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Happy new year and welcome to the first *Wahoo Central Podcast* of 2022. The storm has passed, the spring semester starts next week at UVA and the football team is about to get back to work under new leadership. I'm Jeff White from virginiasports.com, And in our second segment, I'll be talking to Alex Walsh, who's an NCAA champion, an Olympic swimmer.

Right now I want to welcome in one of the many new faces at the McCue Center, and that's Adam Smotherman, who's the head strength and conditioning coach for the football team. Coach, I know you've got a ton on your plate these days, I appreciate your making time for this.

First things first, did you make it through the storm OK?

Ha ha. I made it through the storm just fine. Yes, sir. Thank you.

That's good. I can tell you we don't normally get weather that bad around here, so hopefully we won't be dealing with that again for a while. Your boss here is Tony Elliott, who is a man you obviously know well. You were with him at Clemson for 10 years. The UVA family is just getting to know Coach Elliott. What can fans expect from him and his program?

From Coach Elliot, you can expect a man that is a consistent man. He is a consistent person. He is about his values and he's consistent in his values. He's a strong man of faith. He is a competitor, he's a winner. Phenomenal family man. Loves his players, loves his staff, and it brings that love to everything that he does.

And you know, it's one of the foundational pieces of his vision to build this program is to love and serve and care. And from the program, without a doubt, you can expect phenomenal effort, you can expect accountability, leadership, discipline. And you can expect just a group of people who will grow in connectedness and love for one another, for each other and just bring that passion every day to what we do.

You were an assistant strength and conditioning coach at Clemson which has been a national power under Coach Sweeney. Besides the opportunity to run your own program, what appealed to you about this opportunity here?

Well, obviously, Coach Elliot. I mean, having the opportunity to work with him and for him and to help put feet and hands to his vision, to build this program. As I spoke to-- he's a great man. So the opportunity to work with Coach Elliott and to help him achieve what he's trying to achieve is an awesome opportunity and very appealing.

And then also an opportunity to lead and an opportunity to have something that we can build and that we can lay the foundation and then we can build upon it and construct what we want to see this house that we want to build and to impact lives and impact futures and serve hearts. And to do that from a leadership position is super exciting.

And then the area, the Charlottesville area, the University has been phenomenal so far. I mean, just to have the opportunity to be part of this community and to be part of this University and this athletics department family and the tradition here is just a great opportunity and super exciting. And then and then obviously, the prospect of getting to build upon that foundation and build something brand new and take it to other levels is super exciting.

Virginia and Clemson, they're in different divisions of the ACC. They don't play each other every year. How much did you know about the UVA program before before Coach Elliott took the job and before you started looking at him?

Well, we in being with the Clemson program for 10 seasons total had the opportunity to compete against Virginia for a few times throughout the years and I always noticed great effort and competitiveness and physicality and all those things. So tremendous respect for this program. And then I've been here one time previously as part of a road game. And I remember it just being blown away by the beautiful campus and the atmosphere, the environment. So it's pretty cool to be part of it now.

So when did you, I know you haven't relocated your whole family maybe yet, but when did you report to work in Charlottesville? I know you were at some of the bowl practices. Did you get that right away?

Pretty much right away. Yes, sir. Coach Coach Elliott allowed me to come up here and to observe and start to meet people and develop relationships. And so it's been a few weeks and it's been awesome. Everybody's been very welcoming and very helpful. And just in terms of meshing and building the necessary relationships and moving things in the direction that we're going to go and establishing some of the processes and ways that we're going to do things, it's been a very valuable time to be able to do that before we get our training cycle started.

You were a spectator on the sideline during those bowl practices. The previous staff, strength and conditioning staff were still running things. The season ended so abruptly and unexpectedly with the team pulling out of the Fenway Bowl. Have you had a chance to meet with the players yet either in person or on Zoom or some other means?

Not in a team setting. I've had the opportunity to communicate with them via Teamworks which is a communication platform we have just to be able to introduce myself. And then there's been some of our players who have been through during open gym hours on a voluntary basis.

And so I've had the opportunity to get to sit down and talk with some of them and quite a few of the guys who I sent them my phone number, so quite a few of them have text me and introduce themselves and told me they're really excited to get to work with us. And obviously, likewise I'm super excited to get to work with them.

So that is one of the things that I'm most excited about is the opportunity to build relationships with these players and to have impact in their lives. And for the strength of conditioning staff as a whole to get to do that because that's the most important thing to me and to us as a staff is those relationships and having that impact on their lives to be on sets and reps and X's and O's. So the relationship building aspect is something that I'm very, very excited about.

But to answer your question, no, we have not had an opportunity yet to- I have not had an opportunity yet to get in front of them. But that will be coming very soon. And I'm excited about that.

Yeah. So the spring semester starts next Wednesday. When do you get the team together to start your winter program? And will this be similar to the one that Clemson ran?

So the day classes start. We'll start Wednesday with my team.

Wednesday, OK.

Oh, yeah. We're wasting no time. We're getting after it. And we'll start getting together and establishing our processes and establishing those relationships and starting to put one day at a time together and develop.

And in terms of how we set things up, there will be, of course, similarity to how our program was run at Clemson. That's the system that I am used to and believe in. And that system will obviously be specific to our needs here at the University of Virginia and to what these players need, what this team needs. Ultimately our mission is to mold the team and shape the team into the personality that Coach Elliott wants for the program.

And we talked about earlier what those foundational pillars and pieces are, so our job is to put feet and hands to that and to make sure that Coach Elliott's vision comes alive from a cultural standpoint, from a physical standpoint, a mental standpoint and to build that. And so we'll work our tails off every day to make sure that happens. And I have no doubt that these players will work their tails off every day to make that happen as well.

I know you're probably a little biased because you were in that group and it might be a better question for Coach Elliott. But how integral do you think-- what strength and conditioning has done at Clemson, how integral has that been for the program's overall success over the past decade or so?

Well, like you said, of course, I'm biased. I believe strength conditioning has a tremendous impact on your culture development, obviously your physical development, the physical capacity to be durable, to perform at a high level over and over and over again, play after play, series after series, game after game, season after season. There's obviously the physical component and the cultural development.

But the beauty of strength conditioning is that we get to spend more time with the players than anybody.

The coaches yeah.

Because we have winter training. Even when we get into spring bowl, we have spring training, we have summer training, we have fall camp, we have in season. We're with them a lot. So we have a very unique perspective on the players and on the team and we have a very unique opportunity to build those relationships and to influence and impact behaviors and to impact lives.

So we have a very tremendous opportunity in that area to do that and to put feet and hands to what we're trying to build. But I think that of course, strength conditioning has a profound effect and had a profound effect on the success we were able to experience and will have a great effect on the success that we undoubtedly are going to have here.

But I think it's important to remember that as a strength conditioning staff, we're not a silo. We're not in it by ourselves, we're not moving the needle in a certain direction by ourselves. We're all in this together. It takes everybody.

It takes football coaches, football staff, it takes administration, it takes the athletics department community, the fans, the lungs, it takes nutrition, sports med. It takes academic counselors, it takes the academic environment as a whole. It takes operations, it takes recruiting. It takes-- and I don't want to leave anybody out. It takes everybody.

I mean, really, it takes the media, it takes internal operations, it takes everything. We're all moving in the same direction. And so that's the beauty of this place and of coach Elliot. And his vision of what we're trying to build is the alignment piece and everybody being on the same page and everybody preaching the same message and trying to move in the same direction.

And we're just a piece of that. And it's important to remember that obviously we understand the impact of our work and we understand the impact that we can have. We always say, the team we are tomorrow is a direct reflection of how we train today. But that really all is-- we're a piece of the puzzle and we're excited to be a piece of that puzzle. But it's important that we move in the same direction. And I have no doubt that we will.

At Clemson, Joey Batson directed the strength and conditioning program for football. How big an influence has he been on you in your profession? Joey Batson has been a phenomenal mentor to me. He has had an unbelievable impact on me. More so above and beyond as a strength and conditioning coach, as a man, he has had a phenomenal impact on me.

He gave me an opportunity to come to Clemson fresh out of undergrad as a graduate assistant, to cut my teeth as a strength coach and learn and grow in a tremendously structured program. And he then hired me back in a full time capacity as well. And Coach Batson is a great man. I mean, he is a phenomenal person.

His faith is very important to him. He's a great family man and he's a great coach that loves his players and loves his staff. And one thing I am so appreciative of Coach Batson is that he always took the time and always put in the effort to mentor me as a man and as a coach.

But not just as a coach, as one of his assistants, but as knowing that I had the aspiration of one day being a head strength coach. He took the time to mentor me in that aspect and I'm forever grateful for that. So I'm super thankful for Coach Batson. And, yes, to answer your question, he's had a phenomenal impact on my life.

So you grew up in Smyrna, Tennessee, not far from Nashville. You played at Vanderbilt which I guess is your hometown school. Did you as a boy, did you go to Vandy games? Was that a school you saw yourself playing at?

No. I did not. I did not go to Vanderbilt games until I started getting recruited by them. But I grew up just Southeast of Nashville. I grew up closer to Murfreesboro Tennessee than I did Nashville. So I went to a lot of Middle Tennessee State games as a kid. It was closer, they were the local team.

But the experience at Vanderbilt was a tremendously impactful experience on my life and obviously connected me with great coaches and teammates who have had a tremendous impact on my life.

I mean it's no secret that the SEC is unbelievably strong in football. We saw that again last night. What was it like competing in that league as a player? You were a D tackle.

I mean, it was competitive. It was a tremendous challenge. And being an interior defensive lineman is a tough task but it's a fun job. And I really enjoyed it. I enjoyed the process. You talk about, I fell in love with-- I'd always love the weight room but fell in love with strength conditioning because of the process that I went through of having to get big enough and strong enough to be able to compete just to have a chance.

And my strength coaches were phenomenal and did a great job in my development and showing me what I needed to do. And modeling that for me of what impact you could have really propelled me into a career in strength conditioning. And then my strength coach at Vanderbilt was John Sisk, who is currently the head strength coach at Georgia State.

And he just had a phenomenal impact on me as a man as well but also in my football career. And then my strength conditioning career, he got me connected with Coach Batson. So I'm forever grateful to coach Sisk as well.

Did you do a lot of strength training in high school like before you got to Vanderbilt?

We did. My high school football coach and his staff ran the weight room and we had a great program and that's where first developed a love and a passion for the iron. And to see the tangible results of picking it up and putting it down over and over again.

And wow. I'm getting stronger. I'm putting on muscle mass. I'm performing better on the field. I'm competing. And just to see and feel the effects of training on you as a person and also as an athlete, it's really, really neat.

And my high school weight room was awesome. It was the no windows, cinder block walls, rusty weights. It was gritty and it was awesome and you just develop a passion for it and fall in love with it. It was great.

So do you see the whole spectrum when you have first year guys entering a college program with guys who have done weight training, maybe sophisticated weight training, have had trainers, know their way around the weight room and then other guys for whom it's basically a new process?

Oh. For sure. I mean, any time you get new student athletes coming in the door, you're going to have a whole spectrum of training experience and training history and development levels. And you have players who come in, they're very proficient lifters and they understand technique and progressions and they understand weight room safety and then have developed and/or are farther along in their developmental process. We're all continually developing.

And then you have student athletes that for various reasons have not had a ton of time in the weight room. Maybe they were multi-sport athletes in high school and they've never had a true off season or maybe they had some injury that limited their ability to train, whatever it is. Or maybe they're just at a certain point in their developmental process. And we'll help them go through the next phase of their developmental process.

You're going to have all kind of I've seen, you have all kind of developmental levels coming in. But the beauty of the weight room and the beauty of strength and conditioning is that there are no first, second, or third teamers. Everybody's going to be held to the standard. Everybody's going to train hard. Everybody's going to-- wherever they are in their developmental process, we'll start there. We'll establish our technical base, and we'll begin to progress.

And everybody will progress from right where they are and develop and become a better version of themselves, and then just continue to add to that, and continue to grow. And that is such a fun process to be a part of is to, wherever a student athlete is when they walk in the door, helping them become a better version of themselves or become something that maybe they never even dreamed of becoming, not just physically, but as a person who will go out into the world and have impact-- so developing leadership, developing personal accountability, developing all these characteristics that are so important for excellence in life. It's really fun to be a part of that process.

You attained a measure of fame as the, quote/unquote, Get-Back coach at Clemson, where one of your jobs during games was to keep your defensive coordinator, Brent Venables, on the sideline and off the field. For listeners who have not seen this ESPN video, just Google Adam Smotherman and get-back coach. It's a lot of fun to watch. That had to be kind of crazy, wasn't it? You're an assistant strength and conditioning coach. And all of a sudden, you're starring in this video, or at least co-starring in this video.

[LAUGHS] Yeah, I mean, I guess, the publicity that came from that was certainly unexpected. But it all goes back to if it's important to your boss, it had better be important to you. And sideline control was important.

And so we made that happen. But it wasn't just me. The whole strength conditioning staff, we were all in charge of sideline management. I just happened to be in charge--

High profile.

Yeah, keeping back the defensive coordinator. And so that got some publicity. But yeah, we had some fun with that. And it wasn't always fun. I mean, there were some battles on the sideline there.

[LAUGHS] Yeah, the video shows.

Right. Hey, whatever role we need to play to keep us penalty-free and help us win, we'll do what we got to do.

So you have four assistant coaches on your staff here. One of them, Nate Potashnick was here under Bronco Mendenhall. I may have mangled his last name. He's better known, I think, as Blackjack around here, which is much easier to pronounce. Did you have any history with Nate before you came here?

No, I did not. I was very fortunate to get to meet Coach Potashnick and to develop a relationship and super thankful, super excited that he's part of our staff and a phenomenal coach, very, very intelligent, hardworking, detail-oriented, great relationship builder-- so super, super excited about him, highly respected and super excited about him.

And then I've also got Coach Will Harrison. He's coming from the University of Kansas, also very smart, very hardworking, detailed, great relationship builder. Coach Harrison and I go back to my first year at Clemson. He was a senior wide receiver on the team and phenomenal hard worker and does a great job, so super excited about him.

Coach Drew McDuffie was with us at Clemson as well. He was the student assistant and then a graduate assistant for us. And then, he spent five seasons at Duke University, which is where he's coming to our staff from. Also super intelligent, hard worker, great relationship builder, passionate about what we do and about developing student athletes, so super excited about him.

Coach Jaylen Reid-- super excited about him as well. Coach Reid comes to us from, I guess, I'm allowed to say the school, but Virginia Tech.

[LAUGHTER]

But Coach Reid comes to us from down the road there. And he also worked at Georgia State University and Furman University. And he played football and participated in track and field at Furman University-- passionate, smart, intelligent coach, great relationship builder, very detailed. So you see a theme there of what we wanted to build in the staff is, first and foremost, getting the right people on the bus and people who are passionate about what we do-- great relationship builders, attention to details.

The whole point on the standard and the culture-- phenomenal coaches, phenomenal people. And that's what we have in the staff. And I am unbelievably excited about this group of men and the impact that I know we're going to be able to have. And we've been meeting, and planning, and preparing, and meshing, and just such a great group of coaches that I am so blessed to have as our staff and to be able to move forward with.

I mean, I'm sure you had the aspiration of one day becoming a head strength coach. As your career went along, did you have the proverbial list in your pocket of guys who would reach out to be on your staff when that day came? I mean, were you thinking Drew and Will all along?

Well, you definitely have people that you develop relationships with over time and that you get to visibly see the impact that they have had, and you've worked together, and so you definitely have that. And you have people that you highly respect in this business, who highly recommend people. But yeah, you definitely have ideas of who you'd like to work with and who you know can help build the vision that you're responsible for building and for being a part of building. And so I can't reiterate enough how excited I am about this group of guys and what we're going to be able to do for and with these student athletes. Because that's the most important part, is the student athletes.

Everything is a student athlete-centered. Everything we do comes back to a question of, what is best for the players? What's best for the student athletes from a training standpoint, from a resource standpoint, from a relationship-building standpoint, from a leadership accountability discipline standpoint? What's best for these players and for this program and moving the program forward? And we have absolutely got the right people in place to make that happen, and I'm excited about that.

So you and your wife have two children, a boy and a girl. Are they excited about the move to Charlottesville?

They are. It's the exciting, new adventure for our family. And we're really excited about it. My wife has been phenomenal. She's been a rock star, just handling everything with the family, and the house, and finding us a place to live here, and just making sure that everything works together smoothly and operates smoothly. She's awesome, so I'm super thankful for my wife Lindsey.

And yeah, we've got two children, Jack, who's four, and Caroline, who's two. And they're great. I'm so blessed to be their daddy and to just raise them up and show them the way they need to live. And I'm excited about our families being a part of the program and being around these players because I think it's important to model what we're trying to build in these players and to model what it looks like to be a husband and to be a dad. And then for our kids, our families to be around the programming, to be around the players, and around the staff, and to be grown, and impacted, and influenced in positive ways.

That's the beauty of sports. That's the beauty of football. That's the beauty of athletics, and academics, and being in a great environment like this is they get to grow up around awesome people and an awesome environment, a competitive environment, a high-academic environment. And it's going to make them better, and I'm excited about that.

So you're about a week out from your first workout with the players. Are you counting the days off? Because you've been here for a while laying the groundwork, setting the stage, and then you finally get your guys.

Oh, absolutely, yeah, counting down the days, excited to get in front of them, excited to introduce the shrink staff to them, and excited to just get this process going of being great one rep at a time, one day at a time, and just like has been the theme of our entire conversation, to develop relationships and not just for that to be lip service, but for that to be a true, genuine time-invested conversations about things other than sets and reps and X's and O's to truly have impact. And one of the ways that we do that is, obviously, we have an obligation to produce a strong, powerful, fast, quick, conditioned, tough, finishing football team. But the process of getting to that point is filled with a lot of relationships, a lot of conversations, a lot of fun moments, difficult moments. It's a beautiful process. So yes, absolutely counting down the days to until we can get with these guys.

All right, well, it'll be here before we know it. I know you undoubtedly have a lot to do before then, and you've been very generous with your time today. I appreciate that. Welcome to town. I look forward to working with you, and it should be a fun spring.

Thank you, Jeff. Absolutely, I look forward to working with you. Thank you for your time. And thank you for the opportunity to talk with you here and to just talk through the excitement for being part of the program, what we plan to do. And all I can say is, go, Hoos.

There you go. All right, we're going to take a short break. And then we'll be back to talk swimming with one of UVA's most decorated student athletes.

Hey, this is John Freedman, 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.

OK, joining the show now is one of the Olympians on the UVA Women's Swim Team. And this one is Alex Walsh. Happy new year, Alex.

Happy new year.

How is your second year on grounds going? Do you feel like a seasoned veteran now?

I kind of do feel like a veteran. It's funny because my sister is a first-year on the swim team. So I would say, us being so close already has made my class and also the first-year class really close. So that's been really fun.

But yeah, I would say, compared to last year, this year has gone by a lot more smoother. And I mean, it's just been more fun. We haven't had to deal with as many COVID restrictions, which has been really great.

It's definitely felt a lot more normal. And yeah, I mean, I think it's been a really fun year so far.

So you had to wait a full year, then, to take your first in-person college class, right?

Yes, yeah, I didn't have a single one my first year.

So what was it like to be back in a classroom with other students for the first time since high school for you?

It was great. Honestly, I think sometimes, I would be really tired, and I would be like, I just wish that I could sit in my bed and go to class via Zoom. But I think going to in-person class really held me accountable for going, and paying attention, and getting my notes down.

And some of my classes had an online option, and I would go to those when I needed to accommodate for something else that was happening. But I just found going in-person was a lot easier and, honestly, more efficient for me just to move through the day. So yeah, it was great. And obviously, I loved getting to meet people that I don't normally see every single day on the pool deck. So that was just another pro.

Have you picked a major yet?

Yes. I mean, I guess, I haven't officially declared, but I'm on the path to majoring in computer science.

Oh, great. So most of the student body is home on holiday break, but several of our athletic teams, including swimming and diving, have been here in Charlottesville practicing since late December. What was your holiday like? Did you get back to Nashville for a while?

Yeah, me and Gretchen went to Nashville for a couple of days. And then, we actually went to Connecticut, which is where my mom's family lives. And that was really great because I haven't been there for, I think, a year and a half since this past December.

So going back and just being able to see all of this family that I haven't seen since-- I brought my medal with me, so I got to show all my little cousins, which was really cute. And then yeah, I saw a bunch of these girls that I had grown up with, pretty much. So that was just really fun. And honestly, yeah, we saw a lot of people, which was nice and definitely a luxury, considering that Omicron is everywhere now. But it was good to be able to see a lot of people.

How much do you train or did you train during that time? Did you seek out pools? Or did you do other kind of conditioning? Or did you just take a physical break?

Yeah, we definitely did not train as intensely as we train here, and I think, obviously, I wanted to stay in shape. But also, I know like it's going to be pretty challenging either way if I train or if I don't train coming back to Virginia. So I definitely wanted to prioritize just getting a lot of sleep, and recovering, and being able to spend quality time with my family since I don't see them that often.

But me, before we left Todd, we had a meeting. He was like, I want you guys to lift twice and swim four times. So I got in the weight room once, and I think I swam three times. I think Gretchen swam four times. So yeah, I would say-- and also, it's kind of fun, though, because a lot of my really close friends were on my club team at home, so I want to go and swim with them and be able to catch up with them and stuff.

So with no classes in session, at least for people who are not taking J term, what's the daily routine like for swimmers now? Are you doing multiple workouts a day or staggering?

Yeah, so our daily routine right now is we have practice from 7:00 to 9:00 in the morning. And then, we have practice again from 3:00 to 5:00 at night. So in the mornings, we alternate days. But we either lift for an hour and swim for an hour, or we do dry land for an hour and swim for an hour.

So I do that. And then, I come back and I nap for two hours. And then, I wake up, make breakfast-- or no breakfast-- make lunch, and then do something with the hour of free time that I have, and then go back to practice for two hours, come back. And me and my roommates have been watching a lot of shows and movies-- so just kind of relaxing with my other teammates.

But yeah, this time during our training is pretty difficult mentally just because you feel like you're at the pool all the time. So luckily, we do that for three days in a row, then we get a day off, and then three days in a row, a day off. So the day off happening every four days is pretty nice. But yeah, it's a lot.

Several of your teammates competed last month at the Short Course World Championships in Abu Dhabi. Was that an option for you?

Yes, I did get invited. But I declined just because I knew that I was going to be pretty much swamped with exams. And I just I didn't want to put myself through that stress. I'm really impressed by how Paige, and Emma, and Kate, they all-- we went to Golden Goggles in Miami, and then they came back, took all their exams, and then went straight to world champs.

I was like, wow. I could never do that. So yeah, I declined my spot. But I think I had a really good training block in those two weeks. And obviously, international meets are really fun, but this one, I just had to sit out on. But got some good work done anyway in the pool.

So your first college season, you set the bar awfully high starting with the ACC meet and then the NCAAs, where you won the 200 IM, and you swam on the championship 800 freestyle relay team. Did you expect to have as much success initially in college as it turned out you did?

I would say, the 2IM is my best event. So obviously, I really wanted to do well in that event. And me and Kate, we're obviously huge rivals in that event.

But also, it's really fun to race her because we know that we're like-- it's kind of like us two in the middle of the pool. So that's pretty fun to do that together with another Virginia girl. So I really wanted to do well on that event. And I was happy, but I wasn't totally surprised that I was able to drop a lot of time just because I've been working on that event for a while. But I would say, I definitely didn't expect to be able-- like, the two free, I dropped a lot of time in and, obviously, the relay.

I didn't expect myself to be able to gain this much endurance so quickly. So I think it's really exciting that-- I don't know. And I also was really happy that I was able to show out in the morning and then make those A finals to score the points at NCs. Notoriously, I'm not a very good morning swimmer. So I think teaching myself to do that, I think, is the big turning point that I made this season-- last season, I guess.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but it seemed to me that you were good during the regular season last year-- I mean, really good-- but then, you took your performance to another level at ACCs and NAAs. I'm sure the plan all along is to always peak at the end of the year. But did you feel like you had a lot more in the tank than maybe you'd shown to that point?

Yeah, definitely. I remember my mid-season invite. That meet, you kind of, especially for first years, you don't really know what to expect. It's just like, all right, let's see what we can do. And I remember leaving that meet, and I was pretty disappointed with how I swam just because

I wasn't very close to my best times. And I primarily train with Blair Bachmann. She's my coach, and she had to sit me down.

And she was like, you really need to trust the process. You really have got to be patient. And when the time comes in March, the time will come in March when you will be able to just show all the work that you've been putting in. So yeah, I would say, NAAs, I was more than ready to drop a lot of time and swim really well for my team. So I was definitely more than pleased when that happened.

So after the school year ended, you were part of the UVA contingent that represented the United States in swimming at the Olympic games in Tokyo. You were there with Todd DeSorbo, Emma Weyant, and Kate Douglas, Paige Madden, and yourself. What was that like, being on the other side of the world with people you knew, friends, and teammates, and coaches?

Yeah, I really couldn't be more grateful that all these girls that I had swam with throughout the whole year and Todd were there. I think we had our own little training group. We had it through the whole way.

We took a two-week train trip in Hawaii, and I was with all them. And I was training with Todd every day. And then, obviously, when we got to Tokyo, I was still with Todd, so that just made everything a lot easier to adjust to. And it can be really stressful.

A lot of the athletes there, their coaches weren't there, so they had to train with a different coach, and get different instructions, and different practices and stuff. So having our own little mini UVA team was really cute. And also, it just helped make everything a lot easier and a lot less stressful every practice, which I think, definitely played a big part in how well we were able to do in terms of medal count that we contributed to. So it was pretty awesome.

So the first time you competed at the US Olympic trials back in 2016, you were a rising ninth grader, which is young. How much did that experience help you the second time around last summer, just having been through that? Because I know I've talked to swimmers and coaches about that, and I think Todd just said that's the most pressure-packed event of all the trials because you invest so much time and energy into making the team. And if you have a bad day, it's all for naught. Did it help having been there once before?

Oh, I think it definitely helped. I knew exactly what the arena was going to look like. And it just helped knowing how everything-- what the vibe was, and the ready room, knowing how-- I mean, I was really nervous going into my-- in 2016.

And I didn't even-- making the Olympics wasn't even my goal. It's wasn't even something that was in reach. I still did really well, but I was so nervous. And I didn't even have the cost of not making the team.

So I knew it was going to be a lot more stressful just because I went in seated third. And obviously, they only take top two. So I was like, all right, I'm seated not to make it by one position. That kind of was scary. But just that extra awareness of knowing how everything happens at that meet, just because it's so different from any other meet you'll ever go to. It's so much more stressful and everything.

So yes, 100% that helped. And Gretchen went too, and I would say that also, she felt the same way. She was like, I know exactly what it's going to look like. I know exactly how everything's going to run down. So it makes things easier. But that didn't take away the stress of it.

So then, you get to Tokyo for the actual Olympics in the 200 IM. You get the Silver. Kate Douglas gets the Bronze. You're in lane 4. She's in lane 3, I believe. You finish. It's a photo-finish type deal. That must have been an unforgettable experience, A, to get the medal, and B, to have a friend and teammate in the lane next to you and then medaling as well.

Oh, yeah, I say, it just made it so much more special that we were both able to medal together. And having her right next to me kind of-- it was like the perfect touch to everything that had happened last year because we were definitely huge competitors. And then Todd sat us down, and he was like, you two need to approach this event as you guys are one two in the world, no matter what happens.

And we were like, yeah, we just got to go with that. It's doesn't matter who beats who. All that matters is that we're top two every single time.

So just kind of going in with that mentality and then being able to-- we know how the other one races, and we definitely have different race strategies. But that helps us-- for me, definitely helps me gauge how fast I need to be going keeping up with her, especially on the front-end fly and stuff. So I mean, yeah, just doing it together makes it so much-- it was just so-- yeah, unforgettable is the word, really.

I remember looking at her, especially even when we made the Olympic team, looking at her and being like, oh, my god, you made the team, and then looking at her again. We'd be like, oh, my god, we've medaled. And now, we're done with our season.

That was the most happy, probably. We're like, oh, my god. We can go home now. It was so funny. But yeah, and it was so cute also because we FaceTimed our team after, and they had that huge watch party. And Todd was sobbing. It was so [LAUGHTER]. It was a fun moment.

In a race like that that's so close, did you know that you'd finished ahead of her? Because I'm sure there have been times where she's beaten you in the race and vice versa. Or do you have to wait to see the result? When you touched the wall, did you know you touched ahead of her? Or was there--

Well, honestly, at trials, she was two 100ths behind me. I had no idea if I made the team at trials. I knew I was going to be top; three. Honestly, making the team was not what I was thinking about.

I had physically exerted myself so much during that race, I was so sick after. I didn't even care if I made the team. I was like, someone give me a trash can. I'm about to throw up.

That was literally what I was like. But obviously, when I saw her and that we both had made it, that was such a relief and such a surprise because we talked about making the team together, but we were like that would be really cool. And then we were like, oh, we don't know if that'll happen like we hope.

So having both of our goals just accomplished together was so cool. And then, obviously, at the Olympics, I was able to strategize better on my race, so I definitely closed faster. And I could see her right next to me, but I wasn't really thinking about her. I was like, I need to finish as fast as possible. I need to get my hand on the wall.

And so yeah, I mean, it came as a surprise that I got Silver and then she got Bronze. I didn't really know what the outcome was. But it's always just such a surprise, and relief, and happiness, you know? It's great.

So as you mentioned, you are no longer the only Walsh in the women's program. That's one of the big storylines for the team this season. Gretchen's a first-year at UVA. She already holds one school record. I'm looking at the all-time top 10 list. She's already contending in a number of other events.

You're 18 months older than Gretchen. I think you told me before. What's your relationship like competitively? I know when you hear about brothers growing up in sports, a lot of times, they end up coming to blows. They're fighting each other.

You're probably not going to do that in the pool, but playing basketball or something like that. You're great friends. Are you great competitors with each other too in the pool? Or is it friendly?

Yeah, so it's kind of funny because I feel like our dynamic has really changed over the years, I would say. When I was a senior in high school and she was a junior, we were training partners in Nashville. So we were expected to go next to each other in the lane right next to each other, and we were supposed to race for every single set. And that got really competitive to the point where we would get really angry at each other if one was beating the other.

Or if one was doing the set wrong or not trying or something, that caused a lot of issues. But honestly, being at Virginia together is so much better because we're in different training groups. So she's totally with Todd doing the sprint work. I sometimes go with Todd, but I'm pretty much with Blair most of the time doing more middle distance work. And I think we need different things, and we aren't expected to be racing each other and competing with each other every single day.

So that just makes it easier for us to support each other as opposed to just get mad at each other, which would happen a lot. Obviously, I think training with her makes me a better swimmer, and I definitely make her a better swimmer because we push each other so much. But she now races Kate all the time in practice. We each have our own training groups with what we need to be better. So it's definitely-- it's better now just because we're definitely like nicer teammates to each other now.

So are you on any relays with her at this point?

Yeah. I think I'm on a couple. I've been on a couple of relays with her. I don't know what the relays will look like at end of year. But yes, I think I would definitely be on some with her.

But you do not go head-to-head with her in any individual events at this point, do you?

No.

All right, that's probably for the better, right?

Oh, yeah, it's good. [LAUGHS]

So your mother swam at Boston College. She had an excellent career there. When I talked to her last year, your mom shared some great stories about how quickly you took to the water when you were a young girl. What do you remember about those first times in the pool? Did it dawn on you immediately that you were ahead of other kids your age?

I think I remember some races when I was really little, and I remember swimming. I don't really remember practicing that much ever. But I do remember some races. And obviously, I was pretty good as a little kid. But I think one distinct thing that I remember was when I broke my first national age group record, which they're divvied up between 11, 12's. I think my first one I ever broke was when I was 12.

And my mom, after, she sat me in the car. We were driving home from this meet. And she was like, I don't really think you understand how good that is. And she was trying to put it in perspective for me.

And I was like, oh, wow. That is really good. This is kind of a big deal.

I remember that being a very pivotal moment for me because I remember thinking, oh, this could be something that I really could succeed at growing up. So that was the first time, really. But yeah, and it's just taken off ever since. I didn't really think I would-- I mean, obviously, everyone dreams of going to the Olympics. But doing it still in college while I'm still pretty young, that definitely was pretty awesome.

Was there a point at which you raced your mom and beat her?

No, but she-- I think me and Gretchen started beating her times when we were 12 or 13. And she was like, well, this just makes me feel great. We were like, sorry.

[LAUGHS] So UVA won its first NCAA team title last season. I know the goal is to repeat this year. Is it more challenging to stay hungry as a team once you've won it, and you're, quote/unquote, the hunted instead of the hunter, and everyone is going to be gunning for you? Does that feel any different this year?

I would say, it definitely does feel different. It's just a different mentality. Last year, going and having won zero national championships, and now, coming back and the possibility of being a repeated champion. So I would say, it's different, but I don't think it makes us any less hungry, as someone put.

I think, actually, knowing that this NCAA's is going to be more competitive than last year's, honestly, makes us that much more determined to do it again and that much-- I mean, I would say, the girls this year have been working incredibly hard. And I mean, we've been doing a lot harder of a workout schedule this year than we did last year. So just having that confidence under our belts has definitely made us more eager to race and more eager to defend the title.

You have so many elite swimmers in the program-- Gretchen, yourself, Kate, Emma, many others that I could list. I'm guessing that competition makes practice better, makes it easier for you to improve as a swimmer. You're being pushed all the time in practice, right?

Oh, yeah, like, all the time. Honestly, we have a really good group. On Saturday mornings, we always do a 200 pace set. And it's always me, Kate, Alexis, Ella, Anna Keating, like, all the 200 breaststrokers.

We're all right next to each other going 200 breaststroke pace. I mean, it's all five of us doing it all together. I mean, it's crazy. So having-- and that's just one of the examples.

Every day, we're kind of all put next to each other and expected to race each other. And yeah, that just makes it more-- it's honestly easier to push yourself when you have someone right next to you pushing themselves and pushing you. So yeah, everyone gets better, really.

What event do you have the most room to improve in, do you think?

I would say, I kind of am switching at my event schedule this year. I think I'm probably going to end up doing the 2 IM, the 4 IM, and the 2 fly NC, so that's new. And I would say, I probably-- ever since coming to UVA, I've just been doing so much more endurance work than I've ever done before. So I think I probably have a lot more room to improve in the 400 just because I've been gaining this new strength that I didn't really have before, like, mental and physical. So yeah, I think that event.

So the season resumes for the team on January 15 at Virginia Tech after such a long, competitive break, at least as a UVA team. Is that a big deal to get back? And particularly, because postseason, at that point, is not that far away. When you come back in January, it's in sight.

Oh yeah, I would say, coming up, we're all really excited for the Tech meet. And then after the Tech meet, we have our Carolina weekend, where we do UNC and also NC State. And we're huge rivals with NC State on the men's and women's side. And that's a home dual meet, which is super exciting.

And then after that, we go straight into championship season. So yeah, the energy is starting to get really jittery just thinking about the fact that we are so close to being where our taper meets and stuff. It's exciting, but yeah.

So ACC meet and the NCAAs are both in Atlanta this year. Do you have experience at that pool?

Oh, my gosh. I love that pool. Yeah, I used to swim there all the time when I was in Nashville and stuff. So yeah, I love that pool, so I'm excited to go back. And ACCs is combined this year, which is going to be really fun.

Yeah, men's and women's, right? Well, good. Well, I know that'll be here before we know it. Thanks again for your time, and best of luck this season. Keep Gretchen in line, and we'll talk to you soon.

[LAUGHS] Thank you.

All right, take care. See you.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

And that will do it for this episode. I want to thank Adam and Alex again for joining the show. The 300th episode of this podcast is fast approaching, and we've come a long way since this project was launched back in November, 2013. We appreciate your support, and it would be great if you take a moment 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. And you can also find them researching your podcast provider for *Wahoo Central Podcast*. Our guests this school year have included Brennan Armstrong, Steve Garland, John Freeman, Kate Douglas, Kip Turner, Quinn Blanding, Todd DeSorbo, and many more.

My stories are archived on virginiasports.com under the Content button on the front page. And I'm also on Twitter where my handle is @jeffwhiteuva. Finally, be sure to check out the UVA Sports app, which has been downloaded more than 65,000 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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