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Welcome to another edition of the *Wahoo Central Podcast*. I'm your host, Jeff White, from VirginiaSports.com. I hope everyone had a good Thanksgiving. The football game did not go the way anyone here wanted the other day, but the school year marches on and the same is true for UVA athletics. This is episode number 293 of this podcast, and today we'll be hitting wrestling and softball.

My first guest made his first appearance on episode number two back in November 2013. And he's back for his eighth time on the show. Without further ado, I give you head wrestling coach Steve Garland. Steve, good to see you again. How's everything going?

Yeah, good to see you. I didn't realize I was episode two, man. That makes me [INAUDIBLE]. Thank you. That's awesome.

Back by popular demand every other time. So this is your 16th season at head coach at UVA, which is your alma mater. I mean, you've built up some serious seniority in the department haven't you? I'm looking at the list of head coaches-- Kevin Sauer, Julie Myers, George Gelnovatch, Brian O'Connor. Are they the only ones here who have more seniority than you as a head coach?

Yeah, I think so. Yeah, I think so. Yeah. That's pretty awesome to just even think about. I'm glad you reminded me of that, man. In the month of Thanksgiving and being grateful for things, that's pretty cool that-- praise God, I've been able to be here this long. You know, when I first started in 2006, I'll be honest with you, there were some little moments where I'm like, I don't know if I'm going to make it [INAUDIBLE] tomorrow.

So we've talked about it in your previous appearances, but ACC wrestling has changed dramatically, hasn't it, over, not only your tenure as a head coach, but even from when you wrestled here yourself? I mean, it is now a nationally prominent, powerful conference, isn't it?

Yeah, absolutely. You mentioned even when I wrestled. So the '99 to 2000 season was my last year competitively at UVA. I mean, I barely made it out of conference. There was only 12 qualifiers out of the conference. Think about how crazy that is.

And now we have like 40 something. I mean, it's crazy how much different it is. OK, here's an example. We had some all-Americans-- you know, Jim Harshaw, Matt Roth. These guys are my teammates, my roommates, all-Americans a year before I was, and everything. And so we had some good teams, but we were never even nationally ranked, to my knowledge.

And now, last year 1.5 of the six teams were nationally ranked, including us. And, you know, it was us versus Pitt. We beat them when they ranked 12th in the country or 15th in the country, whatever it was. And it's great match-up. That was just ho-hum. That was just great dual meet in the ACC now. Normal. Like, that's just totally expected.

We split 5 and 5 with Virginia Tech. And they ranked third in the country last year. And everyone in our bus was furious driving home. It's like, it's not a big deal for an agency team to knock off the third ranked team. In other words, that's what we want. That's the expectation.

And [? same ?] [? thing with ?] Virginia Tech and Chapel Hill doing a great job, and obviously, NC State, always good. I mean, it's just such a night-and-day difference. It's not even close to what it was. And that's just a total praise for what the guys are doing now. And it's exciting. And our Friday night duals are exciting. And the match-ups are exciting at ACC. So it's just all good.

I think people who follow the program know that you regularly put out video updates throughout the season, kind of recapping the most recent tournament and competition. You just had a great one about the Madtown Open, which was up in Lock Haven-- yeah, Lock Haven, PA, so we won't go over that.

But you're a little bit into the season now. In general, kind of, what are your thoughts on this year's team? I know you haven't been able to field your whole lineup yet. And hopefully, that'll happen soon.

Yeah, unfortunately, I think there's two things. The one is the negative in that an injuries hit us hard. I mean, it was crazy. And I won't get into all the details, but let's just say four or five starters, former starters, just out with serious, serious stuff. You know?

And then also we had Jay Aiello, who competed at the World Championships in Serbia. So he hasn't been able to wrestle because, frankly, he's been training freestyle. And then, when he came back, he was wrestling 220 or whatever. 220, that was his natural weight now. Now we're doing the weight descent to get him down properly to 197, and do it safely, and do it where we're not hurting our guy.

So he's been out. And that was a good reason to be out, but also you're still missing your anchor on your team. All right. He's our leader. He's our captain. He's our guy.

But that being said, the positive is guys stepping up. We've had plenty of guys that have been doing some great things lately that aren't the quote, "well-known" guys, guys like Jon Errico, who was quietly 6 and 0 on the season, a transfer from University of Pennsylvania, whose brother Luka is here already for us as a younger guy. So he's a fifth-year, getting his master's degree, by the way, in business at the [INAUDIBLE] [? school, ?] one of the hardest things you can do. And he's doing that and wrestling every weekend.

So guys like Justin Phillips, who just won the Lock Haven tournament, who's been battling for years. And he's making big gains. Guys like Ethan Weatherspoon, who's been right there on the cusp, you know. He had that really close loss at Maryland, where he looked amazing and that really close loss in the Campbell dual. And then he looked awesome the first two matches to make the finals at Lock Haven. So that was a big thing. So it's been things like that.

You've seen Brian Courtney coming back down to 133 and looking great. And he's even been dinged up a little bit, but he's been looking good, especially that last match against Campbell. He beat a really tough kid and got bonus points for the team. Dylan Cedeno, who's a freshman for us, red-shirt freshman, who we think is going to be pretty special. And he's been able to do some great things for us so far. He was out of the Campbell match.

So again, it's just the theme of, Oh my goodness, if we could just get our line-up set. He got hit with an illness, a serious illness that I can't get into what it was, but it was serious. And it's just like, man, so if we can just, God willing, get this team out there where everyone's healthy, I think we're going to be pretty good.

Also, you know, guys like Denton Spencer, who is fighting through injuries all year, who has been able to come back and look awesome to make the finals of the tournament last week. So there's been those positives, too, of guys filling in and guys stepping up and guys fighting through pain and fighting through adversity and all that stuff.

So those are things you don't see in the box score. Those are things that donors don't know and alumni don't know and fans don't know. It's like, we know. Frankly, parents don't even know. I mean, we're in that room and we see everything, I mean everything. And it's been a very long semester of work and navigating through that. Let's just say that.

And today is the first day of December. So we're not even that far into it. Now, wrestling is unique, I think, in that you have one format, basically, during the regular season and then you have a different format for post-season. Sometimes you have a team that is a really good dual meet team that is not as good in championships or vice versa. Sometimes they're very good in both.

Do you have a sense of this team? And, obviously, it depends on whether you have your full lineup or not, but if you can put out the lineup you want to put out, how does it shape up, dual meet and also championships?

Well, that's a really great question. That's something that, again, the average fan may not know. What's so different about our sport is this-- I've been saying this for years. So I don't mind saying it again. It's the craziest thing.

So we were ranked as high as ninth in the country at one point in dual meet rankings. I mean, we were killing it. I think we were 11 and 1 that year on the season and had knocked off all these ranked teams. But we went 0 for 4 in the All-American round. And all of a sudden, [INAUDIBLE] eyes we're the worst team in the world. You know? But isn't that crazy? Like, I think we won the ACC championship that year.

But in wrestling terms, if you don't perform at the National tournament, nobody cares. It's the craziest thing. Does that take away everything those kids did on that program for the full season? Heck no. You know? But that's the way it goes.

So really, what's hard to balance is, for us, at the end of the day, the only thing that matters is the NCAA tournament. So you're almost trying to put together an entire schedule, everything geared towards that. So it's the only thing that matters. And this is all part of the process. Everything we do up to that is just leading to that.

So that's really what the guys-- we all have to be thinking about. Now that being said, let's face it, everything matters. We're in a dual meet going crazy for our guys at the Virginia duals or last weekend's-- wherever it was-- you know, it matters. And so it's funny you say that. But it's hard to actually live that out because everybody wants to win every time they step on the mat.

So it's a delicate balance. It's an interesting thing with our sport that we're actually-- there's a sect of wrestling coaches that want to change it. We want to get a national duals format. We want to say these dual meets are exciting. Fans love it. Tournaments aren't what-- this is exciting stuff, don't get me wrong. The NCAA tournament is exciting, too. But we want to get to that because, to build a team, a full team, that's really the format.

Here's an example-- there's been years where teams have two all-Americans and they're top 15 in the country. But that year, that season we beat them by 30 points during the year. So it's like, does that really gauge? Is it about individuals or is it about the team? And every other sports team-- team, team, teamwork, teamwork, teamwork, right? Selflessness, selfless, selflessness, all that stuff. In wrestling, it's almost like, if you got three studs and they're winning at a high level at nationals, you can do some real damage at the NCAA tournament. Right?

Pitt, last year-- you know, Keith Gavin I are still pretty close and he would tell you he wasn't really thrilled with his regular season. But they had two NCAA finalists. And he's like, national coach of the year. And so that stuff happens, you know? And whether right or wrong, I don't know. It's just kind of is what it is. That's the sport of wrestling right now. That's the state we're in. Does that make sense, Jeff?

Yeah. And I know when I covered high school sports for the Richmond paper, I don't know if the VHS still has it, but they had a dual meet. They had dual state champion and the traditional state champion, too.

So, I mean, I think Great Bridge ended up winning both. But you could theoretically have a team that had the best dual meet lineup and won a state championship in that, but did not win it in the traditional championship format. So Yeah, it's interesting.

So last season, you had eight NCAA qualifiers-- Patrick McCormick, Louis Hayes, Brian Courtney, Justin McCoy, Jake Keating, Vic Marcelli, Jay Aiello, Quinn Miller. All of those guys, except Louis, are back. Though, I know a couple of them have yet to compete this season.

You've had a couple of guys switch weights. I think you mentioned Courtney dropped from 41 to 33 and Justin McCoy has gone from 57 to 65, right? Are there any others? And what went into those changes?

Well, let me focus on McCoy because he's been absolute the highlight of the season. He's 6 and 0 right now. He's undefeated. But it's not just his record, it's the way he's competing, Jeff. I mean, he's looking for bonus points every time he steps on the mat. It's constant action.

We get asked this a lot in the recruiting process-- what's your brand and what do you want to be known for? What makes Virginia wrestling Virginia wrestling? Well, the guys I point to are guys like Chris Hendricks, Nick Sulzer, George DiCamillo, Jack Mueller.

You know, Jack Mueller, in 2019, was 20 and 0 going into the NCAA finals. And I think he had 16 of the 20 matches where bonus points. Does that make sense? So that's an amazing stat. And Georgie was always looking for bonus points, right? You remember DiCamillo, the motor he had and how he used to wrestle. That's what we want to see. That's what we want for Virginia wrestling. We want guys who are out there to score points and be exciting.

And really, McCoy has been the shining light in that area. He's been the example for the rest of the team in that area. He's just been wrestling phenomenal. And, to your question, he went he's gone up a weight. And that was something that we've been talking about for years. And we finally pulled the trigger and it's been phenomenal. It's just been the best thing for him. Not having to worry about cutting weight is huge, Jeff.

That's the other thing people don't get. People don't rightly understand, maybe even here at UVA, how hard it is to do what these guys do week in and week out. Not being able to enjoy holidays to the fullest, not being able to do certain things, having to watch-- something as simple as-- I get the biggest kick when I hear other sports teams here in these meetings. When they're going to tournaments or going to competitions, they're eating gummy bears on the bus they've got their water bottles and they got their little snacks.

It's like, with us, dude, we can't even eat. We can't eat, we can't drink, we can't nothing. We're miserable. And so it's like these guys are struggling.

Now, here's the good part-- my point is [? Justin ?] isn't. Justin is not in that. So go figure, he's wrestling great. So I mean, for me, the dream is diet, discipline, lifestyle, and then not have to worry about cutting weight. That's really what you want for everybody. It's not always going to be perfect, but that's the dream, baby. It's that guys can step on that mat and just feel awesome. And I think that's what you're seeing from Justin right now. The move up has been phenomenal for him so far.

But then Courtney went the other way. And I think at 41 he sometimes got overpowered by the bigger, stronger. He was a small 41. 33 a better weight for him?

Yeah, incorrect. And that's, again, I think with Bryan, it's last year he was he was too light. I mean, he was naturally full feed a pound under, walking into a weigh-in. And that's the opposite, where he got matches he should have won-- we think he should have won-- he lost, maybe because he did get overpowered. And he got horsed. And it's like, at 33, we feel like that's not going to be the case. We hope, right? That's the hope.

And again, Brian's married. He's student teaching in grad school. He's so on point with his lifestyle. He can do it. That's what I mean by lifestyle. What I mean by that is all encompassing-- nutrition, sleep habits, the decisions you make socially, all these things. He represents the best of the best in all those areas.

So we don't have to worry about him going down because he does everything right. Guys that do things wrong, it shows when they're wrestling. It'll show up.

So I know wrestlers are probably familiar with this, but I think Jack Mueller told me once that, particularly at a tournament format where you're competing at night but you weigh in the morning, how much weight can a wrestler gain back if he weighs in at 11 AM and he wrestles at 7:00 PM? I mean, they put on several pounds, right? At least. It's not like just putting on-- so for a guy it can be significant then, can't it?

Depending on the guy, sure. But it can be very significant. Gosh, Louis Hayes, as much as I love him-- our all-American from last year. And I love the kid and I spent a lot of hours with that young man when he would blow up at tournaments. I mean, he would somehow, someway, gain seven pounds. You're like, [INAUDIBLE]. How are you still four over? It was just the craziest thing to me. You know?

But Jay Aiello is a monster. He's a monster. His body will suck up that liquid quick. He'll be 13 over the next day like nothing. And he does everything right. He's just like Courtney. He does everything right, but his body just sucks it in like a sponge. But then there's other guys, like Justin McCoy won't be that much. And other guys like Dylan Cedeno, he'll gain four pounds back. It won't be anything crazy.

So I think it depends on the guy. And bodies are different. But I know, Mueller, you mentioned-- oh my goodness, he actually just admitted something to me yesterday that I never knew when he was wrestling for me. He goes, Coach, on Mondays I was coming in at 38.

I was like, what? I didn't realize he was 13 over every Monday. He goes, [INAUDIBLE] that was a good Monday for me. And I was like, holy smokes. I'm glad you never told me that when I was your coach. Because I would have had a heart attack. So I think some of these guys just blow up just naturally. Yeah.

So you mentioned Jay. Early this month, he went to Belgrade, Serbia, took the bronze medal at the under 23 world championships. 97 kilograms class, which I think is what, 220 or 213?

It's 213. Yeah.

213. Yeah. Anyway, and he's working his way back to 97. I had him on the podcast recently. And he talked about the season he had at UVA last year. And he battled, I think, injury and illness. And we did not see the real Jay Aiello. He didn't compete well at NCAAs the way he wanted to. He was runner up in the ACCs. What are you expecting from him this year when he gets back down to 97 and starts wrestling?

Yes. So Jay's an example of it doesn't matter how old you are, you can still improve. And he made huge gains, technically, training for the Worlds. One of the awesome sort of side effects that came out of that process-- understand we have to train him completely different for freestyle, completely. He had to have his own practices.

I mean, it was crazy. It was a lot of work. But in doing that, one of the positives that came out of that is his technique went to a whole other level because he was hyper focused on just little details. So I think what you're going to see is a lot of technical development, a lot less mistakes. Also, again, thankfully, he's healthy. Whereas last year, he wasn't healthy the whole season. And you could see that. People could see that.

His energy level wasn't there.

He was just-- and I can't get into what it was, but it was, again, very, very serious stuff. So this year so far we're not going to see that. So I think what you're going to see-- I can't promise results, right? I mean, I believe in my guy. But I can say, what you're going to see is a much different Jay Aiello, in terms of his technical expertise and the way he executes. But then also, I think you're going to see his motor, which is what he was known for before last year. I think you're going to see that back.

You mentioned a couple transfers. I did a story over the summer on Jarod Verkleeren who came here from Penn State. Your other transfer kind of slipped in under the radar. Jon Errico-- he came here from Penn. Was he a late addition to the roster?

Yeah. Yeah, I'm going to be too honest. We didn't really recruit Jon. Jon just called us up and he said, hey, Coach, I got into grad school. I got into the comm school, which, frankly, was shocking because nobody gets in here on their own.

Yeah.

And you must be a genius. And he goes, bah, I kind of want to still wrestle. I want to see what I can do my last year of eligibility. I want to finish the race. And it was seriously that much of a conversation. So I can't say, oh God, I'm so smart and I figured it out. That really didn't happen. We just got blessed with a kid whose brother was here and who wanted to go to grad school. And he's been great. I mean he's another guy that pretty much is as low maintenance as it gets and does everything right.

And that weight class for us is really deep. Denton Spencer is, again, a fifth year for us that everybody on the team loves. And he actually won all the simulation matches before he got injured. And that was all public knowledge. And so he was there as well. And Sansone just took third at the open. And then we've got Alex Cruz who just took fifth at the Southeast Open and had some good wins. And, oh, by the way, Jake Keating is [? waiting ?] [? in the lurks. ?] So it's an interesting thing we have going on there.

But here's the thing, back to Jon. All he's done is come to work every single day and just do his job. You know what I mean? He doesn't say a word to anybody, doesn't complain, happy as he can be, just grateful, grateful to be here, and grateful that he enjoys being around everybody. I mean, it's just been a great fit. So no one saw that coming, probably even including him, right? I mean, I don't think anybody really saw. He probably didn't know what [INAUDIBLE] either.

Last week you announced the signing of another transfer, Gabe Christenson, who is come coming here from Iowa. When will Gabe enroll at UVA and when will he be eligible to start competing? He's a 97-pounder.

Yes. So he's actually planning to be here this January, this semester, this spring semester. If everything goes to plan, he'll be here full fledged on the roster and ready to rock. Yup.

Good. What do you think? I mean, obviously, Jay's been here forever. You're not going to have him forever. So Jay is moving on. And I'm sure that's a weight class you need to kind of add depth going forward. So Gabe kind of helps in that regard.

Yeah. Actually, Ethan has been great for us. And we expect him to continue to develop. But, yeah. You want to bring-- big guys are just-- it's so hard. It's so hard. Trent and I just had a heart to heart time about this yesterday. It's so hard to recruit 97 and heavyweight. It's not easy. And I don't want to get into all the reasons why I think that is, but you really got to dig in at those weights. You know?

Yeah. So you've got an interesting schedule this year. It seems like the schedule just varies from year to year, kind of dramatically. You don't have as many home duals at Mem Gym as you do some years, I think. You've got North Carolina coming up January 28th. The Hokies come here on February the 18th. And then you host the ACC tournament over at JPJ on March the 6th, right?

Correct. Yeah.

So this will not be the first time the ACC tournament's been here. What's the significance of that for the program? It's really an opportunity to showcase the program, isn't it?

Yeah. Well first of all, it's an opportunity. Whenever you're home, it's just great. And I think, already our alumni are fired up. I'm getting text messages and emails about guys have already got their hotel set. So that's exciting for our fans and for our people close to our program, our kids being able to wrestle in their own arena.

Oh, by the way, any time they can get in the John Paul Jones Arena, it's a really big deal for them. I want our administration to hear that. It's a really big deal for them. It's unbelievable how much it means to those guys to be able to compete in that type of place. And, by the way, the ACC conference-- Neff is on record for saying, look, I love hosting the tournament there. So it's going to be a phenomenal tournament. So it's all good on all those fronts.

And just a quick plug about the schedule, though, we have Midland's coming up December 28th, which is arguably the toughest tournament or at least one of the toughest tournaments in the country, with Iowa and Minnesota and all these other teams that go. And then we have the Virginia duals shortly after that, which is going to be phenomenal. We're going to be wrestling Oklahoma at that event.

Oh, by the way, Oklahoma's got all 10 guys in their lineup nationally ranked. So our schedule's pretty dang tough. Then we go into the ACC grind, which is just insanity-ville. So I feel like it's going to be really tough, really quality the rest of the way.

Before we wrap this up, let's talk about the recruiting class that you signed and you announced earlier this month. Obviously, until the guys get on the mat and actually compete, you don't know how good they'll be. But on paper this is one of your better classes, right, if not your best class?

Yeah, for sure. Yeah. I'm looking at it right now. I've got it written on my board. It's just like, Oh my goodness, it's deep. They're talented, they're very accomplished guys, they're tough. When you include the transfer in there with Gabe, it's like--

Right.

I mean, that's a heck of a group. Yeah. I mean, we're as excited as we've ever been. I have to be careful getting to over optimistic about recruiting classes because they have to come here and do it. But I think, on paper at least, I don't know how you can even compare anything to it. And, gosh darn-it, I know recruiting rankings aren't supposed to matter that much, but the pundits in our sport better freaking recognize this group because [INAUDIBLE]. Last I checked, we have the most top-100 guys in the country signed.

Yeah. I think there are, what, six guys in the top 100, or was it?

Yeah. It's at least six. It's probably more.

So there are two UVA programs based in Mem Gym-- wrestling and volleyball. Volleyball team just finished its first season under a new head coach, Shannon Wells, who took on a major rebuilding project when she came here. I'm sure your paths cross regularly at Mem Gym.

Have you gotten to know Shannon? And what's been your message to her? Because I know these seasons are challenging. Rebuilding seasons are tough for everybody, particularly the head coach.

Well, yeah. First of all, Shannon and her staff, all of them, are phenomenal. I mean they're so fun to be around. They're awesome to talk to. They have great ideas. I mean, not just Shannon, but her whole staff.

Every time I talk to someone on her staff, I learn something. And that's pretty cool. That's no baloney. That's just amazing. It's actually convicting. Like, jeez, I got to get my game together. These guys are actually here. They're just doing great things already.

But my message to her is, when they're struggling, it's like, Coach, I've literally been there. I know exactly what you're up against. Exactly. I got here in 2006 and the team hadn't scored a single point at the National tournament in two years. They didn't have a guy get on the plane to go to Nationals a year before I got here.

So I mean, that's tough. That's rock bottom. And it's ground zero. And then four years later, we were top 15 at the NCAA tournament and won the first ACC championship in 33 years. So my message to her is that things can turn around that quickly. They really can. It really can.

Everybody knows this, but that's why I said the recruiting thing, it's got to be the right kids that actually can handle UVA. Because UVA is hard. People were like, oh yeah, everywhere-- no, it's different here. It's different here. The professors are hard. Classes are hard. Assignments are hard. Now don't get me wrong, you should be able to do it. If I did it, anybody should be able to do it. But I need to give myself a little bit more credit maybe then I realize.

I was freaking mentally-- I was a competitor. So even in class, even though I don't have any book smarts and I don't talk eloquently and people probably think I'm a moron when they listen to me on these podcasts. I'm going to tell you right now, you put me in a room with 400 other people and I'm going to find a way to survive. That's the difference.

So for me, you almost have to find the kid that can survive. Who is going to come here and fight everywhere? I mean, who is going to sit next to the girl with the I Love New York shirt that got in on her own that's a genius. You're like, I'm not letting you beat me on this [? psychobiology ?] [INAUDIBLE], right? [INAUDIBLE] do that.

So you've got to be almost a little bit off in that respect. And I know, Tony, he's said things like that to me before, about you have to be almost borderline obsessed. And as awesome as he is, that's true. And to a certain degree you have to--

And so that's what I think she's going to do. She's going to bring in kids that have her mentality, that fit her, and then they're going to do some pretty special things here, I think.

Awesome. Well listen, you got about a month now to get everybody healthy, hopefully, and get ready for the Midlands championships. I will see you around. But have a happy holidays and good luck with everything. And, as always, thanks for your time.

Yeah. Jeff, thanks for what you do, man. Thanks for caring, brother.

All right. We're going to take a quick break, and then we'll be back to talk a little UVA softball.

Hey this is John Freedman, the voice of the Cavaliers. And with my busy schedule, the best way I've found to keep up with Virginia athletic scores, news, and fan contests is the UVA sports app. You can pick your sports preferences and never miss a final score or any breaking news.

You can also listen to all of our coach's corner shows live on the app. All you got to do is go to the Apple store or Google Play. And search Virginia sports or UV sports. Join the more than 50,000 Wahoo fans who are already using the UVA sports app.

All right. Now, I want to welcome in Joanna Hardin, who is heading into her sixth season as Virginia's head softball coach here. Joanna, it's great to see you again. But I got to warn you, Steve Garland was on the first segment and he is a hard act to follow. So I hope you brought your a-game today.

Oh man, I'm not even going to try to compete with Steve, but I'll give you my best shot.

All right. So you guys are done with fall practice. What are your thoughts on the way fall ball went for your team? I guess you concluded with your blue, orange, inner squad series.

Yeah. If I had to sum it into one word, it'd be competitive. It was extremely competitive in terms of positions, depth, in the circle, behind the plate, every class. Our first senior class came in and, man, they have been a Godsend. They're just fun, they're energetic, they're fiery, and they have really pushed everybody else. And then with that, our upperclassmen have all came back and responded to having six position players.

No pitchers in our freshman class, so six position players. And they are all pretty utility-- can play multiple positions. And so it was extremely competitive. And we really tried to frame that as a striving together because competition is excellent. It makes everybody better so long as it stays competitive and doesn't become rivalrous. So I thought it was extremely competitive, really fun. And I'm very, very excited to see it all on the field in the spring.

What do you like to see with it? I mean, the dynamic for an intrasquad scrimmage is different from that of playing another college team. What are you looking for when your team plays itself, basically?

Yeah. So we have a series of process goals that we have every single week, every single game. So that's ball's hit hard, there's [? first-hit ?] strike percentages. So we're trying to execute our process goals. And it's always interesting because the pitchers have a process goal, the hitters have a process goal. And so it's me versus you. And so there are days when the pitchers don't execute and the hitters do. And then vise versa. And that's going to happen when you're playing yourself.

So we're trying to see if we're executing those process numbers. And then are we improving? Are we falling behind? Are certain athletes improving? Who are? Yes/no. So that's really what we're watching when we play ourselves.

And we finally got to play opponents this fall, which was exciting and fun. So it was fun to put it all together against somebody else this fall because we didn't have that opportunity last fall.

Yeah. How many scrimmages, or whatever you call them-- exhibition scrimmages-- did you end up playing against other college teams this fall? I know you played JMU.

We got seven games in. We missed out on our last game against Maryland because of rain, unfortunately.

How did how did those go? I heard the JMU game went real well. And I don't know about the others?

It went really well. We scored 11 runs against JMU in 6 and gave up 3. That was awesome. Our offense was really explosive. We played Norfolk State in a doubleheader and did really well, scored a ton of runs and didn't give up many runs. That was exciting. You know, you can call wins and losses that don't count for anything. Some sports, your fall matches or games count towards your spring, but ours don't. So I would say we were 5 and 2 overall in the fall.

Played Liberty and our pitchers threw 10 innings and didn't give up any runs, which was exciting, in one of those games. And we came out and were pretty explosive. Scored eight or nine runs in that game. So it was great to see our offense put together plans and execute against somebody else. There was a ton of energy.

We lost a tight game at George Washington, 1-0. And the response from our team I thought was really positive. It was silent. They were so frustrated. They were so upset that they lost. And they just expect to win every game. And they expect to win every intrasquad. They expect to win every blue, orange game. So that was really, really exciting to see and I think something that will be very evident on the field next in the spring.

So I have your current roster here in my left hand. I have your stats from last year in my right hand. If I'm reading it correctly, you have all your pitchers back and basically all of your position players, plus your newcomers. So this is a really experienced group, right?

Definitely. We have experience. And we added a pitching transfer as well, who threw just about 100 innings at Purdue last year. So a ton of experience, a ton of youth that I think will also be integral in this spring for us. And they're going to play, they're going to get some action. But it's a really great combination.

It's funny, Jeff, every year I have this like, oh, we're young. We're young. And it's finally nice to say we're seasoned. Yeah. We're seasoned a little bit. We have a ton of experience. And so that's exciting. And it's a good combination of experience plus some of the young ones that are going to come in and make a name for themselves, which is exciting.

How difficult is it, or has it been, when a group of players hasn't had a ton of success and then they hit a rough patch and they've run into adversity and they can't really draw back on, hey, we got through this before and we came out just fine? It seems like that's a real obstacle when you're trying to turn around a program.

100%. You're spot on. And that's something that Bronco has been really helpful for me-- how do you frame everything that happens? And you have the choice on how you see every circumstance. So for us, we have really emphasized the process.

And I think a big switch for us this fall is our first-year class. They have no history. They have nothing. They're bringing their own experience. They've all been on state championship teams, championship club teams. And so they've come in with winning expectations. And so I think that has really helped.

And because they're all on the field, they all play different positions, that competitive spirit has really, really helped. And then you just frame everything about the process. But we've talked about winning, we've talked about winning more. And you can win every day at practice. So we've set pretty clear standards of what's expected at practice and what's expected on and off the field. And it's been really exciting to see them really grow and develop that. But you just have to choose how you frame everything that happens and keep a short memory.

So you have a new associate head coach, Mike Roberts, who is also going to be the pitching coach. He's got a ton of experience. He comes here from Louisiana. At first, I thought maybe you knew him from your days at McNeese, but you did not overlap there. But did you know him previously, before you hired him?

No, I didn't. We didn't have a previous relationship. I'd heard of him and who he was. And I think of the softball world as pretty small, but when the position opened and I was really pretty thoughtful about what to hire and what I needed to do and how I needed to adapt my role within the program and on the team.

And so as that process kind of moved forward, I really needed to hire a pitching coach. And so I interviewed some great people. And his name had come up and come up. And, it's funny, I reached out to him and he was probably a hot minute away from-- might need to go a couple of other places, and just the right place at the right time. [INAUDIBLE] worked out really well.

But no, before those initial phone calls, I didn't know him at all, personally. So that has been such a blessing. He's awesome, the players love him, a ton of experience, he's a great complement to my personality, and he has brought a lot to the table and a lot to help us build and continue growing.

He's been to the World Series twice, so he knows what it takes to get there. And he's been in championship programs. I think that experience has been really powerful in framing our fall.

So you had been working with the pitchers. What has the addition of Mike to the staff meant for you? I'm guessing it's freed you up to focus on some other areas.

Yeah. I have been able to take a step back and kind of have perspective over the whole program. But I run the defense. I love defense and I love schemes. I love shifts. I love putting ourselves in a position to take away hits, to make outs. I love that. I love that part of the game. And I think it's defense in base running and kind of those two parts of our game, where they can get really under coached and underdeveloped. And so I love that.

So I've taken over infield, outfield, and then Campbell Hutcherson, who came in, just graduated from UNC Chapel Hill. She's our volunteer and she's working with base running and kind of helping out with the first baseman. She works in the outfield. And so we tag team up together.

And I love it. It gives me a farther reach over the whole team because we have 22 position players. And it's been really a breath of fresh air for me, kind of rejuvenated me a little bit. And I just I'm enjoying it. I love it. I love my new role and kind of getting to oversee and manage a little bit more. Yeah, it's great.

So you guys giving Campbell a hard time about her Tar Heel past, I hope? We definitely gave her a hard time at the gate. But I think she's a she's a Hoo now. And she actually has some connections. Her brother's came to the University of Virginia. So she's familiar with grounds and everything. But yeah. We gave her a hard time. We don't actually play UNC in conference this year. We play them a single game in a tournament. So she'll only be torn for one game this year, instead of a series.

So your pitchers threw 321 innings last year. Roughly 44% of those innings went to two first years-- Mikayla and Madison. I mean, that's a lot to ask of them. How did they kind of come through that? And what have you seen from each of them this fall? I mean, Mikayla threw 102 innings last year.

Yeah. So we kind of expect Mikayla and Savanah to come in and throw a large portion of our innings because Savy threw about 100 innings at Purdue-- 70, 80, something like that. So I think the experience was very motivating for Mikayla. I could speak to her, specifically. She just wasn't super happy with all the outcomes and the results, but, man, she learned by fire. And sometimes that's the best way to learn-- just dive in the deep end and try to swim. So she got that experience. And it's really, really matured her quickly.

Madison's been battling some injuries on and off in the fall. So she really hasn't had the opportunity to get out there consistently for the fall. But yeah. A heavy load for first years to come in and carry. So it's exciting that they have that experience now to glean from and to take into this season, along with Savanah.

And Aly, of course, she has tons of experience. She's thrown against every single team in the conference. So she knows what it takes to beat teams in the ACC. So we have a great combination of experience, still some youth. They're really complementary of each other-- the stuff they throw. So I'm excited for them all to have to kind of get after it.

Savanah Henley is the transfer you mentioned. She's from Purdue, but she grew up in the Richmond area. Did you try to recruit her the first time around when she was coming out of high school, or had she committed? She might have already been committed by the time you got here.

Yeah. So there was kind of a little bit of overlap. I'd watch her in high school. We got Mikayla. We'd been on Mikayla for a long, long time. This was before the rule change. So I had been really established with Mikayla. And so when Mikayla committed, right at that September 1-- I don't even know when that was, to be honest, four or five years ago, three years ago-- she kind of was our pitcher for that class.

But Sav was always really persistent. She was always really gritty in high school. I love that she's fiery, super competitive, hates to lose, loves to win. So that was really obvious when I watched her, high school and club. So it's kind of cool that it's come full circle and she's back home and she's at the University of Virginia. And she's from Virginia. And we love our Virginia pitchers. And so it's been cool to have her back home.

Well, I know the pitching was inconsistent last season. But when you look at the team's 2021 stats, the issues at the plate really stand out. Abby Weaver was the only player who hit over 280. Was that just kind of an off season for the whole group do you think? And how much better can those players be? Or do you need the first years to really contribute with their bats?

Yeah. I think hitting is funny. It's hard. I think it's probably a combination of all those things. I could say yes to all of that. It was a tough year, tough schedule. I think we were young. We were trying to learn. And then you're learning by fire. Four-game series is really hard and then we started losing. And then you just get discouraged, get frustrated, and try to do too much. And so it was a combination of that.

I think our offense is good. And we're better than those numbers showed from last year. I think we're much more mature this year with the returning players. And our first years just add some pop, add some power, add some speed. So we're adding to what I think is already a pretty solid offense.

We just had a tough year. I think that's what we chalk that up to and how we frame that. And what did we learn from that? I think we learned a lot. We saw a lot. We got exposed a lot, which is great because it showed us exactly what we need to work on. And all of that was taken into account this fall and incorporated into Jake's plan going into the fall to develop our offense and fill in some of those gaps. But the pieces are there, it just never came together for us.

You had a big national signing day or national signing week in November. All six of your recruits are basically top 100 players with the rankings. Is this the first group where you really reap the benefits in recruiting of Palmer Park? Because I know that Palmer Park has been standing for a couple of years, but with the pandemic you couldn't actually bring recruits on grounds to see the stadium, I think.

Yeah. Yeah, actually, this fall we were able to have 23s. And they were the first class to get to tour Palmer Park. So you're exactly right.

So yeah, this is the first-- everything was virtual last fall, all of our recruiting. And so we were able to show a finished product, but never walk it. But even still, having the virtual visits and having the stadium, you're spot on. We're reaping the benefits of this awesome facility.

And I think the university has always sold itself. It's UVA. And most Virginia athletes love this university. And there is a desire from athletes in the state to be here. So that was always there.

And now you have this facility that is one of the best in the country. You know you're going to play in front of big crowds. It's an exciting time. There's just a lot of momentum in the program. And so all of that is culminated in Palmer Park. So 100%, it really helped.

And it's exciting to win that class. We've got some great players. And it's just going to add to the competitiveness of our program. So today is Wednesday. Baseball announced it's 2022 schedule this morning. Is yours coming out any time soon? And is the ACC sticking with that four game series format that it went to year?

Yeah. We tried to get our release out last week. Actually, we were trying to beat baseball to the punch. But we didn't quite get there. So ours is scheduled to release today, actually. So yes, [? our ?] [? schedge ?] is released.

So we're following the coattails behind baseball. But we do not have a four-game series. We went back to the three game series. That's a game a day-- Friday, Saturday, Sunday. So we were really grateful that the SWAs and the ADs heard our cries that double-headers are just really, really challenging for the student-athlete.

It's a lot. And every ACC game matters. And so they heard our pleas to go back to the game a day. And they decided to do that. So we're back to our normal ACC schedule, which we haven't had in two seasons.

So you got a little bit of experience now at juggling coaching and motherhood, right? Have things been easier this fall? And last fall you also had-- right in the middle of the pandemic with all the protocols and everything.

Yeah. I think they were both challenging in different ways. I think this fall felt busy because we had recruiting happening on ground. And we were going out. So that just added a different element of travel that we didn't have.

But I'm really fortunate. My husband Travis stays home with [? Finn. ?] And so we're just really blessed that he can do that. And so that has helped a lot because there are some days I leave the house, she's not up. And then I come home and I get to see her for 30 minutes. So she's available to come up and have lunch or just come hang out. We'll run around the field for 30 or 40 minutes. And that really helps.

Mom guilt is a real thing. And I don't know that it's talked about very much, but it is, especially as a head coach. You're just juggling so many responsibilities at the top. And so it's been a real blessing that he's able to stay home with her. And that helps me get see her even more than I do during the big part of our schedule.

So I wouldn't say easier, but really, really blessed. And it's been awesome. I love her. I can't imagine my life without her. And working moms out there, man, I have so much respect. You guys are Wonder Woman. So it's pretty awesome to get to experience that and really live it out.

So she's got basically 30 big sisters, I guess, every year?

Yes. It's funny, actually, Jeff. So when Travis will bring her in for lunch, there's a couple players up there. They just grab her and go. And I'm like, all right. See you. It's great. They love her. They have just been an integral part of molding her and shaping her, which is, again, I'm fortunate that she gets to grow up around hard working, strong girls that she's going to look up to and, like I said, big sisters. It's very, very cool.

So I mentioned Steve Garland earlier, who was on the podcast. I know you have been a vocal supporter of the other programs here. How did the pandemic affect your ability to interact with your fellow coaches?

Yeah.

Less kind of face-to-face interaction?

It was tough, but we were pretty intentional with scheduling biweekly meetings on Zoom. And so I actually think I had more deep conversations with coaches during the pandemic, even though it was on Zoom. Now we're all kind of back into our grind.

And so, in passing, if I need something, I'll reach out to coaches. And they're amazing, and they reach back out, and I connect. But I think we had some time to be pretty intentional and talk through some of the changes in college sports and the challenges we're having in our programs during the pandemic-- the mental health challenges that we're all really working through together.

So we really did connect a lot more during the pandemic. It just wasn't in person. And even our head coaches meetings are on Zoom and that's awesome. I really enjoy that. I get to see everybody's face and we can do that from anywhere. And the perspective that comes from our head coaches is just unbelievable. So it really didn't change too much in terms of how connected we were able to stay, just, it was all in Zoom, all virtual.

The players will start their final exams pretty soon, then they get a holiday break, then you come back and get going again with practice and the season. For the coaching staff, is December a rare opportunity to kind of kick back a little bit and catch your breath? Or is this a big recruiting month for you?

Yeah. So we actually don't recruit in December. We have camp. So we have a couple of camps. It's nice. I don't know if kick back is how I would call it because I'm not much of-- it's definitely quieter.

So what we're going to do as the staff, for these next two weeks, we have an off site meeting. We're going to kind of plan out our spring training in January and do a kind of an evaluation of the fall and really pick apart where we need to grow, where we need to develop ourselves. And we're going to plan that out in December and then take a couple of weeks down with family and just enjoy Christmas and the holiday and be back in the office January 2nd and getting after it.

It's more planning, more preparation, more meetings, more film, evaluation type stuff for us. Some camps, but we're not in the office for 8, 10 hours every day. So that's kind of nice. I get to sleep in a little bit or get home early for dinner, which is nice.

Good. Well, opening day will be here before we know it. So recharge those batteries. And thanks again for your time and good seeing you again.

Thanks, it's great to see you too, Jeff. I appreciate your time.

All right. Take care.

Go Hoos.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

OK. That's a wrap for this week. Thanks again to Steve Garland and Joanna Hardin for joining the show. We're closing in on the 300th episode of this podcast. And we've come a long way since that first episode way back in November 2013.

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Our guests this year have included Brennan Armstrong, John Freeman, Jay Aiello, Kate Douglass, Kip Turner, Diana Ordonez, Michaela Meyer, and many more. If you're looking for my stories, they're archived on VirginiaSports.com under the content button on the front page. And I'm also on Twitter where my handle is @JeffWhiteUVA. Be sure to check out the UVA sports app, which has been downloaded more than 64,000 times. It's available from Google Play or the Apple store. We'll be back soon with another episode. Until then, thanks for listening and go Hoos.

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