

Atlantic Coast Conference Football Kickoff

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Duke Blue Devils

Coach Manny Diaz

Jeremiah Hasley

Luke Mergott

Nate Sheppard

Press Conference



The one thing you can do is you can add up all the wins and losses and add up all the wins and losses of the eight teams that you played against or the nine teams this year. By that metric, which is the most objective metric that you can possibly have, there's no feelings or emotions involved in that, we were the top team to go play Virginia in that game.

And then we thoroughly deserved the victory and a great game against an outstanding Virginia team, Tony Elliott, deserved Coach of the Year a year ago.

What also is deserved is that whoever wins this competition in this league and what should be the discourse in this league is that the conference champion should go to the CFP. That should happen.

It's a respect for the league. It's a respect for what it means to play in this league. It's a respect to be one of the final two standing in this league. It should never have been Miami should have been in before that weekend, but when we start talking about analytics and we start talking about committees, then that's how people start getting flip-flopped. That's how we start getting into very hard-to-define strength of schedule that are based off of recruiting rankings and last year.

And we start taking away from the one thing that we can control, is watching two teams play, and somebody wins and somebody loses, and adding up the wins and losses and adding up the wins and losses of who they played against.

So that being said, that's something I think for the respect of the league, the respect of the coaches and the teams of this league. I know this year takes care of itself with the AQ rule, but it was worth mentioning for what we've accomplished.

College football is pretty simple, right, in this day and age. It starts off with evaluation. And the way we were able to evaluate a football team last year that got us here that first week in December, you got to have acquisition. You can't just evaluate them. You got to find a way to get them on

THE MODERATOR: We welcome the Duke Blue Devils into our room. We'll spend a few minutes with Head Coach Manny Diaz as he offers opening remarks. Coach, the podium is yours.

MANNY DIAZ: Thank you. I do appreciate everybody sticking around for the Friday late afternoon time spot. I thought it was for us at Duke. I realize it's because of the Krispy Kreme donuts that are outside. Whatever it takes, glad you all are here.

Been quite a week, huh? I heard we made the news. I heard we got a rule named after us. That's pretty cool, right? The Duke tiebreaker rule.

I want to start remarks by just addressing our thoughts on that. Inherent in the narrative of changing a tiebreaker for the conference championship game is the assertion that last year's team was undeserved of being in the championship game. You hear that word that now there will be more deserved teams in the championship game. I want to push back against that narrative.

I think it's not just false, I think it's insulting. What we're in is we're in a competition. That's what this is. 17 teams showed up here this weekend to compete for one championship. The most simple way to do that is if we could all play each other, right, but we can't do that. There's too many damn teams, right? It would be great to have head-to-head, but there are so many teams. It's hard to get us all together head-to-head. It would be cool to have common opponents, but it's hard to have enough common opponents.



your campus and to choose to come to your school.

Then when that happens, then it comes down to development and deployment. We take pride in how we develop. At Duke I sat here this time a year ago and mentioned that it was the strongest and the fastest Duke team that had been on campus since David Feeley, our strength coach, either under me or Mike Elko previously, and the development mattered.

And then the deployment. By the way, the deployment changes year to year. How we won nine games in 2024 is very, very different than how we won nine games in '25. In '24 we were much, much better on defense. Did enough on offense, protected the football. Last year the strength of our team was obviously our offense. Took a step back on defense but found a way and did enough.

We didn't do everything right and we made our own messes out of conference, but the one thing we were good at is we were good at winning games in this conference. To win seven and to go on to win the Sun Bowl and finish with nine wins, that's the last piece of the puzzle. After development, deployment, it's the connection.

And I do think in an era of the game becoming transactional, and you can be very cynical about the state of college affairs, I think these three guys represent the connection that we have in our locker room that no matter if the names change, that the culture -- and I know coaches throw that word around too much -- that the culture is so strong that we bring in new transfers, they become us. And we have a very distinct "us" at Duke, which I'm very proud to be the coach.

So what we do now is we go again. No different than in 2024 when the narrative was what's left at Duke? The head coach left. The quarterback left. The best D-tackle transferred in conference. The best running back transferred in the triangle. The best DB went to Oregon. It was all about who is left at Duke? Who is left at Duke?

Those guys found a way to go to work, and they found a way to win nine games and take Duke to the Gator Bowl for the first time.

What this offseason has been about is about creating evidence. The exact same thing, the process. Not about trying to recreate the outcome of what happened a year ago. It's about rediscovering the process.

That's why David Feeley is elite in the weight room. Because his standard never wavers. He understands what it takes. Our players have the confidence in how we've gotten there. And even though we've had different names

on the back of the jerseys over the last couple of years or even going back to the last four years, the constant has been how we work and how we prepared.

Guess what, the data is coming in from the summer. We're stronger as a team average in the bench, the squat, and the power clean than we were a year ago. Last year we had five guys that run 22 miles an hour. We just this morning had another PR. We have 11 guys running over 22 miles an hour. We have in the mid 60s -- I think we have 67 guys that run over 20 miles an hour. That's over two-thirds of our football team. That's counting the able bodies.

Our guys are seeing real tangible proof that if they just follow the program, if they follow our process, and they follow the system, they get better.

Ultimately, that's what all this is about is getting our team as good as it can be to be ready to perform for everybody when we start the season Labor Day weekend.

With that, let's open it up for questions.

Q. As the start of the season gets closer, what are you telling your incoming freshmen as they are getting ready for the change of pace in college football?

MANNY DIAZ: Yeah, the best thing to tell the freshmen is to watch our older guys, learn. They've all been there. You have to recognize that college football is a sprint. I'm sorry. It's a marathon. It's not a sprint.

What they're all learning right now is being baptized in the church of Feeley, our strength coach. That usually keeps their hands full.

Everybody has been through it, and I think that's why our leadership is so important to let them know that we've all been there, and if they keep doing the work, it gets better.

Q. You've talked about in the past building a legacy, rediscovering the process, the culture at Duke University. How do you ensure that the Duke program and the Duke institution is not just a stepping-stone program, that players can just come into Duke and transfer at their will? But how do you ensure that Duke is not a stepping-stone program?

MANNY DIAZ: We don't ensure that. There's no way to ensure that. There's no way anybody in the country can ensure that. What we can ensure is that we have a thing that attracts people, that people ideally want to stay, but it also attracts great players.



That's been the one common denominator is, look, in our program, we're only two years in our program. The way we're recruiting, the caliber of high school player we're recruiting, understanding the family that wants their son to graduate from Duke is really, really important.

Listen, if people want our players, that means we're doing something well, right? If we stunk, nobody would want any of our guys. So this is kind of a champagne problem, right, when you win a lot of games and have a lot of guys perform at a high level, ideally the whole idea is that they'll have the opportunity to go straight from Durham to the NFL Draft, right? We've had guys that have done that, that developed, and all got drafted this past spring. That's going to become a recurring theme at our program.

Q. As you mentioned, 2024 you were a defensive team. Last year you were an offensive. Now with your losses to Miami, how are you going to make sure that defense comes up again and performs like they did in 2024?

MANNY DIAZ: Yeah, I think the word that surrounds our defense this year is urgency. Somehow last year we just didn't -- the sum of the parts wasn't quite there. I think we lost urgency. I think we had a little bit of entitlement might have crept in.

I don't know that we have a guy right now that knows for sure that he's a starter, and I think that's fantastic. That's not because we don't have good enough players. I think we have a two-deep that's as talented as anything we've had in the time that I've been there.

So that means that this August is going to be a heck of a competition, a heck of a battle, because whoever starts, there's going to be some damn good players watching that first 11 that run out there against Tulane.

Q. After the departures of Wesley Williams and Vincent Anthony to the draft, as well as Coach Harland Bower to the Ravens, what can you tell us a little bit expectation-wise for our new coach, Coach Harris, as well as some really young, great defensive ends, some of our highest recruits we've ever had in the past previous years?

MANNY DIAZ: Yeah, Trent Harris has stepped in, done a fantastic job with the guys in that room. Really love him. Harland Bower was a fantastic coach, is a fantastic coach, and will do great in Baltimore.

If you scale back almost the last three decades now in this defensive scheme, the one thing it does, it puts defensive ends in the National Football League. This is a pretty

standard occurrence for us.

It stinks to lose guys like Wes and VJ, not just as players, but as people. But coming out of spring practice, what Kevin O'Connor did playing this spring, playing out of his mind, I think everybody understands it's sort of a glamour position in this scheme. They're ready to be the next man up.

There are other guys, as you mentioned, that are going to be in the competition for that as well. I think Tyshon Reed has made big strides. Everyone knows about Bryce Davis.

I'm excited to see that battle. It's the same thing: Who knows? But the best defenses I've been around, especially up front, we go two-deep. Guys are unselfish. There's nothing more tiring on a football field than rushing the passer. If you don't have that depth, there's a massive drop-off between your ones and twos. You're not going to be able to sustain that for four quarters. If anybody has paid attention to Duke football, it's probably going to be decided in the fourth quarter.

I'm really excited about seeing that depth all across our defense help us see us through in those late wins more than they did in '24.

Q. How impactful is it to you to retain both the linebackers Nick Morris Jr. and Luke Mergott?

MANNY DIAZ: It's massive, right? They're both guys who believe in Duke, who the school means a lot to. It was a shame that we had one or the other, right? I think there's an easy (indiscernible) where the two of them can play together on the field at the same time.

It was a big loss when Nick came out of our lineup last year two games into the season. But he's back and healthy and buzzing around. I think that makes -- I think Luke will make Nick better. I think Nick will make Luke better. I think the young guys coming in like Bradley Gompers and Will Felder will make everybody better. You got a guy like Kendall Johnson.

I think our linebacker depth is outstanding, and I think we feel like no matter who is on the field, we'll play at a high level.

Q. You mentioned that this team is just much quicker. In what ways are you all implementing that speed to really elevate the on-field play?

MANNY DIAZ: It's really just the way we train, but I think the reason why we're faster is because we just have faster people, right? We got last year's guys as fast as we can



get them. I think what we've added in the portal and through high school guys, I think we just have faster human beings than we had a year ago.

Now, like I said last year, that only means we're good if we run relay races, right? We got to be good at football too because that's what we get judged on. I do know this, I like having faster football players than slower football players. I've tried it both ways. We win a lot more games with fast ones than slow ones.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you for the time. We will spend some time with Jeremiah Hasley.

Q. You're four touchdowns away from breaking Duke's tight end touchdown record, some likes of Braxton Deaver, Noah Gray, and many other greats. What does something like that mean to you going into what is your final season, trying to make it to the league, as well as just team-oriented and individual goals?

JEREMIAH HASLEY: Yeah, I didn't really know that, to be honest, so that's pretty cool to hear.

To hear guys like that, Noah Gray, who is excelling at the next level with the Kansas City Chiefs, it's truly an honor.

Individual goals going into the season is just always to play for my team and play for this university. I've gave it my all the last four years at Duke University, and it's a special place in my heart and for the people around me, the relationships I've built, the experiences I've had, and the moments, especially the ACC championship win. It's truly a blessing.

Then again, as a team, our standards are always the same. Our expectations, our first goal is always to come back to Charlotte and compete in the ACC championship. With that, it rolls into the College Football Playoffs.

As a team that's always the goal, and if there's transfers and freshmen alike that come into the program that are new, we instill in them with the seniors and the people that have been here for a long time.

THE MODERATOR: You've been recognized by many for all of your academic accomplishments. What's the secret in blending the academics with the athletics?

JEREMIAH HASLEY: I mean, time management, for sure. Duke does not take it easy on their student-athletes. We show up to class each and every day in person, sitting in the front as much as we can and participating. I mean, it's a very difficult, rigorous program, but it sets us up for the future.

Again, I wouldn't trade it for the world. For the four years I've been there as a student and as an athlete, it's truly remarkable.

Q. You've mentioned being at Duke for all four years. What are some of the things you are looking for and looking to take to the next level as you continue on in your career?

JEREMIAH HASLEY: I've seen multiple people in the last few years -- Wesley Williams, Brian Parker -- who have made their next steps into the next level. You know, just talking with them, they just -- the experience they went through, especially in the combine experience, they love what they hear about Duke football players and the smartness they bring to the program, the toughness we have.

That's been just with Coach Feeley the last four years we've been through that process and we know how hard it is. The things that Duke University has to offer is truly special, and you can see it with the guys at the next level.

Q. Jeremiah, you had a position switch early in your career at Duke. How did your experience as a linebacker help you transition to playing tight end?

JEREMIAH HASLEY: Yeah, you see the techniques, how a linebacker performs at the second level and then transitioning over to a tight end. It's very similar. You have to have strong hands. You have to be physical. Again, you have to be very competitive against safety, linebacker, so at the second level.

You know, learning their techniques, learning the schemes and how they fit runs or even how they defend you against the pass, it's very instrumental whenever you go against players like that.

THE MODERATOR: You grew up in Gibsonia, Pennsylvania. It's a town just shy of 3,000 people. What was it like in small-town life being a stand-out football player?

JEREMIAH HASLEY: Yeah, I mean, I grew up in Gibsonia, PA, played at Pine-Richland High School, regarded as one of the best high schools in Pennsylvania. It's truly special, a public school. You don't have a lot of players or even students in those school districts. Again, very special to come out of that.

I have a lot of coaches and friends from back home that I wouldn't have been here without them, and appreciate them getting me here along the way.



Q. How do you like the competition that you have within the state of Florida, knowing that you've got Wake Forest, North Carolina, North Carolina State, and if you go down I-85, you have Clemson? There's a lot of great football within just a matter of a few hours away.

JEREMIAH HASLEY: We're very fortunate to play those teams. It's always a blessing to play one of them. We always try to win our state of North Carolina. We've done that the last two years. Beating NC State, beating UNC and Wake Forest is always a great thing. Then obviously beating Clemson is even a special one, so...

THE MODERATOR: Thank you. We will spend a little bit of time with Luke Mergott.

Q. Your former head coach, Jake Coleman, actually stepped down from coaching your high school. Can you just talk about how he was for a mentor and helped you develop into the player you are today?

LUKE MERGOTT: Yeah, great question. Jake Coleman was my high school coach. As you said, he just stepped down. He was awesome. At the time that he took over, I was playing football, basketball, and baseball. I actually wanted to be a college basketball player. He came over and really embraced and help grow my love of football.

It was right at the time of COVID, and he was out there every day, and we were working out on the beach. His son Brycen Coleman, a great friend of mine, he plays at Vanderbilt, and he flew out to the ACC championship game to watch me play. That whole family has really helped me and my love of football continue to grow.

Q. You made some of the biggest defensive plays for Duke going into the end of the season. How has having a full offseason as being "the guy" kind of changed your approach to the 2026 season?

LUKE MERGOTT: I feel like the key is that it doesn't change your approach because I feel like the second that you let it change your approach is the second you change as a player.

I know me and Coach Diaz had talked a lot, and he's done a really good job of helping me learn how to try to handle success and continue to get better. And the way to do that is just to not change your process, not do extra, and continue to attack every day and not look in the future, but just look at tomorrow -- really today and then tomorrow.

Q. You played both sides of the ball in high school.

You were catching touchdowns. Do you ever miss that? How did that help any playing linebacker in college?

LUKE MERGOTT: My offensive coordinator, Russell Croteau, will tell you to this day from high school that I'm a better tight end than a defender. I love playing offense. My favorite play is still split zone to this day. Run across and cracking that D-end all the time.

Yeah, I mean, I miss it a little bit for sure, but the linebacker is by far the best because, out of everything, the best thing to do is to tackle someone and hit someone, so...

Q. Earlier we were talking about linebacker depth, guys like yourself, Nick, Elliott Schaper, Bradley Gompers, Kendall Johnson, a loaded room. What does that say about the coaching, the talent, and the recruiting that goes into the position of linebacker?

LUKE MERGOTT: Obviously Coach Diaz does an amazing job getting these guys in who are talented. Some of them -- I know Gompers was a tight end as well. Some are linebackers, but they play other positions too.

Then from that point on it's just Coach Feeley developing us. They do a great job teaching us. This is by far the most depth I've seen in our linebacker room since I've been here. I feel like there's going to be no drop-off. I know last year towards the end of the year I had to play a lot of snaps, and this year no matter who goes in the game we're going to uphold the Duke defense standard.

Q. Before earning a featured role on the team, you actually started as a special teams contributor. Can you talk about the importance of that and how it helped develop you as a player?

LUKE MERGOTT: Yeah, special teams is critical, and I plan on hopefully playing special teams again this year. Obviously it's always a competition, but special teams is your first time out there on the field, and the only way to get better is through experience. That's your first time out there experiencing the college game and the college speed.

All those snaps was really when I first started with them to help me learn the speed of the game. Obviously as I got to play more linebacker, then I learned the speed of that.

Special teams is very instrumental to success as a football player and as a team, as we know. And then after college is over, once you get to the NFL, it's instrumental that you know how to play special teams at that level.



THE MODERATOR: Thanks for the time. We'll spend time with Nate Sheppard.

Q. Nate, throughout this offseason, a lot of teams wanted you to enter the transfer portal off your last year. One of three running backs in the ACC to score over ten touchdowns and return to the same program. What was the ultimate deciding factor for you to return to Duke?

NATE SHEPPARD: The ultimate deciding factor was just the team we have and the family we have in that locker room. I think we have one of the best locker rooms in the country, one of the best cultures in the country.

Obviously I committed to this man up on the stage, Manny Diaz. I believed in his vision, everything that he was preaching, and I've seen it come to fruition these last two years that he's been here, especially winning the ACC championship. Those are big reasons why I decided to come back.

Q. You are one of five Duke true freshmen to not just letter but play in more than four games. Can you talk about the prestige of that, playing at a university like Duke?

NATE SHEPPARD: Definitely being able to come in here and contribute at the Power 4 level is huge for me. I always believed I had the ability. I didn't know it would go as far as it did last season. I'm just glad that the coaches had the trust in me and everything like that.

Q. Even though you are just a true sophomore, with guys like Jayvian Tanelus and CJ Givers in the room with you, as a sophomore, what kind of leadership are you going to bring to the table for that room this year and try to get those guys to end up like a one-two punch kind of like you and Castle were together last year?

NATE SHEPPARD: Yeah, definitely. We have some great backs in the room -- CJ Campbell, Billy Daal, obviously the young guys, CJ and Jayvian. I just want to lead by example, show them how to do the drills right and how to come to practice every day and have the mindset that you want to get better every single day.

Q. Your 170 rushing yards in the Sun Bowl were the third most by an ACC freshman behind James Conner and Lamar Jackson. What does it feel to be a part of that company, and how do you plan on building on that this season?

NATE SHEPPARD: Yeah, obviously those are great

names to be in company. Great NFL stars, great in college also. You know, to be in company with those names, it's a great honor. I just want to build and get better for next season.

Q. Over 1,100 rushing yards a year ago. How has Coach Diaz challenged you to take that next step, expecting a much bigger role this year?

NATE SHEPPARD: Yeah, I mean, Diaz always just tells me don't be complacent. Don't be happy where you are. Don't be content where you are at and keep pushing to get better.

I think that's what Coach Feeley has done a lot. He's been instrumental to this team, to me, to everybody else on this stage in getting bigger, stronger and faster.

So never get complacent.

Q. Being that you are at Duke, and obviously that is a basketball school so you guys don't get the attention that the basketball team does, does that -- how does that help you guys just get to work and not have to focus on the outside stuff?

NATE SHEPPARD: No, you know, we do play at the Power 4 level in football and basketball. So, you know, I wouldn't just say we're only a basketball school. I mean, we did just win an ACC championship game. I do have to go back on you a little bit on that. I think we're a football school also.

Q. Someone mentioned that you're a true sophomore. As you're stepping into the leadership role, what are you learning from your previous leaders?

NATE SHEPPARD: Yeah, I'd say Anderson Castle is one of the biggest leaders, especially in our room and probably on our team last year.

I learned a lot from him, how to just stay level-headed during the game, how to keep pushing through, how to just play the next play. I want to instill that into our young guys and everybody else in the locker room.

Q. Just how much more confident do you feel going into this year compared to last year with one year under your belt?

NATE SHEPPARD: Yeah, I have a decent amount of snaps under my belt, so I do have that extra confidence.

Going back to what I said earlier, I do not get complacent. I don't get overconfident in myself and my abilities. I



believe immensely in my O-line and my tight ends and wide receivers to block for me and get their jobs done. If they do their job, I can also do my job.

THE MODERATOR: You grew up along the shores of Lake Pontchartrain, and that area we know over the years has experienced a ton of weather challenges. There is a toughness that comes from your hometown of Mandeville. They're resilient. How does that resiliency translate into what you do in the classroom and what you do on the field?

NATE SHEPPARD: Yeah, obviously, like Jerry said, the classroom, they don't take it easy here on you, on Duke, just because you're an athlete. You still have to go to class. You still have to turn all your assignments in on time. Being able to have that time management, that toughness definitely works out in that aspect.

Then on the football field, you know, this is a tough sport. It's a physical sport. So having that toughness from where I grew up obviously helps.

THE MODERATOR: Duke, good luck this season.

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