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Welcome to the *Wahoo Central Podcast*. I'm your host, Jeff White, from [virginiasports.com](http://virginiasports.com), and this is episode number 295. It's February, which for UVA athletics, is one of the busiest times of the school year, with the postseason approaching for winter sports and our spring sports getting underway.

In our second segment today, we'll be talking UVA baseball with Devin Ortiz, who was one of the leaders of Brian O'Connor's team. First, I want to welcome in Sara O'Leary, the head coach of the unbeaten UVA women's tennis team. It's great to see you again, Sara. How are you doing?

Great to see you, too. Thanks for having me. And I'm doing well, thank you.

So we're recording this on a Tuesday afternoon. Last night, in Durham, our men's basketball team got a huge win over Duke at Cameron Indoor Stadium. I know you are a Wahoo through and through now, but you went to UNC. Is it fair to say it does not break your heart to see Duke lose?

It's a great day whenever Duke loses, especially when our team beats them in the last second with an amazing 3-point shot. I mean, I was actually the only one awake in my house at the time, and I jumped off the couch and was just so excited for them. And what a great game it was. So great job to Tony and his squad. I mean, they're playing some good basketball right now. It's exciting to see.

Yep, it was fun. So all right, we'll get back to tennis now. Your team is 6 and 0 in dual matches. You're ranked number seven nationally heading into this weekend's ITA National Team Indoor Championships in Madison, Wisconsin. What are your thoughts on the season so far?

I'm really excited about where the team is right now. I think we've progressed well since we came back at the start of January. We actually brought the team back pretty early this year. We started practice on January 5. And we were busy from the start. We were doing two-a-days plus conditioning.

But the girls were ready to go. They came back. They were ready to hit the ground running. And we had a couple matches at the beginning of the season against Marshall and Longwood and Richmond, which I thought were good tests for us and allowed our girls to see where their games are at and get their feet wet, feel a little nervous out there on the court. It's a different scenario during the spring when we're playing dual matches. And you're playing for your team. And in the fall, it's all individual.

So that was great preparation for our kickoff weekend and then our last match against Central Florida. So we're just really looking forward to this weekend to go out and test ourselves again against some of the best teams in the country.

This is your fifth season at UVA. Last year, your team advanced to the NCAA tournaments round of 16. Sports are not played on paper, of course, but this appears, at least potentially, to be your best team here. Is that a fair assessment?

Yeah, I think so.

If the players stay healthy, and they come close to their potential.

Yeah, I think that's very key that we stay healthy. But yeah, I think we have some very experienced players but also some really strong new players that have come in and really shown what they're capable of and are excited to be here. I mean, they've played at some of the highest stages of junior tennis, and so they were ready to compete at a high level in college. So yeah, I'm feeling great about this squad and excited to see what we can do.

I mean, to be able to slot someone as talented as Natasha Subhash at number three in singles, that's quite a luxury, isn't it? Because I think she'd probably be playing number one in an awful lot of teams around the country.

Yeah. I mean, you have-- Natasha is an amazing player, incredible competitor, very versatile on the court, and just very, very smart player. And so to have her at three is a really strong number three singles. I mean, Emma has proven herself that she's our number one player. And Natasha came in. She actually had COVID at the beginning of the semester. So we've kind of had to slowly ease her back into things. But she's doing great right now.

Elaine Chervinsky on our team, who's a first year, has just really stepped up, is playing some high-level tennis right now. And so that's where we stand. But that lineup can change throughout the season. But all of them are playing amazing right now and very confident going into this weekend.

Weather permitting, the NCAA championships will be held outdoors in May. And I know Mother Nature can get in the way, and sometimes those matches get played indoors. But what do you hope to accomplish during the indoor portion of the season? And do you have a sense of whether this team is a better indoor team or better outdoor team, or does it make any difference?

I think what we're just trying to accomplish right now is what is our identity as a team right now and really trying to continue to build the culture of this team. I mean, I feel like every year, it's a new team. You bring in new players. Players leave.

And so we brought in a lot of new players this year, with Nicole Kiefer, Elaine Chervinsky, Melodie Collard, and transfer Sara Ziodato. So right now, we're really trying to establish what is our identity and working through that.

But in terms of being a better indoor or outdoor team, I don't know. I think these guys, all of them have played both indoors and outdoors, and I don't think it's going to bother them one way or the other. I think we're ready to go, whether we're playing inside or outside.

To earn one of the 16 spots in the ITA Indoor Championship, your team had to defeat Stanford at the Boar's Head late last month. It came down to number one singles, where Emma Navarro won in three sets to give Virginia a 4 to 3 victory. It's got to be a comforting feeling to have a match in Emma's hands, isn't it?

[LAUGHS] Yes, definitely. I feel for Emma a little bit there because I think people just assume that. But it's a lot of pressure on her. And all the pressure was on her because she's returning NCAA champion, she's only lost one college match before, she's playing against a freshman.

And so I think it's important to give her a lot of credit for what she did there. Because it's not easy when all the pressure is on you. And she handled it so professionally. I mean, she was nervous. She was uncomfortable, for sure. And the girl she was playing is nine in the country, one of the best American junior players that's come into college.

And credit to Emma for what she did. And she knew what was on the line. And she cares about this team so much. And so it was just so impressive to see the way she handled it. Because the other player who she was playing didn't lose it. Emma had to win it. She had to step up and play some incredible tennis.

And it was. It was a very, very high level match that I wouldn't be surprised if they're playing each other deep into the NCAA singles tournament at the end of the year. I mean, I have a lot of respect for Connie Ma, who she was playing. And it was just an unbelievable match.

So that match was probably the most fun match I've had since I've been a coach here at UVA. It was just such a team effort all the way down the line. And to beat Stanford, who I don't think our program has ever, in the history of our program, beaten Stanford. So it was a really great milestone for us and just such a fun match to be a part of. I'm super proud of the girls.

Yeah, I remember following the third set, or the final set, for Emma. And it looked like, early on, all right, she's in control. Then it seemed like, ooh, maybe she's slipping-- maybe it's slipping away from her. But then, at the end, she kind of locked down and took care of business, like she does.

You mentioned it. I think most of our listeners probably know this but for those who don't, Emma won the NCAA singles title as a freshman last year. And she advanced to the NCAA semifinals in doubles with her partner, Rosie Johanson. You've been around Emma for a while. You've recruited her. What makes her such a special player?

And I wanted to ask you about one thing in particular. And I know we talked about it last year when I wrote a story on Emma. Her dominance in the third set is incredible. I guess the one she had the other day, that's one of the rare occasions when the opponent wins more than two games in a third set against her.

Yeah, I think one of Emma's biggest strengths is her fitness. She's an incredible athlete, but she also just works so hard. So I don't think she's ever going to lose a match because of her fitness. She's not built that way. She just puts so much time and effort into her fitness. So that's a huge component of it.

But the other thing that really impresses me about Emma is her ability to stay in the moment and stay present. And she doesn't worry about what's happened earlier in the match. She's not worried about what could happen in the future of the match. She truly has this ability to just stay focused on the task at hand in this next point.

And she's honestly like that in every aspect of her life. I mean, she just doesn't get worried about things that could happen in the future. She doesn't dwell on things that have happened in the past. She learns from things that have happened in the past. But it's just this amazing strength that she has that I wish I had more of. She does it so well.

And she has a lot of belief in herself when she's out there and just never gives up, just such an incredible competitor, fighter. And so I think those things are what really stand out and what make her such a great player and also such a great leader on our team.

One of the things that struck me about Emma when I interviewed her last year was here is someone who is a superstar in her sport. She just seemed so normal-- normal and nice. You would not know that she is the best player in NCAA women's tennis. If you didn't know that, you wouldn't know. She doesn't advertise that fact. She just seems very levelheaded, very personable, very humble. It was pretty cool to talk to her.

Yeah. You're right on. She lives her life with tons of humility. Like you said, you would have no idea that she won the National Championship last year. She does not talk about that. I mean, it's something she's proud of, but she's just she's a normal kid.

And the team loves her. They get along with her really well. She's hilarious. I don't think people know that about her. Because she's very, very serious and quiet on the court. But you see her in practice, and it's a different story. And she's working her tail off all the time, but she's having a great time doing it. And I think it helps her really enjoy training and just getting better every single day.

But yes, her family's done an amazing job raising her, in my opinion. I just think she's such a great kid, super respectful, lives her life with tons of humility and just a normal kid who's a really, really good tennis player.

You've given her a lot of freedom to leave grounds during the school year to compete as an amateur in professional tournaments, she recently reached the semi-finals of a tournament down in Georgia, I think. Is that challenging for you from a team dynamic? Or is it good for the team to get that experience of not having her there all the time?

Yeah, it's definitely challenging. The plan was that she was going to come back for the match in the morning and then go back down and play her quarterfinal match in the afternoon. But there was a last-minute scheduling issue with the tournament, so it didn't work out.

But what I was so impressed with was how my team handled it. And our team, we're nine people strong. It's not just all about Emma. And I think it gave the girls a chance to see, really, what they're capable of, as well.

And they all took it as a challenge. And they stepped up. And they supported Emma. And they knew that Emma wanted to be there. And so that's never in question. And so they took it well. And we beat the number 18 team in the country without her. And I think the girls, they took on that adversity of not having her there, which is something we've talked a lot about is this team, we're only going to accomplish what we want to accomplish if we're willing to take on any sort of adversity and embrace that adversity.

And so I think they really did that last Friday and had a great match. And they got better. And we got a great win. And Emma also won that day. She had an amazing win against a former amazing collegiate player named Robin Anderson, who played at UCLA. So it was a good day for the Hoos.

But yeah, it's challenging. Because we're definitely-- I'm always thinking about the team but also thinking about Emma and her development. So yeah. But we're working together well. And yeah, so it was a good day.

And you mentioned that you have several newcomers on the team this year. One of them is Elaine Chervinsky, who has played number two singles for you when Emma's there, and she played number one, I think, when Emma was not there. What has the addition of her, Elaine, meant to the lineup? I mean, I guess it means you can bump really good players one spot down then.

Yeah, she's just a very high-level player. And she's played at the highest levels of junior tennis, so she was very experienced coming into college. But what I love about Elaine is she brings such a belief factor whenever she's on the court.

When we played Stanford, she was down 5-2 in her match, and it wasn't looking great. The other girl was playing really well. Her opponent is, I think, 21 in the country, a really, really good player. And Elaine just was like, all right, this is what I have to do, put her head down and just went to work.

And the excitement she showed during that third set and the energy she brought, I think it just sparked everybody else. And she just found a way to get it done and believed in herself. And so I think that's something that she's really bringing to this program is a ton of belief and a ton of energy out on the court.

You just see so many fans gravitate towards her court. Because she's pumping her fist. She's pumping everybody else up. And she's having a great time out there. I mean, I coach her. And sometimes players come over, and they're always stressed on the sideline.

She's coming over and telling me jokes and talking through how she's feeling out there, which makes it easier for me to be able to know what to say to her, how to help her. And so it's just been-- she's added a lot in terms of her level but also her personality and what she's bringing to this team and especially in her belief factor in herself and in her team.

Want to ask you about your staff. Gina has been your associate head coach for all five of your years here. Tyson is in his third year, I believe, as the volunteer assistant. How do the three of you divide the coaching duties? Do you each basically do the same thing with the players, or do you have specific assignments for each of the coaches?

Off the court, we split things up in terms of what needs to get done. But on the court, we all work with each of the players. I think one thing that's been really important to us is that we all build really strong, trusting relationships with all the players. And so it's important that they get to know us, and we get to know them.

And so that's kind of how we've done it. I mean, there are certain players in matches that, I think, we coach more than others, just because we found that those players, it works for them. But in practice, meetings with the players, we're always mixing that up and really trying to spend time with each of them.

So it's a good dynamic. I have so much faith in my staff. I've been so lucky to have Tyson be here for three years. He was a head coach before of a men's team, a mid-major program. And for him to be here and want to be a part of our program for this long just shows his belief in us and his belief in the team and his loyalty.

And I mean, he's so smart on the court. He brings so much to this program in terms of his professionalism and his care towards the girls. They know how much he cares about them. He's hilarious. He brings a lot of humor. And it's not an easy job when you're the only male with all these females around you, including our athletic trainer's a female. So he's done a great job.

And then Gina, she's part of our family-- my husband, my son. I mean, I've coached her since she was a freshman at UNC. I coached her for four years there. I was an assistant coach. And we just had a really great bond then. And she wanted to get into coaching. We stayed in great touch.

And when I got this job at UVA-- I actually tried to hire her as my assistant at Davidson when I was there, but she took the NC State position-- and then, when I got this job, I called her again. And it's been one of the best decisions I've ever made. I couldn't have asked for a better partner to do this with. She's just such a student of the game. She's so loyal. She works so hard. And so I'm very fortunate to have the staff that I have.

The head coach of the UVA men's team, Andres Pedroso also has the title of director of tennis. The two programs are very closely aligned. And it wasn't always that way here. They used to be kind of two separate programs. What benefits do you get from having the two programs as close as they are to each other?

I feel so fortunate to be able to work with Andres and Scott and learn from them. I think what's amazing about it is that we-- we communicate every day. And we talk about different drills we're doing. And we talk about how maybe something we've done with one of our players could help them with one of their players and vice versa.

And he was a big reason why I took this job. Because he had been here when they won their first national championship. He was an assistant coach. And so I'm like, what better person to learn from? Those are my goals for this program, to get to that top level of college tennis. So I knew I could learn a lot from him.

And then what a just good, genuine, nice person. I feel like-- I watch how he coaches his team and the culture he's built. And we share the same values in how we want to run our programs.

So it's so easy to work with him. I've learned so much. And we all get along great. We've all been here now for five years, the four of us-- Gina, Scott, Andres, and I. And it's been a great experience. I couldn't ask for more. So we're very fortunate.

The two programs moved last year from the courts at the Snyder Center near Mem Gym to a beautiful new facility, outdoor facility, at the Boar's Head. What has that meant from the program in terms of-- I guess, for the players, they no longer have to hop from venue to venue and hop in their cars, depending on the weather. But has there been a benefit for them competitively and also for the programs, in terms of recruiting?

Definitely. I see that our players play with so much pride out there on these new courts. It's just such a beautiful facility that they're so proud of. And they love the location. And when we bring recruits on campus to walk them out to see these six courts in a row and this incredible scoreboard and the background that we have there, it's really special. And I would put it up there with one of the best facilities in the country. I think it's just stunning when you see it. So for those of you who haven't been out, hopefully, you can--

Come on out.

Come on out for a match. Because it's a beautiful place to watch some tennis. And I think the other thing you mentioned is it's just much more efficient for the players to be able to just know they're going to be at Boar's Head, regardless, for practice, whether it starts raining or it's sunny or whatever the situation may be.

Because yeah, it would be tough at times being out in the middle of practice. And it would start raining. And we'd have to grab all the balls and grab all our stuff and get our cars out of the garage there and drive over. And so we're just so thankful for this ability to be able to play at one place and to be able to play on such amazing, amazing courts with just an incredible backdrop. So we love it.

I know it's all subject to the weather. But do you have a specific match that you're hoping to move outside for? Or do you just play that by ear as the spring goes on?

Not really. I mean, we're so used to playing almost all of our matches in January and February indoors and then all the matches after that outdoors. So we're fine either way because we have a pretty special indoor facility, too. So either way, we get to play in a pretty great atmosphere.

Let me ask you about Danielle Collins, who won two NCAA singles titles here. She recently reached the final of the Australian Open. Danielle-- you didn't coach Danielle here, but she speaks very highly of you and the program. She seems to be a great ambassador for college tennis and what a player can get out of four years in college before becoming a pro. What's it been like to kind of support her from afar? And what does her success mean for the program?

Yeah, I could not be prouder of what she's done and how she's done it. I mean, she's faced a lot of adversity in her career with some health issues. But she's just persevered. And I think she's been such an inspiration to our players on our team but also players all around the world.

And you're right. She's such a great ambassador for college tennis. Because I think there is this-- people feel like, especially international players, feel like I can't go to college. I'm giving up my pro dreams if I go to college.

And what Danielle is doing is truly proving them wrong and showing that you can go to college. You can get an amazing education and continue to go out in the pros on the Pro Tour and become a top 10 player in the world.

And what I love about Danielle is one thing she's mentioned is she goes, I feel like when I'm out there, I feel less pressure. Because whatever happens, I have this amazing degree in my back pocket. And if I get hurt or if I'm not doing well or if I want to give it up, then I can go pursue this degree that I got at the University of Virginia. And so I think she has such a great perspective on it.

But yeah, I mean, just extremely proud of her and what she's doing. And I think Emma is really trying to follow in her footsteps and prove to other players, as well, and be an example to other players that you can do both. You can get a great education, and you can continue to improve and get better and have a great professional career to follow.

Yeah, and I know the two, Emma and Danielle, played doubles together a couple summers ago at a tournament in South Carolina. And I think Danielle texted Emma after Emma won the NCAA title. So it's kind of cool to see it go from one generation to the next.

But anyway, thank you for your time. I know you're getting ready to head to Wisconsin. Safe travels out there. And good luck in the tournament. And we'll see you on those outdoor courts at the Boar's Head.

Awesome. Thank you so much for having me, Jeff.

All right. Thanks, Sara. All right. We're going to take a short break, and then we'll be back to talk some UVA baseball.

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 athletics scores, news, and fan contests is the UVA Sports app. You can pick your sports preferences and never miss a final score or any breaking news.

You can also listen to all of our Coach's Corner shows live on the app. All you gotta 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.

OK, joining the show now is one of the elder statesmen of the UVA baseball team, and that is Devin Ortiz. Devin, it's good to see you again. Thanks for making time to talk.

Of course. Thank you, Jeff, for having me.

So this is it, your final season of college baseball. Has that dawned on you yet? Like, when you were out for the first day of practice, did it occur to you that this is your final first day of practice at the University of Virginia?

Yeah. So I think it definitely has hit me that it's my first last season. Once the season starts, I think it'll hit me a lot more to where I realize that this is the last ride for me. And I'm just going to give it my all out there and have fun.

So you arrived here from your hometown of Nutley, New Jersey, way back in the summer of 2017. Would you have thought then that you'd be here four and a half, almost five, years later, still be here?

Oh, man, to be honest, no. I mean, obviously, no one would have expected COVID throughout the years. And honestly, without looking at it that way, I wouldn't have that opportunity to come back for a fifth year, based on some circumstances with health and all that stuff, in my position. So I'm just really, really grateful that I'm able to do my fifth year here and compete for one more year for a national championship with UVA.

So you were 18 when you got to UVA. You'll be 23 when you leave. How has the college experience changed you as a person? I mean, it's easy to see what you've done on the field over that time but not as easy for people who follow the program to see how you've changed off the field.

Right. So looking back at who I was as a person, the way I was in school as a freshman-- first year, excuse me-- I definitely have grown a tremendous amount with mentality, maturity, time management, knowing responsibilities, just the general things of being an adult. Obviously, I don't think I've got them down pat just yet because I'm still learning. And I will always be learning as I grow.

But just looking back at the-- I think I matured tremendously. And I think that's a big thanks to UVA, the university in itself, and, of course, the baseball program for installing these values and these proper morals to have and what's it take to be a man and all that stuff. So I'm incredibly grateful for what this university has provided me from an on- and off-the-field standpoint.

So the first-year guys on the team, I'm guessing most of them are 18. There might be some 17-year-olds, might be some 19, but probably most are 18. Is there a generation gap at all, do you feel, with those guys?

Yeah, it's actually funny because there's some jokes that me and Tappen would reference or some songs-- they were artists that we listened to that-- we'd do the numbers, and they were in fifth grade when some of these things came out. For music, for example, my sophomore year, a song, an album, that me and Tappen would like or an older transfer student that we'd talk about. And we'll try to include the freshmen on it and be like, hey, what do you know about this guy, you know?

And he's just like, ah, I never really heard that before. And that's where it kind of hits you. It's like, wow, my freshman year of college, you were in seventh grade.

Exactly. So you mentioned Alex Tappen. He's back for a fifth year, too. The head man, Brian O'Connor, has called you guys two of the biggest recruits in the recruiting class. I know you had circumstances with an injury that probably affected, or influenced, your decision. Did you and Alex have any conversations about coming back? Or did each arrive at his decision independently?

So there were some talks in the beginning of-- not the beginning, sorry, in the middle-- of the season, just so we could have our minds on it. We didn't know what the end circumstance would be. Certainly, at the time that we talked about it, I don't even think the ACC Tournament was really an option for us at that moment.

So it was just brought up as a thing of, OK, just putting it out there, right, in the middle of the semester, talking with Coach O'Connor and a couple of the older guys. And then we really didn't talk about it much until after the season.

Once we finished at Omaha, then it was kind of looking forward to the next season and what's the plan with that. So me and Alex didn't really talk about it. I think those conversations were really just privately with Coach O'Connor and him and me and Coach O'Connor.

As an undergraduate, I believe you were a philosophy major, right?

Right.

What interested you about that field of study? And was anybody else, or is anybody else, in the program a philosophy major?

Yeah, so no.

You were it.

Yeah. To answer that question, no, I'm the only one. I think-- ah, I'm forgetting his name-- a couple of years ago, before my time here, there was also someone else. If his name comes to mind, I'll definitely reference it.



But yeah, I chose philosophy just because I was interested in just learning a little more about argument comprehension. And honestly, I was super interested in some of these philosophies, in general. Some of the classes I took were Philosophy of the Mind, Political Philosophy, Historical Philosophy, and just getting a full background of everything.

And it honestly really increased-- it really helped me with writing. I'm not the best writer-- or I came into the university not being able to really write the best papers. And I think that was something where I was like, you know what? I'm going to challenge myself in this major where it requires all writing. It's barely tests and stuff like that. So I think I got a lot better at writing.

It also helped me just from a mental standpoint of just understanding some different things, from-- I don't really want to get into this a lot. It is a lot. But it definitely has helped me. And then I also help a lot of the younger guys who are taking philosophy classes now with some references and stuff like that if they need it.

So I'm sure that involves a lot of reading, a lot of deep reading. If you're opening up your book after a long day at the ballpark, it's got to be tough to concentrate on anything but particularly philosophy, isn't it, at 11 o'clock at night, sitting down with a philosophy book?

Yeah, I can tell you there was a lot more times that weren't fun than they were. But it was a couple hours of-- excuse me-- a couple of hours of reading for an assignment. All the papers were eight to 10 pages. Thankful that there was only about two to three a semester for each class. But at the same time, you're taking four to five classes.

Yeah, that adds up.

That adds up with many pages and many papers. So I'm just thankful I got through it. And I'm happy with my decision of choosing philosophy as my major.

What was the most interesting class you took in your major?

I would say Philosophy of the Mind. It just really-- that's the course where I feel like I was able to really get a different perspective on life and just the way us, as human beings, just view things through our senses and our eyeballs.

What graduate program are you in now?

I'm in the Social Foundations Program in the School of Education and Human Development. And the degree would be in educational psychology.

That's great. So last season was a pivotal one for the UVA baseball program. You had a leading role in it. What did it mean for the program, not only to get back to the NCAA tournament and then to a Super Regional but also to the College World Series in the Mecca of Omaha?

Yeah, it was incredible. As you know, from my first year, second year, we didn't make the tournament, in general. And as a recruit-- and every recruit who comes here-- the goal is to make the tournament, make it to Omaha, and win the whole thing.

So the first and second year were rough ones for us, as younger guys, just trying to find a role. I was trying to find the missing pieces of why we didn't make the tournament, what was going on. And my junior year, we started off with a great run, and things were looking bright for us.

And who knows? The season could have ended a lot differently than what it looks like on paper for that 2020 season. But COVID hit. And we knew that a lot of the pieces were going to come back for the next year, for the 2021 season.

And it didn't start out how we wanted it. But we knew we had the pieces, like I said. So a lot of it just went into trust, handling adversity, dealing with the pressure. I think, at one point at the beginning of our season up until probably about the fifth or sixth week, I've never been a part of a nine-man slump in a lineup.

And I think everyone can account for that. They would say that everyone, even going all the way down to the pinch hitters, was just we couldn't really see the ball well. And as the season went along, we had a long talk after that Georgia Tech weekend. And Coach O'Connor told us, listen, you guys want to go to the College World Series, you guys want to play in the tournament, something everyone in this room hasn't done yet, this is what you have to do.

And we buckled down for the remainder of the season. We won the games that were most important. And that was every game. So when it came down to the regional, everyone says like we faced six elimination games, and we won them. But every game for us throughout the season was an elimination game because of where we started.

So the pressure that a team who is 36 and 12, the pressure is different because we started at that bottom. But just long story short, just making it to winning the Super Regional in Columbia-- winning the Regional and then winning the Super Regional against some very good teams-- South Carolina, Jackson, Jacksonville, ODU, of course, and then DBU, which were a very talented team. We were just extremely proud of ourselves for making it to Omaha and winning a game there.

So if I or anyone else was compiling a list of the most dramatic hits or plays in UVA baseball history, you would be on that list, probably up near the top. In the final game of the NCAA Regional in Columbia, South Carolina, last year, you hit a walk-off homer against ODU, which sent Virginia to a Super Regional for the first time since 2015. First walk-off home run for UVA in an NCAA tournament game.

Looking back on that moment, what was it like? There were great photographs of you being doused with Gatorade or water while you were being interviewed. And it was a celebration for the ages there.

Yeah. That was, as of right now, I can't think of a moment that is bigger than that in my career. Coming to UVA, that's what you want to do. You want to help your team win. In the biggest moments, you want to be on the biggest stage.

And just looking back on it, it feels like a dream. It took me a while to come back down to Earth. But I'm incredibly grateful. And I wouldn't have been able to do it without the support of my teammates. And I'm extremely grateful for that moment.

I mean, what made that game truly remarkable, I think, is that even if you hadn't had that hit, it still would have been a memorable day for you. Your first career start as a UVA pitcher, you struck out six batters. You gave up only one hit. You ended up being named the Regional's Most Outstanding Player.

I know when you were named as the starter, there was surprise among a lot of people who follow the program. But Oak said later, and Drew Dickinson did, that you'd been working behind the scenes. So it wasn't a huge surprise to you when you got handed the ball and told you were going to pitch in that game?

Yeah. Well, it kind of goes both ways. So behind the scenes, I was working on pitching. Obviously, I wasn't playing the field due to other circumstances, but I was able to still hit. So we kind of reassessed and said, all right, if you aren't going to play first base and you can pitch, then we might as well work on that, just in case we need you.

So I think after the selection show, the day after, Coach Drew tells me, all right, you got two innings today, which was on the Tuesday. I believe the selection show was on a Monday. So we had practice on Tuesday. I had two live innings, got through them pretty easy with really low pitch count. And he sends me out there for another.

Once I was done with that outing, I go up to him, and I say, hey, why did you have me go three instead of two? What's the difference? And he said, well, if we go to a game 5 in the regional and we run out of pitching, you're going to have to start. And I was like, oh, OK. And I'm like, yeah, sure, we'll get to a game 5. I don't know. It's my first regional. I don't know what to expect.

We lose the first game, have to dig our way out of that hole. And after we won the ODU game the first time, looking at who we had in the bullpen, the types of relievers we needed to stay in the bullpen, I just kind of knew before even Coach Drew said it and Coach O'Connor announced that I was going to start, that I was going to start.

So that was-- as soon as the-- I knew I was going to start. But the pressure and the emotions didn't really kick in until they announced it. And obviously, that rest of the night, I was thinking about it, called my parents. I'm like, I'm going to start. I'm going to start.

But then we had that rain delay, so I had the whole day to think about it. And then thankful that we had that 9 o'clock game so I could just wake up and go and not have much time to think about it.

I mean, you ended up going four innings, scoreless innings. I kind of had the feeling before the game that if you'd given them two good innings, they would have been happy. Four was just a huge bonus. And then you were able to hand it off to the bullpen.

You were the starting first baseman until late April, when you hurt your left shoulder in a game against Liberty. You moved then to DH. You're right handed. You hit right handed. But I mean, how tough was it to play with that injury? And it ultimately required surgery, right?

Right. So throughout the season, and I'm not sure if many people really realized, I just kept going through some constant dislocations. I didn't really have much of a labrum at that point. But I was opted to get-- the doctor opted for me to get surgery within the season and to stop playing, as I can do a lot of damage to my shoulder in the long run.

I didn't listen to him. I told our trainers and I told him, listen, this is my last season here. This is my fourth season. This is my senior year. We're on a good run. If I can't play the field because that's where it keeps causing the problem, then I want to continue hitting.

So I don't know if many-- I don't know if you realized I wore a Sully brace that kept my shoulder from going up. But it never affected my swing. That was even before the brace, we'd wrap it in some wrap. And it just never affected my swing. I never felt it on my swing.

Even a couple of days after a dislocation, I would still be able to swing the bat. You know, I'm not going to say it felt very comfortable. But I would say that I was able to still do it with no problems.

So just the challenge there was just all mental, in my opinion. I just had to keep talking good to myself, trusting myself, and just pray that my shoulder would stand for the rest of the season. And then I can do what I needed to do from a hitter's standpoint.

Did the injury kind of make your decision for you, or at least make it easier, as far as coming back for a fifth year? Because it certainly would have hindered at least the start of a pro career, coming out and needing surgery like that.

Yeah. Just based off of how long we went into the summer with going to Omaha and finishing and at middle of the end of June, it was a kind of-- I feel like was the right decision, a no-brainer, to come back to get my master's degree, play another year of baseball and play another year of baseball with UVA, and praying that it's going to be a healthy season and, finally, for a normal season for me. You look at my first year, my second year not really knowing the role.

I know I pitched a lot my second year. COVID, being healthy and all that, that season was ended, so it didn't really feel normal, obviously. And then last year, with the injury, I didn't really feel like I could give my 100% to the team. So this year, I'm really excited to just be healthy and help the team win in any way that I can.

So what was your summer regimen and particularly your fall? I know you had the surgery, so I'm guessing you did not do much, if anything, over the summer from the physical standpoint. And then what about when you got here for fall?

Yeah, so from the summer standpoint, after Omaha, I went home for two weeks. I relaxed. I didn't do anything, just because of the long season. And I knew what I had ahead of me. So I enjoyed being at home for two weeks, came back to UVA the middle of July, got fixed up here.

And then my fall was just mainly recovery. It was recovering, rehab. And towards, I would say, November was where I started to just get back into some baseball play-- playing catch, fielding ground balls. And then the month of December, for me, at home was really lifting, a lot of lifting, doing my own personal rehab, just making sure my shoulder was going to be ready for when I got back to school, and just being behind.

I was behind. I'd never taken that much time off, especially in the fall. I didn't see live at bats. I wasn't fielding ground balls. I wasn't playing catch. So I kind of took on an assistant role where, having so many new guys, I knew that this would be a nice opportunity for me to show them the ways of the program.

I didn't have to be playing, but I knew I could be contributing in some way. So getting to know the guys, in general, and just showing them, this is how we do things here, was a big thing for me in the fall. And now I'm healthy, and I'm ready to go. I've been practicing now and ready to go.

So when I talked to Oak in the fall and brought up you and how he planned to use you, he said that you're going to be pitching a lot this year, I think. I don't know if that'll be as a starter or out of the bullpen. How do you see your role at this point? And I'm guessing you'll still be hitting? You had eight home runs last year, including the big one against ODU. And you've shown you're a very capable hitter, as well.

Yeah, so I've just been, since I took the fall off from throwing, once I was able to start throwing again in late November-- well, mid-November till today-- it's just all been really focused on getting my arm back up in strength and working on getting back on the mound. Obviously, now, I'm back on the mound and throwing a couple innings each week.

But yeah, I'm excited for that. I came here. I was recruited as a two-way player. There's been some glimpses of me on the mound early on in my career here but really more just at the plate and on the field.

So just knowing now that I can actually have some time before the season actually starts to focus on pitching, develop my mechanics better, focus on sequencing and just everything that a pitcher works on, it's something that I've never really done. And now that I'm doing it, I'm really excited to see how it plays out in the fall for me.

So are you working at first base, as well, or just mainly DH at the plate?

So I work at first base, as well. I'm out there for all the drills at first. But mainly, the throwing has been limited, just because we want to keep it, from a pitching standpoint, of just being smart with what I do. At the end of the day, that's what it is. It's just being smart with my arm. If I'm going to pitch this year, I don't know what the role is going to be, but whenever my name is called, as long as I'm ready and my arm is healthy.

You mentioned that you didn't really have a clearly defined role as a player your first couple years here. Coach O'Connor has pointed to you as an example of someone who stayed true to the process, stayed patient, kept working, and then ultimately saw that perseverance rewarded. Did you consider transferring at some point?

I mean, obviously, in college athletics now, players are coming and going more than ever. And probably a fair number of people in your situation, after their second year, might have said, hey, I'm going to start fresh someplace else.

Yeah, no, absolutely not. My mentality was always just waiting for my opportunity. I loved where I was at. I chose Virginia for a reason. I knew what I signed up for. So even though things weren't going the way that I wanted them to go-- and that happens to a lot of players. And like you said, after their second year, they want to start somewhere fresh.

But most of the time, the grass isn't really greener on the other side, in my opinion. And I just knew that what I've built here, the time that I've put in to UVA, I wasn't going to waste. And I knew that eventually, if I just trusted myself, trusted the coaching staff, that we'll bring back the UVA baseball from, obviously, how it was my first and second year.

I was motivated. That motivated me, and I'm sure a lot of guys my age, that for UVA baseball that we wanted to come back and win and prove that we came here for a reason, and we're here to win.

There are a lot of familiar faces and names back on this team from last season. But the program also lost a number of really high-profile players, particularly pitchers. What has been your impression early of this group?

I know five transfers joined the program last year. All of them are pitchers. So there are a lot of new faces in that group. What are your thoughts on the team so far? And obviously, until the games start, you're not going to know for sure.

Right. Yeah, so obviously, like you said, we're not going to know for sure until once we start. But-- excuse me-- as of right now, looking back at our team's development and where we're at right now, we certainly are a young team. But we also have a lot of talent and a lot of guys who are motivated to get better, a lot of guys who are doing what they're asked. And that's all we can ask for.

So we have three guys competing at shortstop that are freshmen. We have second-year Jake Gelof at third with another freshman working over there with him, Max Cotier at second with one or two freshmen working over there with him, and then a handful of guys at first base working that are young, and then a couple outfielders and, like you said, pitchers.

So I just think the only thing that I would say is that the only thing that we don't have is just experience. And that comes along with the season as it goes around. A lot of these guys haven't played a college baseball season. And they're really excited for that.

These guys, a lot of these freshmen, are grinders. They are not afraid to handle the pressure. And I'm really excited to see a lot of these guys compete for us in the spring.

You mentioned how close the team came last year not to be able to realize any of those postseason dreams. You dug a really big hole early. You guys were able to climb out of it. But is there any extra emphasis on starting the season well?

I mean, it's not like you ever go into a season or a game not planning to win, not wanting to win. But I guess last season kind of drove home the point that it helps a lot if you're not in that hole.

Right, of course. Every season, you want to get off to a strong start. You want to win your early weekends. You obviously want to win your midweeks. You want to pile up the wins because as the regular season comes to an end, you start to realize every win and every loss matters.

So even if it means that you're losing a Friday, you're losing Saturday, that doesn't mean you put your head down and give up on the weekend and lose Sunday. That means you fight to win that last game. Because at the end of the season, that's going to play a big role.

So I'm thankful that we went through that, as an older guy who's back. Because it shows not only how to handle that type of adversity but where we don't want to start off is most important. And you know, it happens. It's baseball. You don't know what's going to happen. But it's important that we scrap together wins. If that does happen again, which I hope doesn't--

[LAUGHS] Exactly.

But it just shows that everyone matters. And no matter how deep in the hole you are, you can get out of it. And the goal right now is to win one game at a time and just keep fighting.

Good. Well, the season starts February the 18th against Bellarmine in Boiling Springs, North Carolina, where you guys will also play Gardner-Webb and in NJIT from back near your home. The home opener Tuesday, February the 22nd against VMI.

Knock on wood, it will be a more normal atmosphere at Disharoon Park this year, which I think everyone will enjoy. Good luck this season. Thanks again for stopping by. And it's always great to catch up with you.

Thank you. Thank you for having me. It was a pleasure.

All right. Take care, Devin.

Awesome. Have a good one.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

And that is a wrap for this episode. Thanks again to Sara O'Leary and Devin Ortiz for joining the show. We're closing in on the 300th episode of this podcast, which is a project that we started back in November 2013. Your support matters, and we'd appreciate your taking a minute to rate and subscribe to this podcast.

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[MUSIC PLAYING]