know, you might not have been aware of or you might not have been expecting coming into this thing that you go into year two with and say: We'll be better in this way because I've experienced this and I know these pitfalls?

BILL BELICHICK: I think the biggest thing is just the relationships and building with all the people that are involved in the school, whether it's academics, compliance, you know, different training -- the training things that we have to go through, you know, the hourly schedule and so forth that we have to be in compliance with, things like that, and the different people that we're working with.

We brought in some people that I was familiar with, but, you know, also, again, multiple other people in the university. Great people, people who have really done a great job of supporting us, but you just need to build that working relationship with.

So that's been good. It's been fun, and I appreciate the work that they've done. We'll work a lot more efficiently as we spend more time together and get to know each other better and understand the needs and what's most helpful, but they've been great.

Q. The famous Patriot Way has become something talked about a lot in the media. Would you say there is developing a Carolina way, and how would you describe that mindset and those pillars?

BILL BELICHICK: Yeah, I'm not really sure what the Patriot way is. That was kind of, I guess, a catchy marketing term that somebody came up with. Yeah, honestly that's not something we ever talked about at New



England.

But, again, look, the main thing, as I said, that we're trying to do at Carolina is build a culture with good team, good teammates that's tough and smart and works hard every day and continues to get better and improve. That's really what it's about, both individually in individual units like the offensive line or the quarterbacks and the receivers or the linebackers, and then collectively as offensive and defensive units, and the team in terms of functioning and situational football, things like no-huddle field goals or things like that that involve multiple team unit executions.

Q. How are you cancelling out the comparisons of the NFL and last season, and what are you telling your leaders that you brought with you as they go into this new season to have success?

BILL BELICHICK: Yeah, I mean, look, we learn every day. I learn every day. I learn from last year, the year before that, and all the years from before that. But right now we're focusing on going forward, what we can accomplish today, this week, and in this training period. Then we'll move on to our next set of goals.

You take what you have learned from the past and try to improve on it, but, you know, it's really about what you accomplish today and our coming opportunities.

Q. When people watch this North Carolina team next season, what is the first thing you hope they take away when they step on the field?

BILL BELICHICK: What's the first thing -- I don't know. They probably take away new uniforms (smiling).

Q. Players in the NFL can create longevity through their careers through niche special team roles. Famously you coached Matthew Slater who was a great gunner. Can you just talk about the importance of those specialized positions, and does that go into your recruiting aspects at all?

BILL BELICHICK: Yes, special teams, absolutely, goes into everything. It goes into being a good teammate and doing what's best for the team and helping the team in any way possible, whether that's the players got a starting role on offense or defense or not. It's about being able to help the team.

You know, certainly any college football player who doesn't go into the NFL as a starter, which is probably over 90% of them, would be expected to contribute in the kicking game unless they're an offensive or defensive lineman. Any player that wants to play in the NFL, being a good special

team player is an absolute, you know, bonus to them being able to punch a ticket as an NFL player.

Our players understand that. We've talked about it. Honestly, they all want to be in the kicking game and be on special teams because that will help them achieve their goals at the next level. It's not an issue at all. It's a very important part of the game, and our players realize that.

But I've coached a lot of players in the NFL that never played on special teams in college because they were a starter or covered kickoffs as a freshman and never done it since then, and then they come to the NFL and they're not good in special teams. And then somebody beats them out, and then they don't have an opportunity in the league.

Then there have been plenty of other guys like Jonathan Jones and Brandon Bolden and guys like that that have had good special teams play that have gotten them onto the field, and then ended up being strong players on offense or defense because they initially started those roles in the kicking game. Or Matthew Slater who made a career and was a ten-time Pro Bowler in the kicking game because of his development on special teams.

Yeah, appreciate the question. Even we have players like Christo who came into college football as one of the top long snappers in high school, you know, who also snaps for us, which honestly, as I've told him, to be able to long snap and play a position in the NFL is unique. It's unheard of. It creates a very unique value where you can possibly save a roster spot.

Those situations are real.

Q. Last year there was a bit of a quarterback transition in spring and some of the guys left. How important has it been this year with continuity in the room going in from spring to fall camp and those guys being able to work together and having the same guys in the building in spring?

BILL BELICHICK: Yeah, I mean, it's been great. Last year the quarterbacks that played didn't take any snaps for us in the spring. Gio wasn't here. Max wasn't able to participate. So that was it.

This year our quarterbacks after spring ball are still here, are out in player-run practices, which our players were never really able to do the last year because we didn't have enough experience on either side of the ball to line up offensively or defensively and be able to run our plays.

Now our team can go out there and we can run PRPs with each other. They can continue to work on their plays, their

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fundamentals, their techniques, their communication, gain trust in each other. That's a huge advantage we didn't have last year, and the players have done a great job of that.

From what I understand. I haven't been out there, but they've all spoken highly about how productive those have been. Certainly starts on offense at the quarterback position by having an experienced quarterback who can get in the huddle, call the play, and know what everybody is supposed to do, and we just didn't have that last year. That's the type of thing when I say we're way ahead of where we were last year, that would be a good example of it, so thanks for that question.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you. Melkart, you'll have the podium.

Q. You were an underrated recruit who ended up going to Delaware. I actually saw you at the Delaware Pro Days. You were an underrated player in your own right at the edge position. Can you talk about does that provide a chip on your shoulder at all? What goes into your mentality on each game?

MELKART ABOU JAOUDE: As you know, I walked on to the University of Delaware. I've had a chip on my shoulder, you know, even before that. Growing up as a kid, coming from hard times, I've always had a chip on my shoulder. And I carry that with me throughout. I've never lost it, and I never will lose it.

Q. You've become a leader within your team. What are you telling your incoming freshmen and your transfers to go into week zero against TCU?

MELKART ABOU JAOUDE: You know, we haven't really talked much about TCU yet. I'm just more focused on them showing up on time, putting in work, you know, just being the best version of themselves. When TCU comes, that will take care of itself.

Q. Learning from a multi-time Super Bowl champion coach, what are some of the little things, little nuggets that he's given you that stick out to you, maybe something in passing that you say, I need to keep that in my back pocket?

MELKART ABOU JAOUDE: Yeah, just the details of the game, you know, and the simplicity of it. Not trying to overcomplicate the game, but just playing what you see and what you feel sometimes is just as good as, you know, playing hard on the tendencies.

Q. Coming out of a small school recruit, you talked

about walking on to Delaware. Can you just talk about the difficulties of that recruiting process as a teenager and navigating that?

MELKART ABOU JAOUDE: Yeah. So, you know, they found me at the bagel shop my senior year when I was just working trying to make some money. Yeah, you know, I love football, and football is all I know, so I was going to find a way regardless. I was either going to go JUCO, maybe go D3, but I was going to end up here regardless.

I'm blessed that it happened through walking on at the University of Delaware, and I'm very happy for that.

THE MODERATOR: Your thoughts about playing in Ireland, is this one of your first overseas trips?

MELKART ABOU JAOUDE: I visited Lebanon, the country that I'm from, back when I was in seventh grade, but I haven't left since. So, yeah, I'm excited to go to Ireland.

Q. Melkart, you are the leading sack man in terms of returners in the ACC, and you are between Akheem Mesidor and Rueben Bain, two guys that were drafted very highly next year. What do you think you have to do to continue that production and secure yourself a draft pick amongst that pantheon of ACC pass rushers?

MELKART ABOU JAOUDE: Just be more consistent. You know, play my game, but play it consistently, play it on every snap. Also just play with my teammates and just, you know -- yeah, that's it.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Melkart. We'll spend time with Christo Kelly.

Q. You were just one of 11 FCS players to be selected to the AFCA Good Works Team. Can you talk about the importance of community service, and what it means to you to give back?

CHRISTO KELLY: Yeah, we have such an amazing platform as student-athletes and partnering with organizations like Uplifting Athletes. We have an upcoming Lift for Life this Monday raising funds and awareness for the rare disease community. Being able to meet people and understanding, right, just being yourself, given the platform that we have, can have a profound impact on so many people.

Being around so many great people, so many great teammates, right, who are just fully bought into being a part of something bigger than themselves is a huge blessing. Being able to see smiles on people's faces, knowing that



just saying hi, just having a conversation made their day, it's incredibly rewarding.

Q. What was the defining moment that made you to buy into Coach Belichick's season and system?

CHRISTO KELLY: I mean, even before you get into it, right, Coach Belichick, the greatest coach of all time. The results speak for itself, but once you get to know him, right, the humility that he has, the willingness to just be like, hey, what's the best way of doing this. Obviously he knows a thing or two about winning, but just the willingness to want to do whatever it takes to win. The work ethic that he has sets the standard for the rest of this team. It's just a blessing to be able to be a part of it.

Q. You went through your injury last season, tried to come back. What did you learn about yourself, mental health, and just getting through adversity and getting to the other side?

CHRISTO KELLY: Yeah, that's a great question. One of the biggest things for me, one, my faith became more developed. I went to Catholic school, Holy Cross, Loyola Academy, St. Francis Xavier in elementary school. I've always been surrounded by faith, but really was able to take more ownership of it.

Yeah, you know, getting hurt sucks, right? You see how hard everybody is working, and what you want to do is give everything that you have, but being able to see adversity is nothing more than opportunity is the big thing. I think for everyone. You look at your life. You see what has made the biggest impact on you. Where have you grown the most?

It's not in times where things were easy. You don't go to the weight room to do nothing to not push yourself, but it's the times where your back was up against the wall or you didn't know what was going to happen next where everything was stacked against you.

Once you understand that, all right, maybe this discomfort is actually a good thing, and you lean into it. When you are surrounded by so many great people, the support system that I have, that we have here at North Carolina is tremendous. Being able to grow in that sense is a huge impact on how I've approached this offseason, and just incredibly thankful for it.

Q. First off, Christo, whenever you decide to start your political campaign, just let me know. I'm going to vote for you because, my God, this dude is awesome. No, kind of to piggyback off the last question, you get hurt last year, and you come back, and you are now a

veteran on this team, and you have a lot of new people coming in. What is your message to this team? Because you're a guy that -- you're a cutthroat guy. We see you on the field. What's your message to try to instill and inspire this team?

CHRISTO KELLY: Yeah, that's a great question. So for one thing, right, it's echoing Coach Belichick's message. There's no magic pill that you can take for success. Everything is done through hard work, all right? You've got to be able to lean into it. You've got to be a great teammate.

The biggest thing, right, is earning the respect of your teammates. The way that you do that -- like our workout on Wednesday, we ran bouts with Jordan, ran bouts with all the skill guys. That stuff is hard. The training is hard. It's supposed to be hard.

But when you are side-by-side with someone who is pushed to the point of exhaustion, right, where they don't know if they can go on any further and they look to their side and, right, say, "All right, I can count on this guy, he's got to be able to count on me," once you get guys to buy into that, right, once you articulate the standard and you hold them to it, you know, great things happen, and the score will take care of itself.

Ultimately the biggest thing is we're focused on the process. We're focused on today. We're focused on winning today. Do that over time, and success will come, but none of it matters if you don't take care of it right now.

THE MODERATOR: Christo, thank you. We will spend just a little bit of time left with Jordan Shipp.

Q. Coach Belichick just said, hey, we are so far ahead from where we were last season. How do you dictate what to bring along from last season versus the necessary things that you have to capitalize on and flush out from last season?

JORDAN SHIPP: Of course, there are some things we did good last year, but we're not trying to hone on that. We want to flush it all. It's a new start. We're worried about what can we do to be better this year? What can we do to win the day-to-day? What can we do -- today is an off day, but what are you going to do to get better for the next day we work out? Are you going to do recovery, go get treatment? What are you going to do?

That's all our main focus is: What are you going to do to be better and be prepared for when the season comes around?



Q. Coach talked about this still being an open competition at quarterback. You're working with a lot of different guys. What are you taking away from them? How is that challenging you not knowing right now who exactly that starter is going to be in September?

JORDAN SHIPP: To start off, I feel comfortable with either four -- six of the guys, add DJ and Andy in there as well. I feel comfortable with all those guys. They bring different things. Billy is an older guy. A lot more experience. He's seen a lot of different defenses. He's played a lot of different football. He's played a lot of football.

Then you got Miles as another older guy, very athletic guy, cannon of an arm. He can make all the throws. He can do everything. Then you got Tori. He just plays free. He plays backyard football. You always love that.

Then you have Trav. He is a younger guy, but he is a younger guy that is not scared to make mistakes. He's going to make mistakes pushing ball down the field, and he's going to learn from those mistakes, and he's going to be a great player whenever they give him the keys, and he's going to run away with it.

In terms of challenge, I don't look at it as a challenge. Whoever is out there, obviously they're out there for a reason. So let's just go out there and work and let's bring some wins back to Chapel Hill.

Q. Piggybacking off of that last question, having built all of those different options, how has it helped your skill being able to make those catches from all those different guys?

JORDAN SHIPP: Yeah, just being able to adapt. Not everybody -- everybody throws the ball differently. For one, Tori is left-handed. Gio is left-handed. I'm already used to that.

It's just go make the play. It doesn't really matter who is throwing the ball. It matters if you are going to make the play or not. The stat sheet doesn't say, oh, you dropped the ball because this happened. It just says you dropped the ball. So just don't drop the ball. That's the biggest thing. Don't drop the ball. Don't drop the ball. Yeah.

Q. We know about last year, four wins, but you still was able to lead the team in touchdowns and reception yards. I just want to know about the frustration you guys dealt with in the locker room, especially with you dealing with the different types of quarterbacks? What are your team goals for 2026?

JORDAN SHIPP: In terms of frustrations, nobody likes to lose. I wasn't the only one frustrated. Everybody was frustrated, but we understood that those frustrations needed to be pointed in the right direction. Us sitting in the locker room pointing fingers, that's not going to help us go anywhere.

We all had to rally against each other -- or rally with each other because it seemed like everybody was kind of against us. Everybody wanting to see Coach Belichick fail. Nobody wanting to see him be successful in his first year of college football. Nobody wanted to see that.

We learned that more and more. We seen there were articles coming out saying he wasn't at practice during the bye week when we just got off the field, and he's standing right next to me. Stuff like that. It just sounds dumb. That's not true. Why are we even paying attention to that?

That kind of helped. On the outside it seemed like it was pulling us apart, but really it was gelling us together, because there's not a lot of people that go through that like as a whole, as a team. Just having so many people just want to see your coach fail, and that just turns into wanting to see you fail. Anybody but Carolina, that's all they wanted to see. But that's not what's going to happen.

Q. Jordan, your teammates call you Mr. Carolina.

JORDAN SHIPP: Yeah.

Q. Can you talk about what it feels like to be one of the premier faces of the program, and what kind of sense of responsibility does that mean to you?

JORDAN SHIPP: First thing I got to do is thank God for that. I mean, that's just -- the fact that somebody could call you Mr. Carolina, like, it's a joke and all and everything like that, but, I mean, just the fact that I'm even able to be looked at like that is nothing short of a blessing from God. Without Him, I wouldn't be here or anything like that.

You got to start with that. Then, I mean, in terms of just Mr. Carolina, like, I'm from here. I live 20 minutes away. My high school is 15 minutes away. This is home. Carolina is home to me. There's nowhere else I wanted to go. Everybody kept asking about the portal. I made it clear after the NC State game there was nowhere I was going no matter what was going on. We were going to figure out how to bring wins to Carolina because I bleed blue. It is what it is. I'm a Carolina man, Carolina guy, and that's just what I am. Go Heels, through and through.

THE MODERATOR: North Carolina, good luck.

