

Inside Virginia Athletics with Carla Williams
Podcast – Episode 1
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John Freeman: Welcome into our very first episode of Inside Virginia Athletics with Carla Williams. We're recording live from the Hardie Center for the first of many shows that will dive into all aspects of the Virginia Athletics Department. And I'm your host, John Freeman. And our goal on this podcast is to show you three things when it comes to UVA athletics.

One is how we got to where we are. Two is where we are now. And lastly, maybe the most important, which is where are we going? So without further ado, let's welcome in the woman with her name on the headline of the show. She is now the third longest tenured athletic director in the 18 team Atlantic Coast Conference. Dr. Carla Williams, how are we doing today?

Carla Williams: Wow. I didn't know that.

JF: Third longest and we'll introduce our next guest in a moment, but this podcast has your name on it. This came from the athletic department that we wanted to create this podcast. Why did you want to create this podcast and commit to showing supporters of Virginia athletics an inside look into what we all do?

CW: There's so much change in college athletics and it's really, it's next to impossible to really make sure our fans, supporters, donors, stakeholders are as informed as possible. And so we're just searching for as many ways as possible to make sure that our fans understand what's happening in college athletics. And you mentioned it, like, you know, where, how do we get here? You know, where are we right now? And what is it going to take for us to be competitive moving forward? So this podcast is just one way to get the word out.

JF: And when we were talking about what the podcast was gonna look like, one thing you said was cut the fluff. Let's get right to it. So let's get right to our first guest in this episode. He is currently the Associate Athletics Director for Development here and has spent every year, how about this, since 1982 in Charlottesville working with the UVA Athletics Department, specifically with the football program. That makes him, and I just asked him for confirmation on this, the longest tenured employee at UVA Athletics, Mr. Gerry Capone. How we doing today?

Gerry Capone: Doing well, thanks for having me.

JF: Did you know all that data on yourself there? You got Ethan Saliba beaten, the men's basketball (athletic) trainer, by a couple months on your start day, right?

GC: But some would argue because I wasn't quote unquote full time, because I came as a part time coach, but I've been here the longest, I guess. So I don't know if that's anything to brag about.

CW: It is.

GC: I just know I'm old.

JF: We'll have Ethan on for the debate. Okay. But in this episode, we're taking a serious look about the current and future status of Virginia football, but we're also going to answer that question of how we got to where we are, which is why Gerry, with you, four decades of experience around the program, you're gonna be here to offer us that context.

So let's get right to it. We're talking about Virginia football right now. That team has a top 25, top 25 rated transfer class, was recruited with the help of significant donor money. Those players are doing workouts as we speak in an \$80 million building where we said they're aided by multiple nutritionists, strength

coaches, analysts. I listed all those things and Carla, how different are those resources now compared to when you first walked on grounds? And Gerry, just how limited has UVA football been regarding resources?

CW: I've been very fortunate to be at FSU when we won a national championship in football. I was at Georgia when we lost in overtime in the national championship game, working directly with football. And, you know, when I got here, it was December 11th.

And on the next day, I took a tour of the facilities and realized that we had quite a few challenges in that regard. So this facility right now that we're in, it's been several years in the making to get here. And so we're so very thankful for it.

It's made a huge difference, not just in recruiting, but in our student-athletes feeling like they matter, feeling like we care about them and their experience here at UVA. It also sends a message to our parents that we are invested in their sons and making sure that they reach their dreams, not just academically, but also athletically as well.

And then just, there's so many stories about how our donors and supporters have helped us close the gap, or at least get to a level, more of a level playing field so that this team has a chance to compete.

JF: So Gerry you've seen it with your own eyes. We're sitting here in this palatial building, super modern. What would facilities have looked like say 20 years ago or 30 years ago or even 10 years ago in your time here at UVA?

GC: Well let's just start 43 years ago when I first came. We were meeting in the hallways of U Hall. There was a dream to have a football building. And that dream from 82 to 91, when we actually walked into the McCue Center, was a dream that we sold to recruits, especially the kids in the state. We knew we had to recruit the

state to be successful. And we were recruiting on pictures and that investment that we were waiting to materialize. When we built that building, it changed the complexion and or how people viewed Virginia football.

The problem is it didn't last very long. And what I mean by that is, you know, we built the McCue Center to be a football building. And within the first six months of moving into that building, we made it an all-sports building to help all the Olympic sports out because they needed help. There was on the plans, and I wasn't an administrator at the time, but in my position, we had learned that we were building the McCue Center first to take care of football, because we needed to get football the resources they needed, and we needed to invest in the sport.

And then we were gonna build an Olympic Sport building, which if you remember, U-Hall was the, if you guys, maybe you don't, but back in the day we had U-Hall was the, if you guys, maybe you don't, but back in the day we had U-Hall and then we built on one side of it, the McCue Center, and across the quad was gonna be an Olympic Sport Building, which was then gonna take care of everybody we were gonna invest in all sports. But somewhere along the line, we said, well, we can't raise that money, so we're gonna put everybody in the McHugh Center. So we went from building a building and investing in a sport where we took two steps forward and we took one and a half steps backwards because it wasn't a football building.

So whether people realize this or not, we are in the first football building for the Virginia football program. Where most programs, you look at all your traditional schools. One great thing that I did, thanks to George Welsh, when I took this job, I went from being a part-time coach in two years to him offering me to take over the operations job and just do it for a year and he'd put me back on the field. And when I committed to say, hey, I like this job, I wanna

stay with it, he said, well, great, because I wanna start sending you to different schools to see their facilities and see what they have and what we don't have. My first program that I went to, and what he did is he called, and back then, those days were different. So Bear Bryant had just stepped down and Perkins took over at University of Alabama.

So that was my first trip. Now I was young and didn't know a lot and I walk into this, you know, mega, it was all about football then. So over time that just grew. But I remember the first and they said, you should go over to the football dormitory. One week, we wouldn't even talk about football dormitories here. And I walked in and on the ground floor was where they had their meals. And there were all the football players coming down and there were two elderly women behind the counter. There were the chefs, the cooks, and they were greeting the players like, good morning, you want your special today and I'm thinking they're getting personal meals so when I came back and I told the goal was to come back with a report because coaches want to know what they were recruiting against and they wanted to learn what everybody else had and what we didn't have so that was a very eye-opening experience then went on to Penn State, went to Georgia, went to Tennessee, and all these schools. And their investment in what, and that was what, 40 or 39 years ago it started.

And we are on our first building, and most of those programs are on their second, if not third, building. So there's a stark difference of, to answer your question, of where we were, where we are now, but it's in comparison to our competition. We are, you know, we're finally catching up.

JF: So we're finally catching up. Let's take it back when Carla started. Carla, what were your thoughts when you first saw the facilities and having been on the East Coast for a lot of your career, having worked at an ACC school before

where did the facilities when you started rank amongst our peers and those who we compete with on an annual basis?

CW: Yeah, so I've been traveling with football now for, this will be my 23rd season coming up. So I've seen lots of facilities and it's really funny because when I interviewed for this job, I interviewed in three different places, Atlanta, New York, and Boston. I never interviewed in Charlottesville. So I never saw the facilities. And so, you know, when I got here and on that second day took a tour of the facilities, that was eye-opening. I did not expect that. I was actually floored. I also, you know, didn't have a great sense of the challenges related to the operating budget either.

So those two things were a little bit shocking to me and actually made me think whether or not I made the right decision because I understood at the time, having been at FSU, having been at Georgia, that football is the engine that drives the entire department, which drives the community and allows us to have all of the other sports and allows them to be able to thrive. And so when I got here and took the tour, I'll never forget it.

I saw Bronco (Mendenhall) in his office when I was just started the tour. And he's like, Hey, what are you doing? And I said, I'm going over to see all of these facilities. I hadn't seen him before. He was like, Oh boy. Okay. I'd love to talk to you afterwards. And so then I saw him afterwards and he said, you look sick. I said, I am sick. So there was a lot of work to do, but a lot of potential. So we talk about it now.

There's a lot of opportunity in adversity and a lot of opportunity in challenges. And so we just had to accept the challenge and try to get the facility built as quickly as possible leading up until up to Revshare and NIL.

JF: So it's clear how far the facilities had fallen behind. But Gerry, was it always that way? I mean, Virginia football in the mid 90s was a

perennial top 25 team, was ranked number one in the nation at one point. Were the facilities adequate then? And did it start falling behind? Or was that team in that era overachieving despite those facilities?

GC: I think it's a combination, meaning that when we first came, there was this dream of building this facility that was gonna be all football, that we would have a weight room, that when you walked in, there was, you know, it was a football weight room. Weight room became everybody's weight room. And what people don't realize is that when recruits come and you walk into a weight room and there's the swimming team working out in the weight room, they look at us and say, I thought this was a football building.

And for some, you know, one side of the fence is it doesn't make a difference, but for those young kids, it's all about the impression you make when they visit. When they go to the Alabamas of the world, they're seeing a totally different picture that everything is totally invested in football. And we never really had that until now. So when I first came, there was this hope of getting there. And then, you know, as I said before, I think we did more with less during that time. Because during the 90s, we were, George (Welsh) really coached three perennial championship, national championship teams that didn't materialize.

You know, the 90s is what everybody talks about because we were number one. But 95 we had a heck of a team and in 98 you think about the team on paper that we had. They were as good or better than the other two teams because we were. We had more offensive power and we had more we spread out across the board and more defensive power. And we just had some critical injuries one of those being Anthony Poindexter that just threw that dream away. But as we were winning, most programs are building it with investment and we were waiting for the team to win and as the team won, people started to come. The one thing we

didn't do is we didn't invest back in the program as much as we could have and should have. I mean, we wouldn't be where we are today with this building and that investment. But the winning is what brought people to the stadium and got people excited about football. And there was a culture at the time that football was, people were proud of football and what we were doing. We were bringing the community and the university together on Saturdays because we were filling the stadium and it was pretty good, great experience.

JF: So how about now? Where is our investment now compared to our competitors? And you've been to all the stadiums and facilities and you have so much experience looking what everybody else has. Do they have things that we want and that we need to be more competitive?

GC: I would say that, you know, given what, you know, right here where the top 25 rated transfer, you know, things that people are seeing now and kids are looking at this program, they're seeing what's here and they're listening to the coaches and the combination of the two attracts them here. They're coming here saying, hey, they care about football.

It's a culture that we're starting to build. Again, all our coaches have done more with less, but it's a culture that you want to create that's going to bring kids to play here and it's going to help generate where we want to go with the program.

And it starts with the physical piece. And I would look back in my years and say that the Carl Smith family is a big piece of investing in a football program where they changed the look of the stadium to the Scott family. It was a great facility. They just upped it and made it more attractive to our fans and to our recruits. And the things that we did with locker rooms and stuff in the field itself when you walk out there, you feel like it's always a beautiful place to play. It's all those little things that we added and

added onto it that made it a place that, wow, I wanna play here. So all the little things add up and this piece added to that piece and we have lots to do. It never stops, the investment. It's like any company.

JF: How about our competitors though? Where do we sit in that spectrum? Yeah, we're in a lot better

CW: Position right now from the facility standpoint You know, it's the operational part of this is something that we're still working on I think you know Gerry when I got here we had two strength coaches for 130 guys. And everybody else in the country had five strength coaches. So that's operational.

You know, Bronco didn't have a full-time nutritionist just for football. And so we added a full-time nutritionist for football. And so all of those little things that, that those things are required to build championship football programs, uh, facilities, nutrition, strength and conditioning, all of these things come together to build a championship program.

And so, you know, we've worked really hard to try to stack that on top of each other, um, to make it happen. So I'd say if you look at the ACC right now, obviously this facility is one of the best in the conference. It fits Virginia perfectly.

We're never going to have lazy rivers and all of those things. It's very functional and I know that our supporters are very proud of this facility and it's very very functional very practical for our coaches for our student-athletes they actually have a room where they can meet as a team we didn't have that we didn't have a team meeting room so they actually have a team meeting room right now.

Due to the generosity of our supporters, you know, we've got nutritionists, we've got food. We can feed our, we can fuel their bodies the way that their bodies need to be fueled to

compete at a high level. And I've seen that transformation over the last few years.

And so I look at our team now and I go, wow, that physically we look like a power four team. And so we're making strides. I'd say that the ACC, you know, we probably as a conference need to ensure that we never forget to invest in football.

Like Gerry said, it's ongoing. Like you can never feel like, oh, we're there. We don't need to invest anymore in football. That's what happened before at Virginia. So it's continual. You have to invest in the sport because that sport drives the revenue for the entire department. So it's ongoing, ongoing process.

JF: So you got to my next question, but go ahead, Gerry.

GC: I was going to say, just giving you an example of what Carla is saying, what I told you before when I first started this job in the operations side in 1984, when I went to Alabama, they actually had a dining hall for their players, football players. Now we have one that that's how many years later that you'd say well why did it take us so long to get there and that's part of the problem. We are we are on the right trajectory we're just about 30 years behind and we have a lot of time that we have to make up and it just doesn't come overnight

And it's we have to keep building it. We have we're starting to build something very special I think you know when you look at those practice fields the stadium things are really starting to come together and really when you look at our whole athletic complex I think when athletes show up here, even football recruits, they go, wow, this is, they care about athletics in general and now, wow, we walk into a building like this, football's important. Prior to this, no one, I can't say that kids really felt that football was important other than we were winning so they felt that energy. But if you don't have the, if you're not winning, it makes it harder for the

coaches to generate the culture you need. And it starts at the top.

CW: I'll tell you a story, because this kind of fits what you're saying. It was probably year one for me, and I was in the McCue Center, and there was a football player walking out of the training room on crutches and I saw him and I said I offered him a ride and he said that'd be great, that'd be awesome. So helped him get through the first set of doors and and on the floor there was a mat that said it had the V saber and it said uncompromised excellence. And he looked at me and said, "'Miss Carla, that doesn't apply to us.'" And it broke my heart because as a football player, you're putting your body on the line, he's recovering from surgery, and doesn't feel like the investment is there for the football program.

So we know that that is the program that drives this industry, period. And so that just gave me more of a conviction to make sure we got what we needed for the program.

JF: So the investment is there. The question is why? Why invest so heavily in football and what does it do to the rest of the athlete department and how vital is it? We can't survive without revenue from football.

CW: Here's the beauty of it. You don't have to neglect basketball for football to flourish. It happens all over the country. And I think, and so it, you don't have to neglect basketball.

You have to invest in football because that drives, that is the engine, as we've said over and over again, that is the engine. And so without a clear investment in football that is visible, then whether it's conference realignment or media rights or television deals or sponsorships, if you don't invest in the primary driver of this entire industry, then you're sending a message that you don't want to be a part of a national landscape moving forward. And we certainly want to be a part of a national landscape moving forward. And that starts with a proven

track record of investing in the primary revenue driver.

JF: What are the consequences if we don't participate in that national landscape moving forward?

CW: Yeah, I mean, I've mentioned some of those things already, you know. We want to make sure that we have options at UVA. We need options. Whatever comes down the road, whatever the future holds, we need to make sure that the University of Virginia has options.

And you can only do that by investing in the primary revenue driver. It doesn't mean that you don't also invest in basketball because we are certainly investing in basketball. And our donors have really, really stepped up, especially in the last year to help us with the Olympic sports, because that is one thing that UVA is very, very proud of is what's happened with the Olympic sports. So you can do it all. You just have to have a culture that ensures that that is the case.

JF: How about university investment? And I asked this question when talking about university investment in a lot of different ways. That can be monetary, that can be institutional support. So Carla, you tell us where is the university investment in the football program right now and are there differences than when you first came?

CW: Yeah. I think the way I look at it is the university support of the primary marketing arm of the university. I mean you think about it this summer, the V-Sabre was global with our swimmers in Paris. It is a national brand because our sports teams are there on the ACC network, they're on ESPN and ESPN2 and so forth. And so it's a national brand in large part because of the visibility of athletics. And the university has been great. I know a lot of people will say, well, just use the endowment. And what we understand is that the endowment is earmarked for certain places within the

university, like certain causes, scholarships, professorships, et cetera. And we have a place in that, but I would say that the university, in my opinion, has been extremely helpful for us. And we haven't gotten that message out because it's something that probably happens quietly in that we feel and sense the support. And it's been there.

And I'll say one way that Jim Ryan, President Ryan puts it is, the university is investing financially in athletics. And sometimes people think immediately, oh, we're investing in paying players. Well, the university is not. The house settlement means that we can no longer take money from football and men's basketball to support the other sports. We have to share that revenue with the student athletes producing it. And so when you do that, that creates a huge hole in your athletic department budget. And so the university has stepped in to help support the Olympic sports because those are so important to the community.

But those other two sports are the two sports that allow us to sustain an athletic department. So we're getting lots of support across the university, across the board Visitors has been magnificent. Rector (Robert) Hardie and we're looking forward to Rector (Rachel) Sheridan who's a former student-athlete stepping in July 1st. President Ryan has been phenomenal and we think that the way that we represent the University means that we have earned that type of support, because we are great representatives of this university on a global scale.

JF: You're the biggest marketing campaign that the university has to the rest of the nation, and as you said, the world. Gerry, has it always been like this? Carla has talked about the quality relationship right now between the university and the athletics department. In your experience, has it been different?

GC: You can see there is more momentum leaning towards wanting to support and get involved than I've ever felt before.

JF: Carla, how about the academic side with the university?

CW: Yeah. Yeah, you know, UVA is one of those schools that will never abandon its mission, which is education-based. But one of the reasons Virginia was attractive to me is that you can have it all here.

Like you can compete in football, you can compete in basketball. You don't have to compromise the academic values of the institution. We can have it all here. And so we've gotten great support from the university in that regard, especially because the rules have changed so quickly with the transfer portal and admissions deadlines and I mean there's no way that we're able to build these top 25 top 20 transfer portal classes for football and basketball without support and so we're receiving that support we're very very conscious of and protective of the academic mission of the university, the academic values of the university, as we try to compete.

Now, that is harder. Our competitors, it is easier at a lot of places when it comes to the academic expectations. For us here, that hasn't changed. And so we have to find a way to compete within the expectations here at the university. And that is a harder path, as I've said before, but we are doing it.

JF: And Gerry, were you doing the same thing in the mid 90s when we were number one in the country?

GC: I think it's more rewarding when you do win that you're doing it with the caliber of athlete that we're doing with it. They're more than just, they're the true student athlete. And it is not easy, but you know, places like a football building allows it for them to be better at everything because they can get in, get out,

they can get developed football-wise, but then have time to either study here or go somewhere. And it just provides them a greater opportunity. But we've always been faced with that. That has not changed.

JF: How have the donors been in the last couple years, especially in fundraising around football and what's the projection for the future?

CW: Yeah, I mean it's hard to put into words because this landscape has changed so quickly and the amount of resources needed grew exponentially. There's no way we have these successful transfer portal classes.

So I think that's a big part of what we're doing. The number of donors grew exponentially. There's no way we have these successful transfer portal classes without our donors. No way. It is impossible to do without our donors and they have stepped up in a major like us, they appreciate the way that Virginia does athletics. And, you know, so they are investing in that because they do believe that our student athletes should be scholars.

They do believe that our student athletes should learn how to be leaders. They do believe that our student athletes should be a part of the community, you know? So all of the things that are important to the university important to our coaches important to us They're important to our donors too, and they're investing in that

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JF: What would you say to someone? Who might be skeptical that investment means winning?

CW: Well, we want to win in Darden, you know, we want to win in McIntyre, we want to be the top public institution by the year 2030, you know, so winning is a part of our culture, you know, the desire to be the best, the desire to pursue excellence is a part of UVA, and athletics should be no different. And I would argue that

football and basketball should be no different. And so we want to pursue excellence. That's why a lot of us came here and believe in this place is because we believed in the idea that we were going to pursue excellence. And so, you know, that is just, we're just charging forward with that premise because we've laid the groundwork for adding operational investment, adding people that were necessary, building the building, now investing fully in revenue sharing for our student-athletes. That investment has to continue on an ongoing basis.

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JF: Gerry, 42 years in the athletics department. Is this the wildest time you've ever seen?

GC: We've gone in and out of wild times in my years here. We went from athletes not getting anything to now athletes getting everything. And that is a huge cultural change. We went from, in my time, of being very strict with NCAA rules, then being thrown into this world, and our donors were very skeptical, you can't do that.

And everybody was doing it. So we had to educate, we had to change some things. And with that, people started to see that the greatest thing that's going on in all my years, what's going on in college athletics, it's promoting football more than it ever has.

Everybody now understands that if, especially our fan base and our supporters know that through the education, and Carla has been a big piece of this, that if we don't invest in football, all the other sports actually, you know, are hurt by it. They suffer.

And we want football to win. If without that, we all, and basketball suffers too a bit. Both of us have to do our part in bringing it to the, back to the Olympic sports and it starts with us. And now I'm seeing, especially our former players, they're walking around a little different with understanding that now football is getting the respect that it should have been years ago, but

now people are talking about it. And I think it's drawing attention to it, and it's helping us in what our goals are.

JF: And football's such a priority, it was our first episode. So that's gonna wrap it up. Gerry, 42 years, your first podcast with Virginia Athletics. Congratulations.

GC: We'll get a pin.

JF: We can find you one for that. Well guys, I appreciate the time as always and looking forward to some more episodes with you. Carl, we got coach Ryan Odom coming on our next episode and Gerry, we'll see you around.

GC: Thanks buddy.

CW: Thanks G.

That's Carla Williams, Gerry Capone, I'm John Freeman. Thanks so much for tuning in for the very first episode of Inside Virginia Athletics with Carla Williams.