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Welcome to the Wahoo Central podcast. I'm Jeff White, from VirginiaSports.com. And we're coming up fast on our 300th episode. Later on, I'll be talking with the new leader of the UVA Women's Basketball program, Coach Mox.

But right now, I want to bring in one of the University's true scholar athletes, and that's Owayne Owens, from the Track and Field program. Owayne, great to see you again. I know you've already had a workout this afternoon. How is everything going?

Good, man. Thanks so much for having me. It's definitely huge that I get to be a part of this. But I'm doing well, doing well, going through the paces. How are you doing?

Good. Doing well. So first of all, congrats on making the ACC honor roll again. I think you've made it every year since you've been here. Have you been a lifelong serious student even as a young boy? Or was there a point during your life when you started taking academics more seriously?

So my entire life, it's been academics first. I was definitely one of those who was a student first. I went into high school just because of being a good student. I didn't play any sport going into high school. So I really started sports in ninth grade, so from the get go, was always a student first.

And even up until now, I still take great pride in my work as a student. And a lot of that motivation comes from my family. Because it's cool that I'm an athlete to them. But what they really care about is how I do on the school side of things. So I have a lot of accountability from my family as it relates to that.

And it's just like what I hold myself to. I see myself as way more than just getting good distances in my event. And it's more than just that for me. So that's why I always strive to give 100% in classrooms.

So tell us a little bit about the academic track that you're on here. You are in the Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy. But you're a fourth year student here. So this is a master's program, though, right?

It is. It is. So it's a little bit of everything. It's an accelerated master's, which means I start my fourth year. And the interesting part about that is that I'm still in undergrad classes and grad classes. So it is a big commitment, when you add an athletic schedule to that. But anything is possible the right amount of commitment and discipline.

So yeah, it's an accelerated master's. I still have to take, finish off my undergrad classes to graduate with my bachelor's. And then I start my master's now. And I come back an additional year, next year, to finish off the rest of my grad classes.

So do you or will you have an opportunity to walk the lawn in May and get your bachelor's degree and then do it all again a year from now and get your master's?

Yeah, yeah, most definitely, that's the plan. So some good news came in earlier this semester. So I'm technically done with undergrad. Going into this semester, I thought I had to take two more classes, which I'm in one of those two classes, because I dropped one, because I didn't need it.

So I'm done with undergrad, so I will definitely graduate from undergrad in May. And then next year, again, when I finish off my master's, I will walk the lawn again with a master's degree, which I think is phenomenal for me and for my family.

Do you have a concentration in the Batten School? I mean, it's a broad program. Is it just a master's in public policy and leadership, or is it more specific than that?

Yeah, so it's largely a focus on just public policy and leadership, and our classes reflect that. But you get to work in your projects. You have your individual projects that you work on, and you [INAUDIBLE] to those your interests.

So for now, I'm focusing on criminal justice. And who knows? I might find something else that I'm interested in for the second year of the program. But for now, my main focus is criminal justice. And that's where I do most of my research and my academic work. That's my individual life project that I do, criminal justice.

Any of your track and field teammates also in Batten?

Yeah, so Michaela, who was on the team last year, national champion phenomenal athlete, she's in there as well. Johnny Rogers, a transfer, grad transfer, he's in the program as well. And both are [INAUDIBLE], great students and great athletes.

The good thing about grad school is that you do a lot of group work. So I think for one of my classes, we work together as a group on our assignments, which is really, really helpful for all of us.

So you were, I believe, in something called The Leadership Academy before you got into Batten officially as a full-time student. What did the Leadership Academy consist of?

So yeah, I think I was a part of the first group of that. When it started, I was a part of the first. And initially, it started by the Batten School, actually, which is an interesting connection. But it brings leaders together from across athletics and just the student population, bring us to the same space, and bring in a leader who's out in the world in various sectors of the world, and have them speak to us about what real leadership looks like out there in the real world.

So us as students and student athletes can see what it looks like to actually lead. Or we can also get insight in how we can use the skills that we're learning now. There are sports in our classes to lead in the future and right now.

So with the first couple of meetings were in person-- that was before COVID-- and it was just phenomenal, the quality of the guest speakers that they bring in just to speak with us. It was an amazing opportunity to really just get to talk to some of the people that we got to talk to. And then when it moved to online, of course, there was more flexibility. So the quality of the speakers went up even more.

And so it was just really just having us as potential leaders seeing how [INAUDIBLE] are doing it and see what we can learn from them and use that currently to make a difference.

So do you apply these techniques that you learn and you listen to people talk about when you're out on the track with your teammates and in the program? I mean, you're an upperclassman, to begin with and one of the most talented guys on the team, individuals. Do you find yourself doing more leadership stuff than you did when you were first year or second year?

Most definitely, and I think it's just one of those things that come with being a senior, being with other guys on the [? team. ?] And it also comes from just not wanting more from myself, but more from the team, in general. So on a day-to-day basis, it's just like, how can I foster conversations and interactions, so that the younger ones or even people my age can see what a real leader looks like, not just in words, but in action?

So I'm in that position now, where I constantly have to carry myself in a way that displays exemplary leadership. I mean, so it's in my work ethic how I converse with the coaches, how I converse with my peers. I have to do that so the younger people come in and can see that from me and then replicate that. And then that's how we're setting the standard for the team in the years to come.

And not just that, but taking it even a step further to gather the team and have meetings and talk about what we hope to achieve, what we want to achieve, and what it's going to take to get to that-- so yeah, being a senior and having those experiences and that knowledge, definitely it gives me an extra nudge to want to lead.

Because I have the skills. I have the know-how. And it's just I have the resources that I need. So it's just going out and actually doing what I've been learning, putting it into practice pretty much.

It is 85 degrees today or something like that. It's warm outside, which means that you have survived another winter in the United States. Being from Jamaica, for you, how much of a struggle was the weather when you arrived here? And obviously, Virginia is milder than a lot of places in the United States. But it gets cold here in the winter, as you know.

Yeah. I mean, my first winter was unbelievable. Because the funny thing is I moved from Jamaica with my Jamaican wardrobe. So I didn't have any puffy jackets or the warm weather clothing. So when it started to get cold, I was like, how cold could it actually get?

And so I'd go out in just a hoodie and a regular pants and some shoes. And there would be days where my hands would--

[LAUGHTER]

--cold, I couldn't feel my fingers. And I was like, this is absolutely miserable. And it was around the time-- my first year, I had my surgery. So I was on crutches. So I couldn't put my hands in my pocket. And it was unbelievable.

I thought it was the worst thing ever. But it eventually grew on me, and I adjusted my wardrobe accordingly and got some more warm gear. And yeah, I prefer to be in the 80s, high 70s and the 80s, because that's what I'm used to.

Yeah, you grew up in Montego Bay, Jamaica, attended a small all boys high school named Cornwall College. How did you get from Montego Bay to the University of Virginia? Was it Mario Wilson, one of our assistant coaches? I know he recruited you.

Yeah.

Was he the guy who ultimately sold you on UVA?

Yeah, so it was a lot of things. So when I started jumping well, we have a guy in my high school who he knows a lot of coaches in the US. And he would be like, hey, look out for this athlete. And he put me on [INAUDIBLE] when I started jumping well.

And so I got into contact with a few coaches. But when I got into contact with Coach Wilson, and him being Jamaican, that was definitely something. And then I came here on a visit. I really liked the place.

The other visits that I went on were not as nice as this. It just felt-- something about it felt like-- and then the ultimate decision was on academics, because as I said, it's always been being a student first. And when I looked across the options that I have, there was none that was on the same level in terms of academics at UVA.

And my family, they didn't hesitate at all. They were like, yo, that's you're going.

[LAUGHTER]

For them, it's academics first. And so yeah, that's how I really got into it. But yeah, it started with the guy who put me on the radar, and then meeting with Coach Wilson, coming in and seeing the place for myself, and then seeing those academic standards, and being like, yo, it checks off for me.

Didn't you have a crazy path journey, literal journey, to Charlottesville the first summer, where you got here-- I think I wrote this a couple of years ago. You got to the grounds nine hours before your first summer school class [INAUDIBLE]?

Yeah.

Because you had an issue with your student visa, and you had to go to Finland, or something like that?

Yeah, yeah, it might have actually been less than nine hours. But yeah, I can walk you through that journey. So we had the World Under 20 Championships in Finland. And initially, what happened is, when the championships were about to end, it would be right around time for my summer school. So I couldn't go back to Jamaica, then to the US. I had to fly directly from Finland to the US.

But my papers weren't going to come through on time. And so I had to wait. The team traveled, and I had to wait and travel by myself so I could get my documents. So I traveled by myself, got there safely, thank goodness. Got there. My baggage got left in the US, so I was in Finland with only Jamaica gear. But luckily, I got-- I was there for two days.

I competed, showered, got ready, and had to head to the airport. And luckily, I got my stuff back when I was leaving. And then all the traveling, I got to the US, I think, past midnight, because that's past midnight, going close to 1:00. And Coach Dunn was the one who got me from the airport, bring me to my dorms.

And then from there, I had class, I think, 9:00 or 9:30 the following morning. So it was getting in, trying to get settled, make my bed, lay everything out, trying to get as little sleep as I can and then get up and try to find wherever my class was.

And it was a quick transition. It was a very forced transition. But I don't think there's anything about it that I would change--

[LAUGHTER]

--because there's a lot of value in situations like that, where you don't have a choice but to learn and adapt. And I was able to learn so quickly and adapt so quickly, that it just goes to show that we have a lot of potential as student athletes and human beings, in general.

The pandemic has made international travel challenging. Have you been able to get home to Jamaica recently or at all?

I went home the last summer. And then before I went home last summer, it was about two years before I had gotten to go home. Because the pandemic, it was upon us. It was hard to travel. I went home last summer, and it was the first time in a while. So I made sure to take full advantage of that.

You closed the indoor season last month by placing eighth in the triple jump at the NCAA meet, which made you a first team All-American for the second straight year.

[INAUDIBLE]

Are you happy with the way you're jumping as you transition into outdoors?

Right now where I am, I know I need to improve if I'm going to repeat being All-American outdoors, so not completely happy. But I'm on my way to being where I need to be. And Indoor National saw a dip in my performance, based on how I was doing during the season. And there are a lot of different factors that go into that.

And I left ultimately disappointed, because I wanted to jump further. I wanted to place higher. But I was also grateful that, one, I finished healthy, and I still finished first team All-American and what I consider an off day. So yeah, coming from indoor to outdoor, there there's a lot that I needed to reflect on to work on.

And I had my first meet last weekend. We went to Duke. And even though I didn't get the distance that I ultimately wanted, I still got a facility record, a meet record. And I'm excited to go back in a few weeks with ACCs to get that record again.

But yeah, there's a lot that needs to be worked on now in terms of physically and mentally and just getting back where I need to be. Because I really want to take the lessons learned from indoor and get everything together for outdoor so I can give out a better performance and rank even higher.

Forgive me if this is a stupid question, but what is the difference, from the athlete's perspective, in jumping indoors and jumping outdoors? Are they two distinct events, or is it basically the same thing?

There's a few. I think it's one. The main difference is, for indoor, a lot of the runways are elevated. So ground contact is less high impact, and the timing is a little bit different. So transitioning to outdoor, you have to figure out that timing and get your ground contacts right, because the surfaces outdoor or less forgiving.

So if you're off feel a little bit, indoor-- because the surfaces are elevated, it's less high impact-- you'll still be able to get in better jumps. Where outdoor, you really have to figure out the timing. And then outdoor, you have wind. The temperature might not be as regulated as it is indoor.

So those are some of the smaller differences. And I think that's what happened at nationals. Because it was essentially a flat or an outdoor surface indoors, and I've been jumping on the elevated runways all season. So having to make that quick switch affected me. And I'm still in that transition phase of figuring out the timing, how to pace myself down the runway, ground contact, and all of that. So that's the biggest difference for me.

Who is in your training group? And do you have a protege on the men's side or the women's side? Do the men and women train together, the jumpers?

Yeah, yeah, the horizontal jumpers, we all train together. On the men's side, it's me, Ayende Watson, [INAUDIBLE], the first year from Albania. We have [INAUDIBLE] is a fourth year. Who else do we have? I do not want to get forget anybody. We have Jordan [? Scott, ?] who's with us. I think that's it. I hope I'm not forgetting anybody. I feel so bad.

[LAUGHTER] [INAUDIBLE]

[INAUDIBLE] inside.

Coach Wilson oversees that group. He has had a ton of success here. I'll give him a little shout-out here. What makes him such a good coach?

I think for me it's just listening. And he knows when to shut it down because as athletes, we all want to show up and do 100 reps and do each rep better. So he knows when to be like, I know you could do even five more reps right now, but you have given me what I wanted. Save the rest for later.

And what that does is it maintains our health and our hunger and thirst to want to do better. And I mean, so that's what he does. So he knows the right amount that we need for a certain meet or for a certain time of the year.

That's great. So for your first two years here at UVA, you had a big brother of sorts in Jordan Scott--

Yep.

--who is also from Jamaica, who won the NCAA indoor triple jump in 2019. How much did that help, having him here with your transition? And he's back in town training. What's it been like to be reunited? I know when he went out West for one year, you guys stayed in close contact. But is it a good to have him back around?

Oh, most definitely, most definitely. You need that person in training who just always go a foot and a half further. So you always want to push to get better. Because even when you think you get in a good jump, you need that person to jump even further to keep you in check.

And just also the experience that he's had, I always, before I leave for a meet or while I'm at a meet, I'll talk to him and be like, what's the mindset going into this? What are the expectations going into this? Because he's had so much experience in the same conference at the same meets [INAUDIBLE] intensity.

And so I benefit largely from his wisdom and his experience when I compete and in training, as well. I benefit from the competitive edge. Because he don't want me to get him. I want to get him [INAUDIBLE], just iron sharpening iron. So it's definitely great to have him back.

And even in my first two years, it helped a lot with transitioning. Because I mean, same culture, we understood each other very quickly. He knew what it would take to transition effectively in terms of just settling as a student and settling in as an athlete. So it definitely made transitioning a lot easier for me. I wish I had him that first day when I--

[INAUDIBLE]

I don't think he was in town.

So one of the sprinters on the women's side, Kayla Bonnick, is from Jamaica, from St. Catherine, Jamaica. I know that's a good ways from your hometown. I checked Google Maps to make sure before. But have you played the same mentors role with Kayla that Jordan played for you?

Yeah, for sure, for sure. And I feel like it's to a lesser degree, because interest for boys might be different for girls. But I still treat her as like a little sister. I check in, and I try to give her advice on things that work for me or things that I wish I had done when I was at her stage. And Jordan, even Jordan, too, we both help try to get her to transition smoothly and be there for her any time she needs help with something.

The director of Track and Field and Cross Country UVA is Vin Lananna. And Vin has said that he thinks both the men's and women's programs are built more for outdoor success than indoor success, at least this school year. What are your thoughts on the potential of each program as we continue with the outdoor season and head to ACCs and then in NCAAs?

Oh, I mean, I think Coach Vin is absolutely right. I mean, we've had a few great individual and team performances indoor. But as soon as we got to outdoor, we started just heading for it. The first few weeks of outdoor, we were ranked 19. And then after last weekend's meet, we're 13th now.

So we're definitely built more for outdoors just because we have a lot of depth on distance, the longer distances. We have amazing depth and talent in the throws and then some of the sprinting events that we don't have indoors. So yeah, we're loaded and ready for outdoors. But it's amazing what the guys are doing and just the passion they're doing it with. And I'm 100% willing and ready to [INAUDIBLE] that as far as we can go.

Yeah, I was going to ask you about the throwers, what Claudio and those guys have done. Do you ever get over there and pick up a discus or pick up a shot and give it a throw?

No, Coach Wilson wouldn't allow it.

[LAUGHTER]

What they're doing is amazing. I mean, I'm roommates with both Claudio and Ethan. And so I don't know if it's a coincidence or not, but yeah, it's amazing what they're doing. I saw Ethan launch that [INAUDIBLE] so far last week. Claudio just is improving.

So it's amazing to have that added to the team for outdoors. And they're hungry. They really want it. They've been waiting all indoors for it, and so they're ready to go.

So what do you do in the summer? Do you have summer plans? Will you compete for Jamaica? Do you stick around here? I know we've got a little ways before summer arrives. But what are your plans for that period?

Oh yeah, for sure. So as it stands now, I've already accepted an internship with Habitat for Humanity, the Charlottesville branch. So I will [INAUDIBLE] for that. This internship is essentially a part of the graduate program. We have to do a 400-hour minimum internship as a part of the grad program. So I'll have that.

I don't know how much competing I'll be able to do with that. But if needs be, I'll always be ready to show up and represent my country. And we can move things around as it relates to my internship.

But it all depends on how I'm jumping post-nationals and the type of health that I'm in. But for now, the only thing that is set is my internship. Because I have to complete it as a requirement for my grad program.

Well, that's a fantastic organization to be involved with. So good luck with that. Congrats on another successful school year. I'm sure I will talk to you again, one way or another, before NCAAs. But thanks for making time for this. Good luck with Batten. Keep your head above water. I know it can be tough.

Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

All right, take care, Owayne.

You, too. Thanks.

All right, we're going to take a short break, and then we'll be back to talk some women's basketball.

Hey, this is John Freeman, 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 Coaches 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 UVA sports. Join the more than 50,000 Wahoo fans who are already using the UVA sports app.

All right, now I have the privilege to welcome in the newest addition to UVA's roster of head coaches. And that's Amaka Agugua-Hamilton, who has the UVA women's basketball family buzzing with excitement. Coach Mox, welcome to the show. How did I do with that pronunciation?

You did a good job. You did a good job.

From here on, though, it'll just be Coach Mox, so I won't have problems with that. First things first, we're recording this on Wednesday, April the 13th, which also happens to be your birthday. Happy birthday.

Thank you. I appreciate that.

I'm not going to disclose what birthday this is. But--

[LAUGHTER]

--how are you going to celebrate? Are you going to have an opportunity to celebrate, with everything you got going on?

It's crazy. It's just been a whirlwind, a good whirlwind, but it's been pretty busy. So my husband's birthday was on April 3, mine's April 13, and my son is April 30. So we're probably going to celebrate all three at the end of the month when things kind of calm down a little bit.

So your husband Billy Hamilton and your son, are they here in Charlottesville with you? Or are they still out in Springfield, Missouri?

No, they're both here. We don't do anything apart. So we basically came out here for that press conference. We went back, and then we moved up everything, packed up our house, and moved here in a week, and was able to sell our house in a week, too, so that was a blessing. But we're all here. We're in temporary housing until it's time to move in.

Is the housing market out there as crazy as it is here, like things sell like that?

Yeah, it is. It is. It's a great time to sell, not a great time to buy. But we were actually fortunate to find a house here so-- to buy.

So you have a lot of relatives in the DC area, which is where you grew up. Has anybody popped down to Charlottesville yet to see you? Or do you not have time for those kind of social visits?

Well, the crazy thing is we've really only been here a week and a half, so not yet. But actually, this weekend, after we-- we're going to have probably some recruits. But then we'll celebrate Easter. My family's coming down, some of my family, so that'll be fun.

Good. Yesterday afternoon, I stopped by the practice gym at JPJ. I watched you and your staff for a while as you worked out the returning players. It's not a big group, but they were working hard. What are you hoping to accomplish with that group of players in the remaining time you have this semester, which is not a lot at this point?

Yeah, I mean, I've already seen positive strides. They're hungry. They want it. They're talented. I was actually shocked to see how much talent we do have. So I think it's our job just to mold them into the players that we know that they can be. And they've just been receptive to that.

So I just want to instill work ethic, just culture, and just discipline and accountability, that kind of thing. Right now that's the biggest thing and just pushing through fatigue, pushing through adversity, all those things that you can create into a workout, and then obviously, improve their skills as well. I think we have some raw talent in some of them, and I think we have some really skilled talent, so just working on some of their strengths and making it stronger, but definitely focus on the deficiencies.



Do you have a sense at this point of how many players will be back from this past season's team?

Yeah, I mean, I think we have about seven returning. And we're bringing in a lot of kids, as well, which as those start to get signed and sealed and delivered, we'll be able to announce those. But obviously, most notable, Sam Brunelle was one who just signed with us. And that's--

Right.

[INAUDIBLE]. And when you get players like that, great players want to play with great players. So that opens the floodgates for us.

You came here from Missouri State, where you had a 74 and 15 record in three seasons as head coach. I was struck by the congratulatory message that Missouri State Athletics posted on its website when you took the job here. Is it nice to be able to leave a school with no hard feelings? I mean, everyone seemed genuinely happy for you, which is not always the case in sports when coaches change jobs.

Yeah, I mean, I loved all those people there. And the players first and foremost, those are like my kids or little sisters. And then our administration, I was very, very close with their AD [INAUDIBLE] and their president, as well, Clif Smart.

And I just got a new number yesterday. I texted him my new number. And I want to make sure that people still have my contact and keep in touch. And they all were wishing me well. So no, I mean, I don't think I've ever left any place, actually, even as an assistant coach, with bad blood. I just try to leave things good.

You had been an assistant for a long time before you became a head coach. You obviously had a ton of success. What was the biggest surprise-- I don't know if surprise is the right word, but what hit you about being a head coach that maybe you didn't realize until you were actually in that chair?

Well, you know what? I was actually fortunate. It was unfortunate circumstances, but it was a blessing in disguise for me. I was named interim head coach when I was at Michigan State, when I was associate head coach there for about a month and a half or so. Because at the time, my boss fell sick.

For me, those first couple of weeks, I was just thrown into a fire. Because it happened literally during the game. So my head was spinning. There was all kinds of things I had to do. I had assume all roles as a head coach and all interviews, all appearances, practice playing and game planning, all that stuff, organizing people, leading people.

So I was just thrust into that. And I thought, once I got settled and that I got into a good rhythm-- and then she eventually came back. But that helped me prepare for Missouri State. So when I got there, I was very poised and confident in what I was doing, because I had already been in that whirlwind, in that fire.

So there was nothing really that surprised me. Of course, you're continuing to evolve as a coach every day. It doesn't matter if you've been doing it 5 years or 30 years. It's just a profession that you continue to evolve.

Debbie Ryan was here at JBJ at your introductory press conference three weeks ago. Had you been around her? Had you met her before the press conference to spend much time around her?

It's funny. She just called me yesterday. She's a great supporter. I just have so much tremendous respect for what she's done here, for sure. I knew her. I'd met her, I guess you could say, when I was at VCU, and she was finishing up here her last seasons.

So we had had talks in passing and on the recruiting trail, things like that. But I actually didn't even think she would remember me, because I was a very young coach at that time. And when she called me on the day that I got hired or announced, she said she did remember me. So that was pretty cool. But like I said, she did great things here. And we're just trying to bring the program back to that standard.

So she did not recruit you out of Oakton High School?

No, she did not.

[LAUGHTER]

Have some resentment there for her, but--

Her loss.

Yeah.

At what age did you decide that basketball was your passion and what you wanted to do as a player and ultimately, as a coach? And you had some knee injuries along the way, too, right?

Yeah, I had an injury-plagued career-- six knee surgeries, sciatica in my back, [INAUDIBLE] joints and my back problems, partially torn rotator cuff, stress fractures in my foot. My injury reserve list was crazy. So I did have an injury-plagued career, and that's how I got into coaching.

Because my senior year in college, my coach made me into a student coach. And then I just fell in love with helping people and watching them grow and just working on things that we talk about, and having them success with it, it just really filled me up. So that's how I got into the profession.

But I always thought I was going to play. Even growing up, I thought I'd be the first woman in the NBA type thing. And then that WNBA came about, and I was like, oh, my goodness, I want to be in that. But I had opportunities to play pro. I just was so banged up. So I got right into coaching.

But even before that, growing up, soccer was my first sport. I'm Nigerian, and that's a big sport for us. And I played soccer. I actually started playing basketball probably middle school. I started a little bit late. And it's because I grew. And they just were like, you should play basketball. And I fell in love with the sport.

But I wasn't a serious, I guess, athlete or serious about the sport until probably my sophomore year, when I actually got injured in high school. And when something's taken away from you, that's when you realize how much you love it.

So you ended up at Hofstra University as a player. You played there for Felisha Legette-Jack, later coached with her. She was recently named head coach at Syracuse, which means you're going to be going head to head with her.

I know I talked to her after you were hired, and I got the feeling you were still very close. What's it going to be like being on opposite benches from her? And have you guys talked about that whole dynamic since she got named at Syracuse?

Yeah, we were just texting yesterday. We talk maybe a couple of times a week. We are still very close. And I think it's a great story. Honestly, I never really thought that would come about when I was playing for her. But for us to be in the same conference and for us to both be home, too, is actually really cool. And I was just so happy for her to get that job.

Nobody bleeds orange up there for Syracuse more than she does, so she deserved it. But I just think it's going to be really cool. I mean, we're excited about that. We're excited about the opportunities and possibilities. But I want to win the game when we go head to head. But outside of that, I am going to be rooting for her.

How much did you know about a ACC basketball, women's basketball, before coming here?

Well, I mean, I kind of grew up in ACC country. So growing up, it was obviously-- UVA was big when we were growing up. I knew of some other [INAUDIBLE] and some of the other coaches. But I grew up around Maryland. I was 45 minutes from Maryland, obviously UVA, the North Carolina schools.

And yeah, I mean, I just think, if you grow up in northern Virginia, you know all about ACC basketball, I mean, if you're a fan. So obviously, conferences have moved around, and teams have moved in and out of that. So the conference has changed, but for the most part, it's still the ACC.

What's been the response from former UVA players since you were hired? I know several of them were at the press conference at JBJ. Have you heard from any of them?

Oh yeah, a lot of them. Wendy Palmer actually was the first one to reach out. I've worked with Wendy at VCU, so we've been close. But Dawn Staley, [? Tammi ?] [? Reiss, ?] Monica. So the list goes on. Lisa was my realtor. So the list goes on and on. And Jocelyn, she's in here working out a lot, so I talk to her.

But I'm excited to be part of that sisterhood. It's a very strong sisterhood here, and that's something, that I want to make sure we bring people back together. Because I don't know. In recent years, I just feel like they might have gotten [INAUDIBLE] a little bit. But I told them, that when we did the alumni Zoom, that I want to bring them home, and I want them to be a big part of our success.

Oh, so you did do an alumni Zoom?

Yes, we did.

You have coached in the state before as an assistant. You did you come back to Virginia with pretty good relationships with high school coaches and AU coaches in this part of the country?

Yeah, I definitely did. Just really the DMV area, obviously, down here, the beach area, and then all up and down the East Coast, is really important. Even when I went to Michigan State, even though we're all the way in Michigan, I still was recruiting this area heavily. Same thing when I was at Indiana.

So a lot of the kids that are transferring, we have relationships with. CJ Jones, my recruiting coordinator, he was at Temple for four years in the East Carolina. So most of his contacts are over here. So that really helps with the recruiting ties as well.

Well, that's a good transition to my next question. Can you tell me about your staff? You brought your assistants from Missouri State. Can you go through each of those quickly, or not quickly?

So excited to bring them. They're like family to me. Definitely been loyal, and I want to be loyal to them and further their career. But they're great people first, and they're great coaches as well.

So CJ Jones is my recruiting coordinator and assistant coach. He was at Temple for four years, East Carolina for two. Then he was on the men's side before that. But most notably, he did player development in the NBA for five years for the Pistons and the Heat. So he brings tremendous experience that way. He's a great father and husband, great role model for our student athletes, has three little boys and a wife.

And then Alysiah Bond, we probably have the longest relationship. She was actually even in my wedding. But we worked together for four years at Michigan State. But she also worked for the great Pat Summitt, at Tennessee. She worked at Arizona, Wisconsin, Texas Tech, obviously Missouri State, Central Florida, Murray State.

So she brings a lot of experience. She went to the Final Four in 1993 with Ohio State, so a lot of high-level experience. The thing that she brings the most is her personality and just who she is. She just draws people in, so recruits community.

Everybody really loves her, just player relationship, community relationships, and recruiting. And she's more of a defensive coach. CJ is more of an offensive coach.

And then my young one, my young star [INAUDIBLE]--

[LAUGHTER]

--she actually coached there for four years at Michigan State and was their interim coach her senior year for some time. But she's all-time leading scorer at Michigan State, all-time leading three-point percentage, field goal percentage, all that stuff, was top 10 WNBA draft pick, phenomenal player. I mean, she literally could still-- she could be in the WNBA right now. If you come in the gym and watch her, you'll be blown away.

But her passion is to coach. And I told her when she was a player, no matter where she's playing, when I become a head coach, I'm going to call her. And I did, and she came. So she actually did a year before she got with me at Missouri State. She did a year at Maryland as their recruiting operations player development person.

So yeah, those three, I mean, they bring a lot, a wealth of knowledge. Tori's a really good player developer. Kids really respect her. She's old enough where they respect her, but young enough where she can still relate and get out there and do it. So I love my staff. I think they bring tremendous experience, and they're definitely going to be a big part of our success.

You also announced the hiring of your strength coach, Chris Toland. What was Chris's reaction when he saw the weight room at JPJ?

He literally dropped to his knees when he walked in there-- oh, my goodness. And I told him, I couldn't even wait for that moment. I was like, I cannot wait till he sees this weight room, because it is just phenomenal. And I don't even know. He probably lives in there, to be honest. Because he works out three times a day, and then he's working out all the kids.

And he's blown away by the technology in there, and it's right up his alley. That's where he belongs, because he's really, really good. And he just understands the body, understands movement, and he understands mobility. He understands recovery, strengthening, speed, agility. He just has a really good grasp on all things strength and conditioning.

Do you have any other support staffers in place, or is that still to come?

I do. A couple are going to get announced. I don't know if we're [INAUDIBLE].

I don't know. If they've gone through HR, you can probably talk about them. If they haven't, then--

Yeah, we'll probably wait. But I do have a video coordinator, a director of operations. I have a director of player development-- I mean, sorry, scouting and player development. And I have a director of recruiting operations. And then there's still one position that I'm trying to hire, which is our director of multimedia and creative content person.

You mentioned that earlier this week, Samantha Brunelle announced she was transferring here and that she had signed her grant and aid. Did much about Sam as a player before she entered the portal?

Oh, yeah. I mean, didn't know that she was transferring. That shocked me. And I was just like, oh, my gosh, we got to get her home. But everybody knows Samantha Brunelle. I mean, she was the number one player in the country coming out to '19. We tried to put our name in the hat when I was at Michigan State, just because I know this area. I know the coaches, things like that.

And I did talk to her. I talked to her once or twice, but she didn't remember that. She was like, no, Coach [INAUDIBLE]. She had a [INAUDIBLE] at that time. But the beauty of everything when she came here was, I mean, obviously, she did want to come home. But she said, I had to have a feeling. And she really wanted to make sure she had a feeling.

And she did. We connected on so many levels. And she connected with my staff. And she said that this is the kind of feeling that she had when she knew Notre Dame was the place for her. And she didn't think she would be able to have that feeling again.

So it wasn't just her coming home. She actually feels like she could thrive in my system and help us put UVA back on the map. And also, she feels like she's going to be coached well and have that relationship with me and my staff, which is something she really wants. So it was actually really a happy marriage on both ends, because I'm a cultures coach. Yes, I want somebody to be very talented, but you've got to fit our culture, and we got to have that connection. So that was really big.

To get any transfer, to get a transfer who has multiple years of eligibility left, how big a deal is that? Just because there's always a transition period when someone comes into a new program and learns a new system.

Yeah, I mean, it's huge. Obviously, the transfer portal has changed, changed the game. And it actually affects high school students the most, high school athletes. Because now it's like you can get, especially in our situation, when we're trying to turn a program around, you can get experience right away, right out of the portal.

So for me, yes, there's times where we're going to have grad transfers and just one year. But I actually traditionally like the four-year kid, because I'm a relationship coach. And I love the maturity or maturation of that kid and watching them evolve, and all that stuff.

So for me, in the transfer portal, the more years they have, the better. Because that's the longer we have with them. But it doesn't mean that we don't take grad transfers for one year or people that only have two years. But I think that it's really affected the high school athlete the most.

So between Sam's friends and family in Greene County and your relatives coming down from the DMV, then attendance at JPI right there ought to double just with those two groups. How many more players do you hope to add this spring, either high school players who sign or transfers from other colleges?

Yeah, I mean, it's hard to say, because we've added some. We can't talk about it. And so they've signed, so I mean, there'll be a healthy amount, I think. But we will have seven returners that I think can contribute.

Rebuilding a program that's been down for a while is not an easy process. What will be the key? What will be the key in this process? And are you by nature a patient person?

Yeah, I mean, I think you have to be patient in this business, to a certain extent, but you also have to be demanding as well. So just setting my culture, setting the standards, expectations. And then the winning mentality is the biggest thing. This is a team that won five games last year.

So you have to change the mentality. And we do that by even just shooting drills and practice, and things like that. There's a winner and loser to everything we do. Every drill is competitive, and every drill correlates. And so our system, so it's never you're never just doing something just to do it or check the box or waste time.

So I think you're changing the mentality a little by little, and getting people hungry and understanding that the winning part matters is going to help. But then also, like I said, culture, just getting to know them and building relationships is big, and helping them understand that I want them to be successful on and off the court. And doing things that can also bring us closer off the court is going to be essential as well.

The other program down the hall from you has as a strong culture itself. Have you had any chance to talk with Tony Bennett since you've been hired?

My press conference week, I talked to him; since I've been back, not as much. One, I've been in a whirlwind. I'm buying and selling a house and getting everybody organized and hiring and recruiting. But two, they were actually out recruiting. Their calendar's a little bit different than ours.

So I'll pop in there at some point. He's a phenomenal guy. Honestly, when I first met him, everybody was telling me, oh, he's a great guy. He's a great guy. But when I first met him and just felt his spirit, I almost thought I was talking to a pastor or something like [INAUDIBLE].

[LAUGHTER]

--a very strong spirit. I have a lot of respect for him, what he does on the court. But now getting to meet him, I understand why he's so successful.

Do you know his sister Kathy at all from basketball circles?

No. I mean, I know she coached at Indiana and coached [INAUDIBLE] places. But I know who she is. I've never really met her like that.

Well, I know you're busy. I appreciate very much you're making time for this. Have a happy birthday. I hope this didn't spoil the big day.

No.

And good luck with everything.

OK, thank you so much.

Take care.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

And that's a wrap for Episode 299. Thanks again to our Owayne and Coach Mox for stopping by. And thanks to all our listeners, too. Your support is crucial, and we would appreciate your taking a minute to rate and subscribe to this podcast.

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[MUSIC PLAYING]