Inside Virginia Athletics with Carla Williams
Podcast – Episode 5
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JOHN FREEMAN: Welcome in to another episode of Inside Virginia Athletics with Dr. Carla Williams. I'm John Freeman. We record this following a special weekend in Charlottesville, when the court at John Paul Jones Arena was dedicated in honor of Tony Bennett, the greatest coach in Virginia basketball history. And several former players from the Bennett era returned for the ceremony, including one who will be our guest today. We'll introduce him in a moment. But first, let's welcome in Dr. Carla Williams.

How is the athletic director of the Hoos doing as we run towards March Madness?

CARLA WILLIAMS: I'm doing awesome. Ready for March already. It's going to be special for both teams.

JF: And this guy knows something about playing in March Madness. Let's bring in a man that some call the president. One of the all -time great scholar athletes here at Virginia. His number, you can see it. It's retired at John Paul Jones Arena. It hangs up there on the rafters.

He recently announced his retirement from the NBA after nine highly successful seasons. What a joy it is to welcome back the 2016 ACC Player of the Year. That is Malcolm Brogdon, who is back on grounds. And Malcolm, how you doing? How's retirement going?

MALCOLM BROGDON: Retirement's been incredible. You know, I'm thankful to be back. This is a place I call home. You know, it's really good to be back. It was really good to see Coach Bennett, see a few of my former teammates yesterday or on Saturday and, you know, a lot of really good memories, yeah.

JF: And it didn't take long for Carla to reach out in your retirement and ask you to come speak at her class, which you're teaching Carla. Tell us about that and Malcolm's involvement in it.

CW: So we've got a business of college and professional sports class at McIntyre this spring. And back during the fall, we were trying to come up with a roster of speakers. And I was going over it with our staff. And we've got a great list. And I was like, we should get Malcolm to come back. And they were like, yeah, can we get Malcolm?

And then we had all of these staff people. We had staff members that wanted to come sit in on the class. And we were like, maybe one or two. But we can't have a class full of staff members. But the students are excited. We're excited.

It'll be a lot of fun.

JF: So Malcolm, you're back to honor Coach Bennett and also to speak at Carla's class. Take us through your first impressions of this new look Virginia basketball program. I imagine this is your first time at JPJ under Coach (Ryan) Odom. What do you think?

MB: Yeah, you know, I think he's doing a great job. You know, I think he fits the bill. It's a hard bill to fit after Tony Bennett leaves, but the team is doing very well this year. Totally different style of play. I've been watching actually a lot, actually more this year than last year. Watching the team and the guys, you know, it's a you can tell it's a good group of guys They get along they play good basketball totally different style and pace of play then compared to you know, the Bennett era but You know, there's a lot of good energy in JPJ last night and the team's ranked and doing well and winning games You can't ask for much more.

MB: Yeah, and we've brought you in to talk about college basketball the differences between your era what you see in the new era and Carla I want you to comment a little bit about the current state of Virginia basketball. So

we talk about this success. The team has the longest winning streak in the ACC as we record this. Coach Odom has been a hit right out of the box. Take us through all the inner workings behind the scenes in the year leading up to this season. that made it possible beyond just hiring a coach and bringing these players in?

CW: Yeah, I think we all know the landscape has changed like tremendously. It's totally different from what it was before. We've never experienced this. So you're rebuilding, you're reconstructing a roster annually. And I think, you know, for this year's team, we return zero minutes. from last year's team.

So we knew it was a tall task in front of us and put the resources in place for Coach Odom when he got here and he just hit the ground running. And I think, you know, when UVA attracts a certain type of coach and which attracts a certain type of student athlete, And once he got on the recruiting trails, we started to get a lot of interest from some really great young men who were great fits that wanted to be students at UVA that were also very, very good basketball players as well. So I think it's come together really well. It's taken our entire community to help us navigate this new landscape. And I think we've done it well thus far.

JF: And it's no secret. college basketball has become more professionalized. You hear that word being thrown around a lot. Malcolm, you have a lot of professional experience in the NBA, and you saw a lot of the business side of basketball. In nine years, you went through free agency, you were traded multiple times. So as the college game becomes more professionalized, what do you see as the benefits and drawbacks of that for today's players?

MB: You know, I think clearly, I think one of the biggest benefits is guys are getting paid. They're getting compensated I think that can be very helpful. But at the same time it's a it's a double - edged sword. I think it can be very detrimental You know, you see a lot of guys not saving the money You see a lot of guys picking inferior educations because they can get a quicker dollar now. So for me, the hope is that guys can see, have sort of this long-term view for life and after basketball and after school and get a good education.

Get a good education, make some money while you're in school, but understand that this is short-term money. This isn't generational wealth. save this money, but go to a school where you can get a good education, because still, that is very valuable in the real world.

JF: And Carla, we're still pitching that too, right?

CW: Yeah, I think that's one of the beauties of places like UVA, is that the education is really key. And we've talked about it here before. One of the things that I really love is the fact that Coach Odom, when he got the team here together in June, one of the first things he did was have a history class. Like, he taught them about the history of the program, the history of the department, the history of the university, and they visited the lawn in the rotunda, and they heard from former players and former coaches, so that there was a connection to the institution and not just, you know, the players aren't here just to play a season. They are here to be connected to the institution. When you have coaches that go the extra mile, that put in the effort to try to build that connection, then you know that this is something deeper.

And the educational piece is something that for us, it's a given. Like you are a student when you choose UVA and all of our guys fit that mold. But I do worry about it from an industry standpoint. What is the impact going to be with the transfers, the multi-transfers? and whether or not the degree somehow gets devalued in this process of compensation. So it is a concern.

JF: Have you ever thought about Malcolm what your college experience would have been like if

it took place in today's current landscape of college athletics compared to when you played and you had five full seasons as a student here at Virginia and four on the basketball court.

MB: For sure. Look, I think hindsight is 20 -20. I think it's easy to sort of look back and say, you know, I would have, I would have still come to UVA. I would have still, you know, but I think it's hard. I think, you know, I came from a middle - class family. Not everybody's afforded that privilege and money wasn't, Issue for us.

So really it was about getting the best education still to this day. It would be about getting the best education. But for a lot of guys, that's not the case. They don't come from that socioeconomic class that background and you know It it's hard to say that, you know, everybody should go get the best education. It's hard to say that when money is a factor money matters being compensated matters but with that comes responsibility and understanding that your futures is your responsibility. These guys are making choices that I didn't have to make when I was in college. These are kids at the end of the day, and they're having to make big choices that impact their future 10, 20 years down the road. So you hope that they're making well-informed decisions.

You hope that their parents and their agents are helping them make good decisions.

CW: You know, we spent, just in our industry, we spent like the last 20 years trying to improve the graduation rates for student athletes. And it has been a multi-year, decade process. And every student now has to progress towards a degree. So even if you're transferring multiple times, you still have to progress towards a degree. And I just wanted you to talk a little bit more about the value of an education. Like, we understand the value of a UVA degree, but for a young person, who would not have gone to college, but for a basketball scholarship the importance of going to college and ensuring that you do get an education. It's okay to, in my opinion, it's okay to be compensated. Like that's, they've earned it, right? It's a multibillion-dollar industry, but don't miss out on the opportunity wherever you are to get an education.

MB: Absolutely. I think, um, you know, I think guys have been leaving, leaving college for the NBA, the NFL draft early forever. But now, you know, you add another element. of compensation that I think can shape decision - making. And you just hope guys understand, no matter where you are, if you're at a UVA, if you're just, you know, any school, you understand that there's great importance to getting an education, to getting a four-year degree. And, you know, potentially, you know, the way that the landscape has changed now, you can get fifth, six years of eligibility.

So it actually opens up. That's something that I would have, that I did take advantage of before the landscape was there, because I got my master's. I redshirted a year, ended up getting my master's in my fifth year. That's a beautiful opportunity for a lot of these guys to get an accelerated degree. and continue to shape their future after basketball.

CW: And we do have a high degree of student athletes in football and basketball that are graduate students. They value the graduate degree at UVA too.

JF: Malcolm, you obviously took advantage of both the academic side and the basketball side here at Virginia. In your experience in the NBA, how much did staying in one place in college and developing here and having that amount of investment in growing your game help you once you got to the league compared to this new era where a lot of players might play in three, four different schools before making that professional jump?

MB: It helped me tremendously. I think one for me, and this is something I always talk to Coach Bennett about, I always talk to my mom about,

is having a legacy, leaving your footprint somewhere, leaving a legacy behind you that people know what you stood for when you were there, but also your accomplishments can stand the test of time. And I think I had that opportunity here at UVA, and I had an opportunity to leave after my fourth year, even though I had a fifth year, I had an opportunity to leave, and came back to school to finish my master's because I understood the importance of getting a master's and also finishing what you start somewhere. I think that's something that a lot of kids these days, and I don't blame them for it, but I think they're missing out on that opportunity to be able to finish something somewhere and have a legacy. I just think it is a hard landscape to navigate.

JF: When you look back at your Virginia career, what are you most proud of?

MB: Honestly, the one thing that Coach Bennett would always say, he told me this in my third year, because I was thinking about entering the draft in my fourth year, I really considered it. And he sat me down. Of course, he really wanted me to come back to school. He sat me down and he said, you can have it all. You can have everything you want. We know how much you care about your education.

We know how hard you've worked to get to the NBA, to that next level. You can have both. And you can leave here with a degree from Virginia, a master's degree from Virginia, and get drafted in the NBA. But you have to stay here and finish what you started. And I'm proud of myself, but I'm proud of everybody that's helped me get to that point. And because this is never a journey alone.

There's always people that are instrumental in your journey that help you accomplish the things you do. I'm proud to be able to have accomplished doing really everything I could at the university.

JF: Yeah. And when you were here, your career went five years. Your first year, you played 22 minutes a game, averaged about seven points per game. Your second year, you redshirted. So there was adversity at the beginning. And in this current environment, you see a lot of players and student-athletes run from adversity.

So what piece of advice would you have for those who maybe their first year on grounds or on campus, wherever they are, isn't working out how they wanted and they're thinking about moving on to a different school?

MB: You know, I think you hit it right on the head. I think adversity is actually what grows us. That's where you find your growth. There's an adversity. It's staying where you are and working through whatever you're going through.

And for me, UVA is challenging academically. It's not one of these schools where you come, you're able to skip classes, you're able to, you know, sort of bend the rules. It doesn't bend the rules for you. You have to go to class, you have to get the work done. This is a rigorous education. So I, you know, and I appreciated that.

I dived into it. And nowadays, I think guys hit adversity, whether it's on the court, whether it's in the classroom, things don't shape up how they want. And they go and they basically sign another one -year deal at another university. And I think they're skipping out on a chance to grow, which is what I see for a lot of these young athletes, which is the biggest toll that's hitting them is they're not able to grow and mature and sort of be in that moment, be in that adversity. Because a lot of times, that's what you need to get over the hump at that school.

You need a little bit of adversity to establish your legacy somewhere.

CW: We call that the obstacle is the way.

MB: Right.

CW: So whenever there is an obstacle or adversity, it's supposed to be there because that's there to help you grow, help you develop, help you learn. And we need more of that, not less.

JF: Just a few more minutes with Malcolm Brogdon. What's the topic of the class today, by the way?

CW: So today we are going to talk about college coaches' contracts, which is going to be very, very interesting with a lot in the news. today regarding those contracts and whether or not student-athletes should be employees. And so Malcolm's experience with the NBA Players Association and being a representative, the students are really looking forward to hearing his perspective on that. And we are too.

So it's a big debate right now, legally and just in our industry.

JF: Well, only so many people get to go to the class, but everybody can listen to the podcast. So let's hear what Malcolm thinks about it. Should student athletes be employees?

MB: I don't have a definite answer to that. I think it's tricky. I think there's evidence to support both sides. But I do know they are getting paid as employees. They are getting paid as employees, treated as employees.

I don't know if that means they should have the employee title, but they are also students. They are also at the university getting an education. So that provides evidence that they are not employees, you know.

It's a tough one, for sure.

CW: It's a great debate. You know, it's funny because I think the student-athletes have said, at least in the national polling, that they do not want to be employees because of everything that comes along with it. But there are a lot of forces in the industry that would like to see them labeled as student-athletes. So it'll be ongoing, no easy resolution for sure. But for us, the difference is, you know, we talked earlier about this being college sports moving towards a professional model.

We're a hybrid because we are. They are compensated. They do have contracts. They do have agents and representatives and all of those things that the big difference, though, is that they are students. You know, they are still students. And that is a good portion of their time at our institution.

So that is a huge difference that cannot be overlooked.

JF: What would be the drawbacks for the student athletes themselves if they became employees? Added pressures?

CW: Well, I mean, if you're an employee, you can be fired easier. It's easier to fire an employee than it is to dismiss a student and take their scholarship. So right now, there are certain protections for student athletes because they are students. So coaches or schools can't just take their scholarship when they're not playing well, or if they're not living up to the performance or the expectations, we can't take their scholarship. But if they are employees, that puts them in a different class, and employees can be terminated.

So that's just one aspect of it that would be a negative for the student-athletes.

MB: So I have a question. How does that work with these guys signing these contracts? They're getting compensated. The money is guaranteed, correct?

So even if you fire them, you still have to pay them out, correct?

CW: Yes. So unless they do something to violate the terms of the contract, or they transfer, or engage in tampering with another institution. So because there's no uniformity, all of the contracts are kind of different. And so for us, they are guaranteed as long as the student meets a certain set of standards, which for us also includes academic standards and ethical behavior standards as well. So that may not be true across the board. So yes it is guaranteed most of them as you can see we've had some examples this this past winter stay for the season. So if they sign for a season, they stay for a season. Some student -athletes have multi -year deals where they haven't stayed for the second part of that deal. We do not. So most schools do not have multi -year deals for the student-athletes.

So it's a one -in, and then you've got to redo it the next year.

JF: And then Malcolm, what your former coach Tony Bennett said when he retired was he was really concerned about the mental health impact on student athletes in today's environment with NIL and the agents and the pressures with that. Having played in the NBA, having been traded, having had your life rearranged. Not by your choice in some cases.

What is the mental impact of the business side when it comes to playing sports?

MB: It is real. It ruins a lot of guys careers because they can't handle the mental aspect of the game. When you come up in basketball, they always say the game is 90% mental and 10% physical. That holds to be true at the NBA level.

Everybody, when you get to the NBA, is very talented. We thought Justin Anderson was a great athlete here. He was at UVA. But then you get to the NBA, and he will tell you himself, there are a lot of great athletes on every team. It then becomes, how can you separate yourself mentally? How do you think about the game? How do you handle yourself off the court? How do you handle your business? Who are the people you have in your circle and around you? All that stuff matters. So I think it really matters. And now you're treating these college guys like professional athletes.

You're paying them. These guys are basically signing one-year deals and then reevaluating if they want to stay or move to a different school. So it brings in that sort of volatility and them having to manage a lot more than they did in my era. There's just a lot more responsibility they're taking on now of hiring the right agent, of still having to manage their family because money's involved and then making a good decision for themselves and their future.

CW: It's annual free agency.

MB: Right. Much tougher.

CW: It's very, very, very tough. When we know, because, I mean, you're an example of that, the evidence shows us that consistency is helpful in all endeavors, but because it's annual free agency, there's so much volatility that it just adds to what we need to do to manage the entire situation. So the mental health aspect of it is real. It was already, you know, a challenge for the industry, but when you add in compensation, especially at some very high levels, and you add in the family dynamics and everything that comes with it, then it's more of a challenge. We're fortunate here in that we've got three in -house sports psychologists that just work with our athletes, and they are phenomenal.

And we know that we're very fortunate to have that, and that's very helpful for all of our student-athletes, not just the ones who are benefiting from revenue share or NIL, but it's definitely an aspect that Tony (Bennett) and I have spoken about before. It's top of mind because of the challenges.

JF: And our current student-athletes obviously have a network of past student-athletes in all endeavors. So Malcolm, what's next for you now that retired life has hit? What's next for Malcolm Brogdon?

MB: I'm married. I married my college sweetheart. She was on the volleyball team here. We've been together. It's crazy. We've been together for 15 years. We have three little ones now, a five -year -old, a three-year-old, and a one-year-old. And now it's really, I mean, anybody that has kids can attest to it. Once you have kids, your lifestyle changes. you know, sort of shape around them and what's best for them and their future.

So we've owned a house in Atlanta over the past, you know, 10 years, and we're making the transition and moving to New York for a multitude of reasons, but I think culturally it'll be better for the kids, a little bit more diverse, a little bit more opportunity to get to know different types of people in New York. And then for my wife and I, I think there's more opportunities for after basketball, whatever business we want to dive into, which right now it feels like it's going to be private equity. I have a real interest in that. But New York just has a plethora of opportunities for both of us.

CW: What advice would you give, number one, your younger self? Okay, so think back to your high school days in Atlanta. What advice would you give that younger Malcolm? And then I want you to think about our guys on our team right now. It's a great group of guys. What advice would you give them as well?

MB: Thought about this question for myself. I think I did a lot of things right. And I think I did some things the wrong way. And I would not change much. I would most likely, I'd tell myself, you're on the right path.

Keep doing what you're doing. But remember, life is all about balance. If you knew me in high school and college, and this is what got me to the NBA. This is what gave me my success. But I was super, super focused. I sacrificed everything.

I sacrificed my social life. I did not go out here. I did not drink in school. I did not do anything. I was focused on my grades and athletics. But my relationships suffered.

I wasn't able to grow as a person within my relationships. My marriage has been work. My relationship with my wife, that's been work because I wasn't able to grow when I needed to grow because I'm so focused all the time, so focused on, you know, the task at hand. My family relationships struggled as well.

So it's been a, for me, honestly, it's been a rebuilding process, you know, towards the end of my career and after retirement to rebuild some of these relationships. So I would just remind myself, life is all about balance. So while you're doing this, it's okay to be focused and it's okay to, you know, prioritize basketball over everything. But understand as you get older, seek out balance in your life.

And then as far as these guys, the guys here at UVA, I would tell them that this is a superior, I mean, what separates UVA is the education. This is a superior education and experience you're going to get here at UVA.

And prioritize being here and being in this environment over everything. Whether you want to think about you know, the education that you're getting here is incredible but also the connections you're building with the student-athletes reach out into the community and actually be engaged with your with your classmates because I didn't do that while I was here at all and these the kids here go on do incredible things Incredible whether you want to say they become billionaires where you want to say they become scientists like they do incredible things here.

So I You can still do basketball, you can still go to the NBA, you can still make money, but prioritize being here at UVA because this is a special opportunity.

CW: Are you still busy with your foundation work?

MB: I'm still doing my foundation. For those of you that don't know, it's called the Well Built Foundation. I changed the name. We focus, you know, we had a sort of an HBCU side where we focused on HBCUs and uplifting them, and we sort of cut that out. Now we solely focus on water, which was my mission at the beginning.

And we build clean water wells in East Africa, Tanzania, and Kenya, and now West Africa, Liberia as well. So we're continuing to expand, continuing to build wells.

So yeah, I'm continuing to do that, continuing to do the good work.

CW: When's the last time you've been to Africa? It's been probably three or four summers. My last two, my last three years I did Milwaukee for three, Indiana for three, then I did Boston one, Portland one, Washington one. And like we talked about earlier, those one-year deals where you're getting traded every summer, is tough on yourself, it's tough on your family, and then it's tough on the business that you're running outside of all that. So the foundation stuff, I really slowed down. And not stopped, but I slowed it down. So now I'll pick it back up. I wasn't able to really travel to Africa and do the work in person.

CW: One of the things I wanted to ask you about, because I think I know how you feel about this, but it'd be great to share. Like I can tell in you, it's really important to serve. Like, can you just share why it's important to serve? Because I think in this environment today, it's just a lot of, you know, me first. And that isn't always healthy for the individual or for society. And you've always been a person that has valued service. Why is it important to serve others?

MB: I think it's, you know, I think it's, I'm a product of how I was raised. And my mom raised me to be someone that understood what service meant, to understand what blessing others with your blessings meant. And being able to go to Africa when I was maybe 10 years old, seeing poverty, I think that really just changed the core of who I am and understanding that I deal with issues here and we deal with issues in America. A lot of us, especially myself, deal with first world issues. We're dealing with, you know, it's all relative.

There are people out here that have real problems. And just to keep that perspective in mind and understand that when you're so blessed and you have all these things going for you, whether it's money and resources, whether it's people just want to touch your hand and shake your hand, give people your time. Share your resources with people as much as you can. It's important because that's what people remember. People don't remember your accolades. People don't remember the money you made.

People don't remember you know, the new car you have or the nice watch you have on, people remember how you made them feel.

So it's important to be authentic, but also be someone that's generous with your time and generous with the resources you have.

CW: You're a great ambassador. We're very, very proud of you.

MB: Thank you.

JF: All right. We all got to sit in on class today. Carla's class with Malcolm Brogdon tonight. And this was a pleasure to be next to you guys. Thanks so much for coming by, Malcolm. Thank you. Thank you for having me.

CW: Thank you.

MB: All right. Thank you.

JF: Another episode of Inside Virginia Athletics with Dr. Carla Williams.