

Welcome to the Wahoo's Central Podcast. I'm Jeff White, from VirginiaSports.com. And we launched this project way back on November 13, 2013. My guest on that first show was Steve Swanson. And 299 episodes later, I'm happy to welcome in to of Steve's counterparts from the athletic department, Tony Elliott and Tony Bennett.

You've heard of the Emmys, the Grammys the Oscars. Today we present the Tonys. Gentlemen. Thanks for making time for this. How are you both doing?

Well, how long did it take you to think of that intro, first? And you weren't kidding, I didn't know this was the 300th podcast. So I'm honored, I know we're both honored to be on with you Jeff. But doing great.

Good.

Yes, it's an honor for me. I'm just I'm just riding along the coattails of the big tee over there. So I'm just happy to be here. And looking forward to having some fun with you guys.

So it's a little awkward to refer to you by your full names in this conversation. So unless you object.

Basketball and football.

I'm going to go with TB for Coach Bennett, and Tony for Coach Elliott. Is that OK? Because TB and TE, that's too close, too. Is that all right?

I got you.

I'll take it. Some of my guys call me that, the players do. So it's all good.

All right. All right, to start with Tony, that would be Tony Elliott. He was hired during basketball.

Tony the Tiger, let's go with that.

Tony, not anymore, Tony the who?

Yeah, no we can't say that. That's right, that sounds bad. He's going to do the four-eye thing.

Yeah, by the time hoops season ended, football was getting ready for spring practice. Then spring ball ended, and both of the coaching staffs had been out on the road recruiting a little bit. Have you two been able to spend any time together?

Not yet. I'm actually looking forward to it. I think we're going to be on the same plane flight going down to the ACC meeting. So I'm looking forward to it. But the day of the press conference, TB was very gracious to let me come over and take a look at his office, and just exchange some pleasantries. And I've been very grateful for that.

But I've heard a lot about him. I know Coach Swinney thinks the world of him. So I'm looking forward to spending some time here next week.

You guys have, as you mentioned, you guys have a well-known mutual friend in Clemson's head, football coach, Dabo Swinney. Coach Swinney has obviously been a huge part of your life, Tony. He was your position coach when you played receiver at Clemson, then he was your boss for 11 years. TB, what about you? How did you meet Coach Swinney, and how often do you talk to him?

Yeah, just what Tony just said, it was actually at the head coaches meetings, the ACC head coaches meetings, probably by the poolside. But just met him, and I think I just said, look, I admire who you are, your faith. Obviously the program you've built.

And we just talked a little bit. And then that was the extent of it. And just when sometimes we've played Clemson basketball, he would sometimes say hello, maybe two or three times. And then every year I'd see him at the Spring meetings.

And an occasional, he would call. You know a funny story, he called me, and I think it's maybe been documented. When I think we won, we got to the maybe-- we went to the Final Four, and he called me. And said I'm just calling to tell you, you're going to win the National Championship, it's done, it's spoken. I was kind of like, OK, you know.

And he told me after, he's like, those games are so close. I was thinking to myself a few times, why did I say that to him? And then I actually saw him when my father and I got to play Augusta, after the National Championship, he was there.

So just a few times. Obviously I don't know him well, but great respect. And actually the cool thing is, when Tony got the job here, he was like, you have no idea. And coach Purnell, the Clemson basketball coach, I was just with him a couple of weekends ago. And he's like, you got the real deal, and they were so excited for your opportunity. And so just that's kind of the exchanges I've had with that one.

Now one of my colleagues here, Eric Botner, told me a story the other day. Said you were playing at Littlejohn, and I think it coincided with one of their National Championship celebrations for football.

And you're trying to get back on the court after halftime to coach the team. And coach Swinney stops you and wants to chat. Is that true or did Bot get that wrong?

No, no, he did, it was great. And I don't know if he was running a little interference, so I couldn't get back on the court. But no, it was awesome to see him. And he's always been so gracious. And I've told you, Jeff, and Tony, you were part of it.

One of the greatest memories I have, and inspirations, is we were rolling up on the bus. And I think it was after either your first or second National Championship, probably your first. And we played that day, and they were going to honor the football team in the stadium. And then they probably brought you guys out at halftime.

But riding up to the bus, on the bus and seeing all the people filling in to honor and celebrate your National Championship. I can literally remember thinking, maybe one day this would be incredible.

I remember that feeling, like how amazing that would feel one day. And then when we won it, and the football team spoke to the fans, welcomed us back. I recited that story. Because it was, I said one day. And I remember saying that day is now. You know that's just, only a few people get to feel that unique feeling. So that's some cool memories with that.

Tony, I was checking our future schedules for football. And it looks like 2025 would be the earliest UVA could play Clemson, in a regular season game. Is that a match-up that you would rather not be part of, unless it's in the ACC Championship Game.

I'm just trying to get to my first game. I'm trying to figure this thing out. But nah, definitely that would be a cool moment. I'm not even sure where that game would be at. But it'd be a cool moment, if he's still standing on the sideline.

I'm pretty sure there'll be other staff members because of the continuity that always exists at Clemson, to be able to see some of those folks. But man, I'm hopeful that we get to see him at the end of the season in Charlotte. That's what we're looking for as a program.

And talking to the seniors and those guys, sitting down and articulating what their goals are. And they want to have a chance to represent in the ACC Championship. And obviously we've talked about it, that to be a champion, you've got to beat a champion.

And we know that for a while Clemson has been atop of the ACC. And I anticipate that they'll continue to be up there. And what a cool moment it would be to see them before 2025.

You were very patient as you waited to pursue a head coaching job. What, if anything, did coach Swinney tell you about UVA, given what he knew about it?

You know, UVA kind of came into the picture unexpectedly. Because I don't think anybody anticipated that coach Bronco was going to step down. And I know that he always spoke very, very highly of Bronco, and the job that he was doing at UVA.

The biggest advice that he gave me, is he would always tell me, he said look, I want you to be an old head coach. In order to be an old head coach, and you've got to be a successful young head coach. And so for me, it was all about finding the right fit.

And when we started to have the serious conversations as I was narrowing in on a decision. We just felt like it was a good fit, with my academic background, playing in the ACC, the recruiting ties that I have. That it was a really, really good fit.

The education, against his reverence for TB over there, and the relationship. So those were the things that we talked about. But the biggest piece of advice was, that always stuck with me, is I wanted to be an old head coach. And not just take any job, because I was eager to be a young head coach.

So I'm wondering how much background each of you has in the other sport? Tony, I know you're a big time baseball fan. And you played that game as a kid. Did you play hoops, too, growing up?

I did. So growing up a California kid, it was baseball and football, that was it. And then because of family situation, I had to move to South Carolina. And the African-American boys there were like, no, we don't play baseball, we play basketball.

So they said, hey buddy, if you want to fit in, you better learn how to shoot this round ball. And so, funny story, I was just playing pickup basketball at one of the local rec gyms one day. And the varsity basketball coach came in and saw me playing, and he asked me if I played.

And I was like, not organized, I just fiddle around. And he said, hey look, you're going to try out for the team. So I ended up playing basketball starting my 10th grade year, all the way through.

So, on the wall outside the men's basketball office at JPJ, is a quote from a legendary coach. It reads, the measure of who we are, is what we do with what we have. That quote is not from John Wooden or Dr. Naismith or Bobby Knight. It's from Vince Lombardi. Which means I guess you can take the boy out of Green Bay, but you can't take the Green Bay out of the boy, right?

You're right. I got my Brett Bard signed ball up there, too. So it's good.

What about you as a kid, did you play any football?

I did, yeah. Were you, by the way were you a Lakers fan, Tony? Or are you an NBA fan, at all? Lakers--

Yeah, I'm Jordan. I'm Chicago Bulls, Michael Jordan all the way through. Still obsessed with Jordan.

You see that poster right there?

I love it.

There it is.

I shouldn't--

Put that on it.

You know him being a Carolina guy, I probably shouldn't have. But I'll tell you a funny story. Michael Jordan's brother was here, his son was a potential recruit. And Michael Jordan's brother sat on that couch. And I had that poster, and he just sat down, and I'm sitting there talking to him and his son.

And it was eerie because he looks like Michael. And so there he is, and Michael's right above him. And I'm just like, I couldn't believe the moment. It was surreal. Like here I am with his brother.

But no, my deal with football. Of course growing up in Green Bay, Wisconsin, you don't have a choice. Actually got to know Coach Holmgren a little bit, and Reggie White. Like it was unbelievable getting to know him. And I used to work out in the Packers Lambeau Field, the Packer facility, when I was training for college and the NBA.

But my experience with football, I played flag football, played seventh grade tackle football. As a lefty I was a pretty good quarterback. This is embarrassing to admit. And Tony is going to not respect me for this.

But one of the reasons I stopped playing football is I wanted to focus on basketball. But in seventh grade, the locker room smelled so bad because we left our pads and in our stuff in there. And I told my mom, I'm like, it's awful, like I'm not playing that sport. So then I stopped.

Not a real tough guy right there, to say that. So I'm sorry, Tony, I let you down. But I love the game.

Hey, that's real football. These are--

That's real.

They have no idea. Like all their stuff is air-dried and ventilated, new gloves every week. They have no idea what real football smells like.

Out back then, hockey and football, bad.

TB, you finished high school in Green Bay, then you played for your father at the University there. For those of us who have not been to Green Bay, can you describe like how big the Packers presence is in Wisconsin in general, but Green Bay in particular?

Yeah, shoot, our associate head coach, Coach Wilbur is a huge Pittsburgh Steeler fan. And I think there's just some of those cities, and then Green Bay being a smaller community. And it's unique because it's a community owned team in some ways.

But no, it's for real. Like you know when every Catholic priest is ending the mass early. Because you know you go to 11 o'clock, and 11:45 you're out, so you can get to kickoff. It's a big deal.

But you can tell the mood of the city, the state, by how the Packers do. And you know, obviously starting from Lombardi, Bart Starr and all the way through it. It's very significant, and still is, I think one of the more powerful franchises, in terms of their following and all that.

I don't know if you're aware of it, but there's a Green Bay connection on the football staff, too. Tony's defensive coordinator, John Rochinski, grew up there and attended Notre Dame Academy. You went to Preble high. Was Notre Dame one of your rivals?

Yeah, well actually when I was there, it was Promontory. It was an all boys school. And then I think after, he must be younger. They had the girls and the boys go together. So I think it was Notre Dame. I don't know how old he is.

He's around my age.

You guys are all younger. Like I'm way past it, so I'll be 53 soon, geez. But that's great, I didn't know that. I look forward to meeting him. And his last S-K-I? Is that his last three letters of his name?

Yep.

Yep, good Polish guy, that's the Wisconsin Green Bay guy, so now that's great.

We're going to take a quick break, and then it'll be time for some more TNT.

[LAUGHING]

That one came from-- you--

Are you Ernie? You're Ernie.

I'm Ernie, who's Chuck? Who's?

Yeah, yeah, no, no, I don't, yeah, I don't know, those are--

All right.

We're Kenny and Shaq. I don't want to be Charles Barkley.

All right, I'm back with Tony Elliott and Tony Bennett. How much do you two study coaches from other sports? I mean, can that be a source of fresh ideas for you? Or do you just look at basketball coaches, TB? And football coaches, Tony?

You know, I think you watch anybody who's excellent at what they do, at any different level. Whether it's the WNBA, women's basketball or other sports. Or a great musician, a great actor, and I just think there's someone who loves what they do, and are excellent at it, there's lessons.

It's universal that you take from it. So I certainly, baseball managers, football coaches. You study at different levels. There's always something there to glean. And again, you've got to be true to yourself. But yeah, no I don't know if I study that much. But there's little things I take from all different sports and different walks or different professions.

What about you, Tony?

I plan to. And a lot of the studying was part of the culture at Clemson. Because we would always take a look at anybody else who was successful, to see, could we supplement. But I think every one of us, as a coach, has been influenced by John Wooden.

You talk about the basics. And even myself, that really have no concept of what he was able to do. Understand that he started by teaching everybody how to put their socks and shoes on. So there's always something that you can learn.

And I try to learn from any and everybody. I think every person that comes into your life has an opportunity to impact it, and you can gain something from that relationship. So going forward, I know I will.

Been reading the legacy book about the New Zealand, All Blacks, just trying to pick up whatever tidbits to help me become the best I could be, to help these young student athletes.

I lived in New Zealand for three years.

OK.

And it was fascinating. After I got them playing in the NBA, and just being in that culture, of being around the All Blacks. And then like a couple of-- we had a young man come and help us, we've had some New Zealand players. So it's fascinating.

I haven't read that book. Our strength coach has, but I've heard "Sweep in the Shed." There's some--

"Sweep in the Shed."

--Really, really significant.

I hadn't finished it yet, but it's a pretty good book.

It's good.

For Tony, this will be your first season as a college head coach. TB, you were in this position back in 2006 at Washington State. I'm sure your father and others, prepped you as well as they could for that moment. But are there certain things you have to experience for yourself as a head coach, before you can really understand them?

Sure, I mean, I think you're always well prepared in being in the situations you have. But it's just new. I think one thing that is different, is I was at Washington State where my father was the head coach, for three years before me. And then I took over for him, so the continuity was there.

And I remember coming from Washington State to Virginia. And one of the reasons why you said you were patient, is this was I admired Stanford. So the world of academics and athletics was huge.

But then when I came, and it was kind of starting somewhere brand new, that was different. And you learn through failure, you learn through success. You just trust you're true to yourself, but you just keep growing. I'm still screwing up often and learning from my mistakes.

But it is different. In basketball they always say, just you move 12 inches and it's amazing the difference. Like from the assistant coaches chair to the head coaches, as assistants or associated coaches in basketball. And I think you're more prepared than I ever would be, for a certain reason.

But you know, you make a lot of suggestions as an assistant coach. And you make decisions as a head coach. But because, Tony, you were like the offensive coordinator. And football, I think is more geared for you to step into a head coaching role, more ready than I ever would have been as a basketball coach.

I think that's going to be a tremendous advantage. And there are some things here probably, that you don't have at Clemson, and that are going to be challenges. But there's no one, again, more prepared in certain ways. But I think that's-- I hope that's an advantage for you, and you don't have to screw up as much as I did.

Yeah, Tony, what, I mean, I'm sure coach Swinney has given you a lot of advice over the years. Is there anything in particular, as you step into this next chapter in your career, that he talked to you about or advised you on?

It all starts with the people. Just making sure that you surround yourself with really, really good people, smart people. Not people that are all the same as you, that are going to have a difference of opinion at times. But they're loyal people. So that when a decision is made, everybody's on the same page.

And I agree with you, TB, on the comment. I think transitioning from an assistant to becoming a coordinator, you get indoctrinated with the management of adults. And that's probably one of the hardest parts of our job.

It's not the management of the student athletes, it's the management of the staff, and the adults. And the amount of demands on your time. So you get a little bit of that at the coordinator position, so it's not a complete shock when you transition to the head coaching seat.

But I've said this before, and just like you, Coach Bennett, I'm going to make a lot of mistakes. I own that already. But I'm going to learn from the mistakes and do the best that I can.

And I feel confident in the people that I have around me, to help lift me up when I fall short. And we're going to do this thing as a team. And I'm just excited to see us be able to build something, even though we might not have what we had at Clemson. But we got to we got a blank sheet, and we got the pens and pencils and the erasers to be able to go build something unique.

Ready or not, we are in the age of NIL. And the landscape of college sports seems to be changing every day. Both of you said you want to have developmental programs, where first years come in and they grow and they improve as they get older.

I know you're going to fill holes with transfers as needed, but you don't really want to rely on them. In a time when so many coaches seem content to load up on transfers every year. What are you guys like about the path you're choosing to take? And we'll start with you, Tony.

It's because you're allowed to, or you're making a decision to be relational, not transactional. I think the landscape outside of college football has changed. But at the end of the day, the same things that it took to be successful 15 years ago, is the same thing that's going to take to be successful as a student athlete.

So you add the third component of the NIL. But you haven't taken anything off the plate of the student athlete. They're still a full time student, they're still a full time athlete. And the biggest thing is to figure out how to take an 18-year-old, right? And teach them how to compartmentalize and manage all of that.

And then take time for their personal growth. So that when their three to five years is done, that they're ready for life beyond football. And I think the things that are coming into play right now, give them somewhat of an opportunity to get a head start in the future.

But realistically, it's the lessons that they learn, the education that they receive along the way, that's ultimately going to determine their success 40 years from now.

So for me, I want it to be relational. I don't want it to be transactional. I want to sleep good at night, knowing that I'm helping young people develop holistically, care about as the whole person.

And I'm not just trying to have a good team, that I'm trying to build a good program. Which I believe will manifest good teams over time.

TB, what are your thoughts on that?

Yeah, and I think one other, we talked about NIL and the other caveat, is this the one time transfer exception. You know that provides a unique challenge to keeping continuity, and getting guys older.

And you know, Tony and I face some challenges. You know, building a program here, there are many great things. But there are some things that are harder at the University of Virginia, than most other institutions.

And it's a good thing, because there's such great-- in some ways it's a good thing. There's such a high quality, high standard academics, but we can't get as many transfers in. You can get some first year transfers in, and grad transfers. But when you get into that second and third year, because of the credits that are accepted here, it's a challenge.

And that, in some ways puts us at a disadvantage in a lot of ways, than other schools in our league. And that's hard. So it does put a premium on trying to either build through growing them at young guys, and filling in the pieces. So that's a real challenge.

But it was very well said by Tony, because some things are constants. You know, if it's about the people, and I think you find the right people. You won't get it perfect, some guys will leave. But if the core can stay together, you pour in them and you grow together. And you have guys that you can go through that adversity with, eventually it will bode well. But it does present real challenges.

And in football, the number game, there are certain things that again, you're the right guy for this job, but there are real challenges. And people should be alert to that, and understand that this is different. There's so many good things, but there has to be a realistic expectation with that.

You've both been part of National Championship teams. UVA of course, won the NCAA basketball title 2019. Clemson won National Football titles in 2016 and 2018. Obviously all three of those teams had a number of future pros playing for them. But there are plenty of talented teams that never win championships.

When you look back on those seasons, how important were the intangible elements, like work ethic and selflessness and unity, to the success of those teams? Coach Bennett start.

OK. Yeah, you have to have obviously enough talent, and the players are going to make plays and do special things. But I don't think because of us being the only team in the history up to that point, to drop a 116 game.

If you didn't have those things you just mentioned, Jeff, there's no way you would have been able to come back better, stronger, and use that and still survive that. And then apply it and then go win a championship.

And you know, obviously a lot of it I think, we were blessed in ways beyond, and it was an unbelievable story. But that stuff has to be there. When you're building a program and you're just getting started, to take the first steps.

Or when you're trying to take those last steps to do it all. It's all the same, that stuff has to be in place. So no question, you can't, there's no substitute for that stuff. And all that matters immensely.

Tony, for the two Clemson teams? Did they have a galvanizing loss like that UMBC game, or some kind of other adversity that brought everyone together? Or I mean, were they just really good teams, that bought into what the coaches were teaching them?

I think it's a combination. The first one, I can remember playing Alabama in 15, and we lost in Arizona in the National championship. And I think that part of it was we felt like we belonged. We had hope that we would win.

But after that game and we came up short, we knew that we belonged. And those guys, they took that feeling in the locker room and they galvanized it. And they set their minds on a mission.



And then they believe that there had to be a standard of performance in order to get another opportunity, knowing that it's not guaranteed that we were going to go back to the Championship in 2016.

But in order for us to have a chance, there was a standard of performance. And within that standard of performance or to accomplish that standard of performance, all the things that you talked about, sacrifice, chemistry, continuity, accountability, toughness. Just all those things that it takes to win the game, and win consistently.

And then I think about 2018, we lost pretty bad to Alabama in the 2017 Sugar Bowl. And that kind of sparked a fire in some of our older guys to forgo the NFL, and to come back.

And so that's when for the power rangers came back up front, and so you had that leadership. And so those were four year guys, that had been developed, that they knew and they understood what the standard of performance was. And so every day when they came to practice, they demanded that their teammates perform to the standard, because they did it.

And so those were probably the two losses. But a lot of it was just the caliber and quality and character of the young men. And their unselfishness and their commitment to doing what's necessary, to give themselves a chance to win at the highest level.

You guys have been extremely generous with your time. And I'll let you go on a minute. But before I do though, I want to put in a plug for the master plan. TB, you know firsthand, I think the impact that a facility like JPJ can have with its weight room, and its locker rooms, and the practice gyms.

You're not playing or practicing in a place like U-Haul, and that's a good thing. The reality is, facilities are part of the decision making process for a lot of recruits. How much is having JPJ-- how big an asset has JPJ been, as you have built this program into what it is today?

First we got to start by getting better WiFi where you are, Jeff, because you keep freezing up. So that's the first part of the master plan if you're in there.

But no, you can't. When I remember that's when I was interviewing here and they brought me here, and I saw the arena and the facilities. And I said, phew, this is amazing.

Now that's not the only reason why you're going to be successful, but it really is significant. And the ability to do that and how we've been fortunate enough to have people, the fundraising and getting it, it's huge. It's huge for-- and Tony can speak to this for recruiting and for the experience.

And I think it matters. I think you did that at Clemson, obviously as you guys had success what you did. So that's really important. And I think when you compare probably, where football is in relation to the other teams in the league, it's at a disadvantage.

So you know it doesn't have to be better than every team, or maybe exactly the same. But it's got to move up. And then as success comes, then the more opportunities will happen. So I think that has to happen.

And I believe people are-- I hope people are on board, because it's provided us some really great opportunities. And again, advantages to draw the right kind of people, as Tony said, into our program.

Tony, the new Football Operations Center is scheduled to be ready for the 2024 season. That will be a banner day for the program. What will just having ground broken, so that when you bring people by, they can actually see the building start to rise from the ground. What will that mean in the next two years, do you think?

I think it'll be big. I think when you look at, just take business models, for example. You look at the life cycle of a business. You know there's the growth, then there's the plateau, and then the decline. I think you always want to stay on the growth phase.

And as Coach Bennett said, there's a certain level of growth that needs to take place, to just get us to a point to where we're competitive.

And then I think all the things that are special about the University of Virginia will take you over the top to a certain extent. Because you have that competitive advantage. But in this day and age, kids just want to see construction. They want to see things going on, because they want to know what the investment is. They want to know that football is important. They want to know that their future is important, that you're going to provide them all their resources.

And also from a mindset standpoint, of if I'm going to demand your best, and I feel like I have a responsibility as a coach to go out and provide you with the best that I possibly can, within reason.

I think it's unrealistic to ask a young man to come and give him the program everything that he has. And then you're not trying to show that growth to provide them the best, within the confines of what you're restricted by. So it's going to be huge.

But the thing that I'm most excited about, is that we have a year and a half or so, to really, really lay the foundation, so the culture will be taking into the building. Because what I want, is I don't want it to be a situation that the only reason young men want to come to the University of Virginia is because we've got a nice new shiny building.

I want them to appreciate that we have that. And that we have a commitment to their success in the future, and provide them everything that they need. But I want to have the culture established as we walk in.

So that at the end of the day, it's what's inside the house that really makes the house. But at least we can attract the guys to come take a look at what we got. So that we can share with them what we're really all about, once you actually make this your permanent residence.

Well, good. Well that is a perfect note to end on, I think. Thank you both for your time. Maybe we can do it again for episode number 400, few years down the road.

I like how that sounds, because hey, wishful thinking, I like it. We'll be here for a while.

You want it to be-- but Ernie Johnson, you know the TNT, or Roy Firestone, you didn't make any of us cry in your interview. But who do you want us to refer to you as?

Whichever you prefer, Tony or TB, whatever. But anyway, thanks guys, I appreciate it, and we'll see you around.

Thanks, man.

All right, take care.

I appreciate it.

Yeah.

See you, Tony.