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Welcome to episode number 296 of the Wahoo Central podcast. I'm your host, Jeff White, from VirginiaSports.com And as March approaches, the season is winding down for UVA's winter sports. In the second half of the show, we'll talk swimming with ACC champion Ella Nelson. First, we're going to focus on hoops with a special guest, Jayden Nixon, from the men's basketball team. Jayden, thanks for making time for this. I know it was a late night last night. How's everything going?

It's going pretty well right now. I mean, it was pretty tough loss last night, but I think the guys are just ready to play in the next few games to kind of finish out the season strong.

Yeah. So we're recording this on a Thursday afternoon. Last night, Virginia battled Duke at JPJ-- great atmosphere there. Tony Bennett called it electric. And I think that's an apt description. The game came down to the wire. You saw it up close and personal. What were your main takeaways from the game?

I think my main takeaway is just how much better we've gotten over the past few months. I mean, seeing all these guys step up and lock down on defense and then really bring it over to the offensive end too and really make the right decisions just kept us in the game, even brought us to lead a lot of times. And a lot of the stuff we weren't seeing at the beginning of the year, so it's been really great to kind of see the development of each of the players individually and as a whole throughout the season.

I mean, you and the program have had so much success throughout your career. Was it jarring at all at the start of the year to kind of be out of sync a little bit and have so much work to do and have so much progress to make?

A little bit. This year kind of reminds me of my second year where we didn't have an extreme amount of success, like, we may have not met the expectations of a lot of the fans and of the media and stuff like that. But, just like how we always do, we always stay really consistent and keep working hard. So as other teams kind of teeter off a little bit, we always keep moving forward. So at the end of our second year, we ended up on a really big winning streak. And going into the tournament, we felt really good. And it kind of feels like that now. We may have not had as many of those like big time wins as we did the second year, but I think the overall environment and the vibe feels the same.

Final home game of the season is Saturday at JPJ against Florida State. You have been a spectator for three of these senior days. You'll be a participant this time, along with Kihei Clark, Kody Stattmann, Chris McGarhen, and Shane Nelson. What are your emotions going into this game? You've watched these. You know what senior day can be like.

Yeah. I mean, it's definitely kind of surreal. Like you said before, I've watched them for three other times now. I just think it's really fulfilling to see my process throughout these four years and it's kind of coming full circle now. And to be with all the people that I came in with and then leave with them at the same time and kind of a celebration is something I've been looking forward to for the past few weeks and I'm really excited about.

Your first year you were part of a team that won the NCAA championship. You saw some action in the first round win over Gardner-Webb. I mean that's one of those experiences I'm guessing that you'll tell your grandchildren about one day, looking back that year.

Yeah, definitely. I think the team we had was very special. And I wasn't there for the first round loss against the UMBC the year before, but I could just see and feel how hungry the team was coming in after that loss. So it was it's kind of weird because I wasn't part of the loss that made everybody so keyed in and that tournament, but it felt good seeing, from almost an outsider's perspective because I wasn't there that first year, seeing how determined everybody was and how that carried forward through the rest of the year into the tournament. So that's something I think really inspired me and something I'll definitely tell my family when I--

So you're nearing the end of your fourth year in Coach Bennett's program. Are there lessons you've learned, away from the X's and O's and the actual basketball technique, that you'll carry with you into your life beyond college?

Yeah. I think the biggest thing for me has been just to stay hungry and just keep working. I think the biggest mistake-- I'm sorry.

[ALARM RINGING]

That's all right.

I think my alarm came off-- one second. Sorry about that. I'm all good now. But I was going to say is, yeah, just seeing Ty and Dre work so hard. My first year after their loss, they were coming in the summer working out every day. And then seeing how hard Kihei has been working his game these past few years and seeing just how work ethic can take you so far is something that I really try to embody myself. And I think that's the biggest thing for me. Because when I was going in through high school, I was always big, always talented. I didn't feel like I had to put in all that effort. But when you get to this level, everybody is just as talented as you. So how can you show what you can do? And that's through the hard work. So I think that's the biggest takeaway I've learned from.

Do you gain an appreciation for the pillars of coach Bennett's program, what they stand for? I know you come into the program and you see those words. And I'm not sure everyone fully appreciates, at that point, what they mean and how important they are to Coach Bennett. Does that change the more time you spend in the program?

Yeah, it definitely has. I remember my first year, I kind of always heard about it because I'm not from here. And then my first year here, he would always talk about the pillars and how he would like to embody those through his teams. And I definitely wasn't skeptical. I fully embodied it. But I was kind of curious as to what it fully meant. But over these past four years, you can kind of see how he embodies that and how each individual on the team embodies a different pillar. Obviously, they always use all of them. Each of the players has something specific in those five pillars that they bring to the team. And then with that, everybody kind of joins together to create a special program and a special environment that embodies all those five.

So as you mentioned, you grew up in this community. Were you born in Charlottesville?

Yeah. I was born in Martha Jefferson Hospital. Both my parents graduated from here in '96. So yeah. And then they had me in '99 at Martha Jefferson. So I've been here my whole life. So did you attend games at U Hall when you were little?

I don't-- I think might have.

[INTERPOSING VOICES].

Yeah. I don't remember attending a game in U Hall. The first games I really remember was were the first JPJ games. Yeah.

Who was your favorite player or your favorite players growing up?

I watched a lot of Mike Scott growing up. I watched a lot of Mustapha Farrakhan. I always thought he was really, really good. Sean Singletary and then Sylvan Landsverk, a lot of the older guys I really looked up to and tried to watch. But even towards the end of my high school career, I really liked-- Isaiah Wilkins was there before I was there. I really liked how charismatic and how he was on defense, how he really led the team. And then even just looking at my senior year, just looking at Ty and Kyle and seeing how hard work can really put you into one of the biggest stages. It's something that's been really inspiring to me.

What's it been like having Isaiah back with the program this year? And you probably make him feel old if you tell him you grew up watching him and you were a big fan of his. Yeah. I mean, it's been great. I feel like me and him have gotten really close this year because he's been working with the green machine a lot this year as pretty much our starting five. But he's been a really great piece of this team. And me and him, I think, share a lot of interests. Me and him are really big music guys, so we talk a lot about music and different things and different struggles going on in our world and stuff. And he's somebody I really look up to in a way that somebody that's like me both on and off the court. So I don't feel like I get that often, so it's been really nice to have somebody like that here that can coach me, but also I can play with every day. So it's been great.

The green machine is a revered part of the program-- has become, over the years. How much satisfaction do you take, you and the fellow green teamers, when the starters play well and the regulars play well even if you may not get in the game yourself? Does that help you feel like you had a real role in the team's success?

Yeah, it definitely does. I mean, I can probably speak for all of us and say that sometimes it is tough not getting those minutes and not kind of getting that spotlight a little bit. But in practice it's been great because the coaches treat every practice like a game, pretty much. They have the same energy they would when we play Duke. So when you play well in practice and you do those good things in practice, it's almost like doing those good things in the game.

And then when you see you make a good move in practice that beats someone else and then they defend that move in a game, you're just like, I helped them do that. Or we end up defending really well in practice and then you see Kihai torch that defender in the game. It's a really great feeling. But one of the best feelings is when KG will tell us the offenses to run and we do the offenses better than what the other team does. And so we end up shutting the team down. That's probably one of the best feelings, too, because it shows how good we are as a team, as a Green Team. And some of us could play other places, but we chose to stay here and help achieve something bigger than us. So it just shows how committed we are to the team and also how good we are as individual players, too. So it's really great.

So you graduated from St Anne's Belfield School. What were those years like? You it on some good teams. There were some other good athletes in the school who-- I guess you overlapped with Nick Kent, who played baseball here and Connor Schnellenberger who is playing lacrosse here now.

Yeah.

What was your STAB experience like?

Yeah. It was a great experience. I really enjoyed, not just the athletic part, but the academic part as well. I still talk with a lot of my teachers like Miss Robertson, who is an English teacher. So I talk with her and meet with her about once every month, once every two months, just to catch up. But in terms of the basketball experience, we had a really great family on the STAB team. I played with Javin Delaurier, who was a Duke alum. And then Matt Palumbo was my best friend. He was part of the UVA program for pretty much as long as I was here. So it was great kind of seeing everybody do the great things in college after we left St Anne's. I know Jalen Harrison played baseball and football here. So I still talk to him a lot, too. So it was a great experience. I wouldn't change it for anything.

So Matt Palumbo is up at George Mason now, right-- with TJ Grams, who was your former academic advisor. Do you follow the Mason games from afar now and check those scores all the time?

Yeah. Me and Matt talked maybe two or three times a week. And I'm always asking how they're doing. So I'm rooting for them a lot. And their new coach, Kim English-- Matt always speaks very highly about him. And he's someone that, over this past few months, just watching how he coaches and how he leads his team, that's somebody that I've been looking up to, too, from far away just because of how close he is with this team and how he leads from a really direct perspective, too, like Coach Bennett-- just a younger guy-- younger African-American coach just really leading his team in the right direction. So that's something that I really admire about him and want to look to do for myself in the future.

After you graduated from St Anne's, you spent a post-graduate year at Choate Rosemary Hall, which is a prestigious boarding school in Connecticut. Was your decision to spend a year there driven by academics or basketball or a combination of the two?

Yeah, it was both. So I was getting looked at by a lot of high academic schools for Division 1 and didn't really get the offers that I wanted coming out of St Anne's Belfield. So the head coach at Choate, Andrew Dawson, reached out and said that a few schools reached out to him for me to maybe do a post-grad year. I think you mentioned Brown, Cornell, and a few others that reached out to him first and said that, hey, you guys should take him so we can recruit him a little longer.

And at that time, I had no idea what Choate Rosemary Hall was. And then after he reached out, I looked into it and saw that they were a top three high school in the country. So I was like, maybe I should look into this because, although basketball was a key part in me taking that post-grad option, I think that academics is what really made me grow a lot as an individual and learn more about myself. Because it was a pretty rigorous course load and being far away from home at such a young age and not really in that college setting proposed some challenges, too. Yeah. I really loved it there. I still have all my Choate apparel and still talk to my teammates from Choate to this day. So it was a really great experience for me. I wouldn't change that either.

You had a lot of good options as far as college academically and with basketball. You chose to come to UVA and walk onto the team. What went into that decision? And was UVA always your dream school? Or did you seriously consider other schools?

Yeah. Yeah, I really considered other schools. And I was looking at a lot of high academic D3s like Williams and Amherst, Randolph-Macon here in Virginia, and then a few other lower Division I schools that were giving me the opportunity, but I didn't really feel like fit the academic need for me. And so I had an opportunity to walk on after I left St Anne's Belfield. And then I wanted to kind of pursue my options a little bit more at Choate. And then when I still didn't really feel like I got the opportunity that I really wanted, I decided to come here and walk on at UVA.

So Coach Bennett put you on scholarship your second year. What was that moment like? And I can't remember the details, but I think he kind of sprung it on you, didn't he?

Yeah, he did.

-- at a team meeting.

Yeah. So they did this thing called a chair exercise, where you kind of talk about your highs and lows of your life and maybe the people you look up to. And Coach Bennett went on the chair at that time. And he said that one of his highlights was giving me a scholarship. Everybody jumped on me and stuff like that. And it was a really great experience.

And I think the biggest thing for me was just Coach Bennett and the coaching staff just showing how much they believed in me and how much I mattered to the program despite not necessarily contributing on the court in games. They kind of recognized that I brought so much value in practice and in the classroom and even as a leader to some of the other kids on the court. So it was really great. I was really grateful for that.

All right. Let's talk academics, last but certainly not least, with you. You are a fixture on the ACC honor roll. You're a biology major, right?

Yeah, that's correct. Yeah.

Only bio major on the team, I'm guessing.

Yeah, I think so. Yeah.

So you mentioned both your parents attended UVA and graduated here. I'm guessing you grew up in a household where the importance of education was emphasized?

Yeah. Both my parents were really, really encouraging me to do as well as I could. I don't think they really were drilling into me like, Oh, you have to be a good student or you have to do this. But I think they knew from a young age that I was really interested in school and trying to better myself academically. So once they saw that, they really tried to nourish that in me as well. So I'm really thankful for them not necessarily driving me into a wall or trying to say, do good in school, but just encouraging me to be as best as I can in whatever I was passionate about.

Have you been interested in science from an early age? What drew you to biology?

Yeah. It's actually funny. So I was at public school my freshman year of high school, when I went to high school. And they have this program called the Health and Medical Sciences Academy. And my ninth grade teacher, Mr Dove, really nudged me into the science direction just because of how curious he was as a teacher. And not necessarily knowing everything about science, but if I ask him a question, he'd be like, let me get back to you. I'll get back to you in 30 minutes or I'll get back to you tomorrow, and kind of figuring that out on his own. And that really drove me to want to pursue that, too, because I'm a very curious person also. And I obviously don't know everything there is to know about science just like he didn't know everything to know, but you can always learn. There's always something out there. So that kind of drove me to pursue that.

So are you in a pre-med program?

Yeah, right now I am pre-med.

All right. So because of the COVID year, you have another year of eligibility, or athletic eligibility. What are your plans? You graduate in May from UVA. What are your plans for next year?

Yeah, I'm not really sure yet. It's something I really have to talk to my family about. The great thing about going through the Med school process now is that you don't have to go jump straight into Med school out of high school, I mean out of college. And so there's definitely different opportunities for me to get a master's in something that I'm really interested in. I want to go into hospital administration, you know, like running a hospital or even owning one myself. So opportunities to get an MBA or MHA, a master's in Health Administration, or even a master's in public health. Things like that I can still pursue and get maybe use my fifth year of eligibility-- get my master's in something I'm really interested in. And then, hopefully, that will help with my Med school admissions process as well.

I mean, would you ultimately like to be a doctor, though, or a physician?

Yeah, I think being a doctor is the thing I've always wanted to do just because there are so many people in the world that need that help and that need that extra care that they might not get otherwise. And I want to be a cornerstone of helping people's lives change for the better. But in terms of administration, I think it's good to always have leaders that are in that field and can kind of get in the trenches and then help after that. So that's kind of the reason why I wanted to go into administration because I would have the best of both worlds in that.

Has it been challenging to balance your academic obligations with your basketball commitment? I mean, basketball takes a lot of time. Academics takes a lot of time. I'm guessing you have labs with bio or you have had them. But you've also been, I think, at every practice I've seen. So I don't think you've missed a ton of time.

Yeah. I think I've only missed one or two practices in my four years here. And, I'm not going to lie, it is extremely challenging to balance both the academics and athletics because a lot of the people that are in the Med school, like in the science field, here teaching at UVA don't really know what it's like to be a full-time division one athlete. And even fewer know what the rigorous travel schedule is with basketball. We have so many games.

So it's been kind of tough trying to convince people that I do have a really busy schedule. And sometimes I might not get the help that I need in terms of figuring out my classes and as well as I can do in those classes. But overall, the school's been really good to me. And TJ was such a big help to me. And now, Jazlyn has been a tremendous help to me this year as my academic coordinator. And so it's been tough, but it's been really fulfilling. And I've learned so much about myself. And I can't wait to do more.

So you would not be the first doctor to come through the basketball program. Have you ever met Bobby Stokes who played for Coach Holland here? He's a doctor. [INTERPOSING VOICES]. Yeah. I haven't met Bobby Stokes and Mike Owens, but I've heard great things about them. And I've talked with a few athletes and a few basketball players that have gone through UVA that have gone through the Med school process, too. So everybody's been such a great help. And with this medical process, getting advice from people that have been there is, I think, one of the best tools you can have. So it's been great. Everybody's been extremely helpful.

Any thought to playing college basketball as a grad transfer at another school next year?

I mean, yeah, it's definitely crossed my mind. I've loved my time here for four years. And they've been really great to me. But it would be interesting to see, if I were to get another opportunity, what that would look like at a different school. So I haven't really decided that yet, but it's obviously something that I've thought about. It'd be interesting to see. Because right now, we're trying to focus on getting this tournament birthed and going as far as we can. But after that, after we do we got to do, it'd be interesting to see what my options would be for next year.

Yeah. Well, it sounds like you've got a lot of good options. So before I let you go, how big will your senior day cheering section be on Saturday? Hopefully pretty big. I know a lot of my family wants to come down. It's just a matter of my sister who is playing at Eastern Mennonite right now, has a game on Saturday. So she might not be able to come, but I'm hoping she can. But I know my grandparents and then my great aunts are coming. And then my other aunts on my mom's side are coming, too. And so is my dad - coming up from Atlanta. So I'll have a big crowd. So, hopefully, they'll be cheering as loud as they can.

Well, you'll be hard pressed to have more fans there than Kihei had last night. I don't know if you saw his crew, but they turned out and they turned out in force last night.

Yeah. That's the great thing about Kihei's family. And just even them with me over the past four years, I've felt like they've taken me in as one of their own. You can see how tight-knit they are by how many people they're bringing to this game. But they're really supportive of Kihei. You can tell because of how much of a caring and confident person he is, too. So it's been great seeing them and saying hi to them and even hanging out with them over the four years.

Yeah. Well, listen. Thanks again for your time. Enjoy the day. Enjoy the moment on Saturday. We'll see you out at JPJ.

Of course. Thank you very much.

All right. We're going to take a short break, and then we'll be back to talk to one of the many stars of the reigning NCAA champion women's swimming and diving team.

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.

The UVA women's swimming and diving team won its third straight ACC title last week and will try to win a second straight NCAA championship next month. This is a great time, then, to talk UVA swimming. And I want to welcome in one of the shining lights of Todd DeSorbo's program. And that is third year, Ella Nelson. Ella, thanks for joining the show. How's everything going? And congrats on the win.

Yeah, I'm excited to be here. Thanks for having me. So the Hoos went in as the favorite at ACCs, ended up beating NC State by about 75 points to capture the championship. Was the meet any closer than you thought it would be? Were there any anxious moments for the team along the way?

I think it definitely was a little bit closer than we had expected. Although, I will say, going into it, we knew that ACCs might be a little closer than NAAs would end up. Well, knock on wood. We haven't quite gotten to that point yet. But we obviously had a close to perfect meet on the women's side, at least, I'll say. And I think after the first night when we had back to back American records, the points were not anywhere in our heads. We were just swimming so fast out of our minds that we were like, yeah, no way this could come to a close team race.

And, although we might have gotten a little stressed on the last night, I think we knew we had what it took to pull out the win. And, if anything, I think that it made it so much more fun that it was a close team race. I think I talked to Todd about that on the last night. I was like, it's so much fun when there's another team pushing you to swim faster and faster and faster. It just makes it so much more fun and exciting. And the fans get to root for their home team and have fun with that. Yeah. I'm very glad that we did come out with the win, but I think we knew we had what it took all along.

You personally had an outstanding meet. You won the 400 yard individual medley for the second straight year. You swam a leg on the relay team that won the 800 freestyle relay. You finished third in the 200 breaststroke and fifth in the 200 IM. The 800 free relay team set a meet record and had the second fastest time in UVA history. And that was true, also, for your 400 IM. Were you happy with your performance? There's a lot to be happy about. Was there any disappointment or did you surpass what you thought you would do?

Oh yeah. No, I was so happy with my performances. I always love being on that relay on the first night. Unlike past years, it was the only relay on that first night. Sometimes there's also the 200 medley relay. And it's just such a fun way to get the meet started out. It's kind of a special relay at UVA because this was our 15th year winning that relay, consecutively. So I'd say it just adds more excitement rather than pressure to that, that it has been such a rich part of UVA's history.

Alex and I were both on it last year, but they were two first years on it this year as well that took Paige Madden and Kyla Valls' spot. So I think that was kind of special for Alex and I to feel like a bit of the veterans on that relay and get to bring Ella and Reilly on that with us. And I think we all couldn't have been happier with how it started off. And it's a good way to get the momentum going for the rest of the meet. And you can never be more excited for a win on the first event.

And then I think you also mentioned the four hundred IM. That's kind of starting to be my baby in the pool. I used to be really, really nervous for that event. It just scared me. It's a really hard event, I won't lie. And in high school it would just always scare me, to the point where I would like try to tell my coaches that I had a stomach ache before the event or something like that. But I really felt like I've gotten more comfortable with that event. And after winning it last year, I think my confidence has just kind of gone up a lot.

And I think I'm really, really lucky that the ACC always brings a lot of competition at the conference level, which prepares me really, really well for even more conference competition at the NCAA level. So I was really, really happy to get that win for the team at ACCs and having Mo Weyant there also swimming with me. Yeah, we were right next to each other in the final of that event. And she finished second. So we're always training together in practice, so it just made it really fun to be in the pool together at the meet.

So to be successful in the IM, obviously, you have to be proficient at every stroke. What is your best stroke? How would you rank your strokes in order from strongest to weakest, relatively speaking?

Yeah. So I'd say breaststroke is definitely my best, and then freestyle is probably second. Butterfly and backstroke, I don't know which one is better. They're both not great. So I'm really, really glad once I get through the first half of that event. It's really nice to get the fly out of the way because I think even the best butterflyers would say that that's the hardest leg of the IM. Butterfly is just really hard.

And then backstroke. I used to be really, really bad at it. And then in college, I've gotten a lot better at it. So I've gotten to the point where I'm not drastically behind after the first half of the race. And I can keep up with the crowd for the first half. And then when I get to the breaststroke, it's kind of where I can really get a lead on the rest of the competition. And then the freestyle, it's kind of just give it all you got. It's a hard four laps. I will say that. But it's just always good to bring it home as fast as you can, I guess.

Which of the coaches do you work most closely with or do you work with all of them at different times?

Yeah, I definitely do work with all of them a little bit at different times. Blair is my primary coach. So I would say that the large majority of my practices are with Blair. And she does kind of upper mid-distance work. We have a great group. White group is the name of our group. And we have just a great group of girls in that group. So I get to train every day with Emma and Alex and Abby Harter. We're the main IM group.

But we do a lot of women's team practices all together. And I guess Todd is usually leading those. I'll do some practices with Tyler to get in kind of the upper end work. And then with Wes, I'll do some 200 pace practices with him. So definitely most of my practices are with Blair. And she's kind of the one who coordinates all of my practice schedules. But I definitely do get in work with all the rest of the coaches as well.



In years past, the ACC women's and men's meets were held a week apart. It was a combined event this year. Did that dynamic feel a lot different? Did you like that format or do you prefer the other one?

The dynamic was definitely a lot different, but I think only in a positive way. The women's team and the men's team both do a great job of bringing their own energy when the meets are separated. But I think this year it was just a combination of both of those energies and it was complete chaos the whole time.

I really enjoyed it just because I feel like I haven't really gotten the chance to watch our men's team in person at a high level meet. So I really enjoyed getting to watch them come together as a team. And they broke an American record themselves. So that was really, really fun to be a part of it. And we're just so close as a combined team that it just felt like we were all there together like we would be at practice or at dual meets or anything like that. So the dynamic between the men's and women's team was just as great and the same as it's always been. But I would say that just having so many more people at the meet just added so much chaos to it and noise and excitement and all those good things.

The NCAA championships start on March the 16th, which is about three weeks from now. What is your training schedule for you and your teammates who will be competing at NCAA? What's your training schedule between now and then? And have you tapered at all this season?

So the next three weeks will be-- well, I guess the next 2 and 1/2 weeks before we do taper, will be really, really intense training. And as much as it hurts me to say that, it's kind of the thing that lets us go even faster than we have at NAAs. So those of us that had already qualified for NAAs prior to ACCs didn't taper at all for ACCs, which just gives us a leg up for NAAs. So we were able to get back yesterday, or Sunday, I guess, get back in the pool yesterday and then kind of get ourselves back together.

And then come tomorrow, we'll really get back to training. And it just allowed us to really not even skip a beat going to ACCs. We got to get some practice and racing. And, obviously, we had no lack of really fast swimming there. So we'll be in a really good position after these next 2 and 1/2 weeks to go even faster at NAAs, which is really exciting thing to be thinking about now. And I think the potential of us going a lot faster is kind of what keeps us excited during these next 2 and 1/2 weeks of really, really intense training.

I mean if you look across the country at other elite swimmers, is it uncommon for swimmers to have not tapered at this point? That give you an advantage or do most of your peers-- are they going to be in a similar situation-- real championship contenders?

Yeah. I think that probably most of the real championship contenders are probably in a similar situation to us. But I think we're in a really unique position where our conference has gotten so fast that we get kind of the best of the best racing experience just at our conference meet. Which just gives us the experience of being at such a high level meet and having to perform and having to race really hard for that many days in a row. So I really think it just depends, though. Some people, some teams do like to come down and taper a lot for their conference meets so that they can win a team title. We're lucky that we just have so many girls at the top that we don't have to taper a ton and we can still be vying for that team title. So I'd like to think we have a leg up. But it's really hard to tell what people are doing, what people aren't doing.

Last year, I think the UVA women were seeded to win the NCAA team title. You ended up doing so. There will be similar expectations this time around. Does it feel any different having won it? Coming in as defending champions, is there more pressure this time, do you think? Or will there be less because you know you can do it, having done it?

Yeah. I think right now there's kind of two overwhelming feelings amongst our team. One is that we definitely have the target on our back and everyone is trying to beat us. So I think we all know that. But if anything, that only makes us more excited and more motivated and have just more motivation to win.

I think we all go back to that COVID year when NCAA got canceled because we were so, so geared up to win. We just wanted it so badly. And then it got canceled. So I think last year that was in the back of our minds. And this year it'll be in the back of our minds, just having that taken away from us. So I, personally, don't feel much more pressure. I just don't really function like that. But I think we're just all really, really excited for it. And we know that other teams want it, probably just as much as we do. So we just have to find an edge anywhere we can and use it to our advantage.

After you won the team title last year, back at the AFC, Carla Williams and Jim Ryan came out, jumped in the pool in their working clothes. That was a great video. That's got to be a little bit in the back of your mind that you want to replay that scene, isn't it?

Because I think now that President Ryan has kind of set the bar there, he'd have to do it again, I would think.

Do it again, I know. The thing that comes to my mind first, when I think of that, is how they all went in their shoes. And I think President Ryan was wearing the nice shoes. But, yeah. That was a really special moment. None of us expected that we'd be going in the pool again with President Ryan. But it was a fun moment. Yeah.

At the NCAAs of last year, you swam on the 800 free relay team that won the title. You were second in two events-- the 400 IM and the 200 breaststroke. And you placed, I think, fifth in the 200 IM. Having come so close to winning last year, is that-- I'm sure you set out to win any time you compete, but is that a big goal for you, personally, going into this meet?

Yes. That definitely is a big goal of mine. And I've kind of been focusing this year on vocalizing my goals. So it's even big for me to be saying that right now, that one of my goals is to win an individual event. And I'm really lucky that I'll have UVA teammates of mine in both of those races with me, which gives me kind of a lot of comfort and ease, just knowing that they'll be in there just like they are in practice. But yeah, definitely just wanting to get as many points for the team as possible has always been kind of my motivation and what drives me in meets. So if that manifests its way into an individual title, that would be amazing. Yeah.

The ACC meet was in Atlanta. The NCAAs will be held at the same venue. How much of a difference does familiarity with the pool make? And are there pools that you really like competing in and pools you really don't like competing in?

Yeah, it's a huge thing that ACCs are in the same place as the NCAAs. And we had that same situation last year when ACCs were in Greensboro. And then NCAA were also there. There's just certain things about different pools that can kind of prove to be challenging in some ways. I think a lot of us were talking about how the walls were a little weird at the Atlanta pool. So it's just really lucky that we had practice with that at ACCs, so now we'll be able to nail it at NCAAs.

I'm from Nashville, Tennessee, so Atlanta was kind of a common competition spot for me all throughout high school. So I was lucky enough to-- it had been a few years since I had raced in the pool, but at least I knew kind of what the pool looked like, what the locker rooms are like, little things that you can just take out of your head when you get there for the first time. But I think it gives, at least the ACC as a conference, a huge leg up at NCAAs to be familiar with the pool and how things are going to run and where you sit, where you warm up, stuff like that.

As I mentioned in the opening, your third year at UVA. What's your UVA experience outside of swimming been like? And what are you majoring in?

Yeah. So I'm a kinesiology major. And it has been so amazing. I just transferred into the School of Education the beginning of this year, I guess. Yeah. And I've just been able to find such a great group of mentors, group of peers in the School of Education. All of my classes they're a lot smaller than I would have ever expected, which has been amazing because I've been able to form relationships with my professors, relationships with my peers. I've been able to immerse myself in the Charlottesville community and find ways to give back to a city and a community that's given so much to my college experience. And, obviously, the swim team is a huge part of my UVA experience, but outside of that it's been just as amazing.

What have you been involved in you mentioned?

Yeah. So just this past semester, I got really involved in Special Olympics in Charlottesville which was just the most rewarding experience I think I might have ever been a part of. It was every Sunday. And this past season was volleyball. So every Sunday, I went and hung out with athletes from Charlottesville. And I have close to zero skills in volleyball, but it was so fun just to get to see them come together and see them get excited for their competitions, just like I do, and be excited for a win here and there and be motivated by their losses and stuff. It was so much fun.

So let's talk about the program's Nashville connection. You mentioned that's your hometown. You, Alex Walsh, and her sister Gretchen all attended the same school in Nashville, Harpeth Hall. If I have this right, when you were a senior, Gretchen was a sophomore and Alex was a junior. Right?

Yep. Yeah, that's right.

Stacked like that. You were the first one to commit to UVA. You did that in February 2018. Were there other schools you looked at seriously? And did you have any connection to UVA or to Charlottesville?

Yeah. So I definitely did have a group of-- I guess it was really just two schools down at the end that I got very serious about, which was here and University of Texas. But my aunt actually ran at UVA and graduated in '82. So that was kind of my UVA connection. And my mom--

She ran track and field here?

Yeah. She ran track and field here and then went on to compete at the '84 Olympics.

Wow. What's her name? Margaret Gross.

Oh, yeah. She's famous. You need to put that in your bio. I don't think that's in your bio. That's a big deal.

Yeah. So that's my UVA connection. Then my mom went to UNC, which is geographically close to UVA. So I was always familiar with the area, familiar with the types of people that UVA attracts, and stuff like that. And then having the swim team being such an up and coming program was just such a draw for me. At the time that I was committing, it was just a program full of excitement and potential. And I would say the same of it right now. It's still full of excitement and exciting things to come.

Yeah. I committed and then, obviously, I wanted to let Alex and Gretchen have their own college recruiting process. But I had to throw in a few UVA comments here and there to try to get them to come. And thank goodness it worked out the way it did because they're the type of people that I will stay in contact with for the rest of my life and, obviously, are great additions to the UVA team. But yeah, it's fun to look back at all of that and remember the recruiting process and learning about UVA and what it stands for and the team and stuff like that. And, obviously, I couldn't be more grateful that I ended up here.

So you swam with the Walsh sisters on the Nashville aquatic club and also, obviously, at school. How old were you when you met Alex and/or Gretchen? And how long have you been competing together, with a couple breaks?

Yeah. I remember the first time that I met Alex and Gretchen. I was in eighth grade and I was a student ambassador at my middle school at the time, which is the same as the high school that we went to. And I had to tour them around the school to show them the ins and outs of everything. So I think Gretchen was a sixth grader and Alex was a seventh grader. So they ended up moving to Nashville and I was a freshman and Alex was in eighth grade, and Gretchen was in seventh grade. So yeah, we've been competing and hanging out for 9ish years now. And we had a pretty fun little group of girls at Nashville aquatic club. And we got to travel around to meets together and stuff like that, which was a lot of fun, too.

So is UVA popular school? I know we've had a lot of kids from Nashville over the years. What about your school that you attended? Are there classmates here of yours who are not on the swim team?

Yeah. I think it kind of depends on the year. I have two of my pretty close friends from high school, who are also here at UVA. But I can remember years when I was younger in high school where there'd be five, six, seven, maybe, girls who ended up going to UVA. So I think Harpeth Hall is a pretty big feeder to UVA. But our grades in high school were not more than 100. So it was a pretty small high school. So it couldn't be more than five or six girls that ended up going to UVA. So you competed at the US Olympic trials last June, right? What was that experience like? And what are your aspirations in the sport? Are you looking forward to going through that process again? I guess its only two years from now, 2 and 1/2 years, right?

Yeah. So I also went to Olympic trials in 2016. Another big memory in my head of a Ella, Alex, and Gretchen trip. I did terribly at that meeting in 2016. I think I was somewhere near dead last. So I think having that experience from 2016 Olympic trials gave me a huge leg up for 2020. I didn't really have any particular goals going into the meet other than do the best that I could. And I think I ended up surprising myself at that meet coming in-- I think I got fifth in the 200 breaststroke.

So I think after the semifinal swim, I might have been seeded third or fourth going into finals. And, obviously, the top two make the Olympics. So I kind of found myself in a position that I hadn't expected. And I think that coming out of Olympic trials, I just kind of had a seed planted in the back of my head that maybe an Olympic berth is my ultimate goal in swimming. So I am in the process of considering a fifth year because that would line up pretty perfectly with the Olympic year. So I am going to keep swimming until the 2024 Olympic trials. And we'll see how those trials go, but obviously the end goal would be to get a place on the Olympic team in Paris. But we'll see. We'll see.

What is on the schedule for this summer competitively?

Yeah. So it's really just a few weeks-- I think it's about three or four weeks after NCAAs-- we'll be going to Greensboro for World Champ trials. And that is the qualifying meet for Worlds. So it'll be a good group of us from UVA will be going. And it's the same as Olympic trials, top two will get a spot on the Worlds team. And Todd was named the head women's coach for that meet. So I'm super excited for him, but also will be a nice to have some familiar faces there if I do make that meet. So that'll be this year. And then I think a lot of us will also go to US Nationals at the end of the summer, which is in California.

Right. Well, first things first, I know you've got to get ready for NCAAs. Good luck with that. We'll be rooting for you. That should be a good week for UVA swimming, men and women. But thanks, again, for your time. Congrats on a great year. And I know there's more to come.

Yeah, thank you so much for having me.

Take care.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

And that will do it for this week. Thanks again to Jayden and Ella for joining the show. We started this podcast back in 2013. And some nine years later, were closing in on our 300th episode. Your support is crucial and we would appreciate your taking a minute to rate and subscribe to this podcast. Previous episodes are archived under the media button on the front page of VirginiaSports.com, our official website. You can also find them by searching your podcast provider for Wahoo Central podcast.

Our guests this school year have included Devon Ortiz, Jay Aiello, Alex Walsh, Brennan Armstrong, Steve Garland, John Freeman, Todd DeSorbo, and many more. My stories are archived on VirginiaSports.com under the content button on the front page. And I also post links to them on Twitter where my handle is @JeffWhiteUVA. Finally, be sure to check out the UVA sports app which has been downloaded more than 68,000 times. It's available from Google Play or the Apple Store. We'll be back soon with another episode. Until then, thanks for listening and go Hoos.

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