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Welcome to the *Wahoo Central Podcast*. I'm your host Jeff White from virginiasports.com. This is episode 290. And today we'll be hitting UVA football and then talking some Cavalier cross country. Without any further ado, my first guest is a new member of the Hoos secondary and a hugely important piece of that group. And that is graduate student Anthony Johnson. Mr. Johnson, thanks for joining the show. How are you doing?

I'm doing good. Great to be on.

So homecoming's this week at UVA, but you've celebrated your own version of homecoming the last two weeks, haven't you?

Yes, sir. Winning big down in Florida against the University of Miami with all my family. That was a great feeling. And then just last week on the road again at Louisville, my school that I graduated from and I transferred from, was a really great feeling. Two really good wins and just a testament to how hard we work as a team.

So let's start with the Miami game, which was at Hard Rock Stadium. You grew up in the Fort Lauderdale area. The team stayed at a hotel in Fort Lauderdale. Everybody knows that Mandy Alonso is from Miami and he had a big cheering section at the game. But what about you? Did you have a lot of family and friends there?

Yeah. I had about like 32 guests there to see me. They did a good job of making sure that I had enough tickets so all my family that was able to come. My grandparents got to come to their first game to see me down there and play. And it was really exciting and I really grateful for that opportunity, especially getting the W.

So then nine days later, UVA plays at Louisville where you earned your undergraduate degree, as you mentioned. What was the experience like for you going back there? Had you ever been in the visitor's locker room at Cardinal Stadium?

Yeah. I was in the visitor's locker room when we had the reconstruction of the stadium when we got the new expansion. And it was definitely a high emotions. Just happy to be back. Lou was a great place. I actually love the atmosphere and the city life around it. I was happy to be back and I was happy to be on the side that I was on with my guys at UVA and on the victorious side as well.

So you didn't practice much last week, if at all. Were you worried that you might not get cleared to play for the game?

I had some concerns. My trainers did a good job of just taking me through the right measures to make sure that I had my best chance when I took my test so that I was able to get cleared. And I just was trusting in their process. It was my first concussion. I never had one or well at least that I know of. And I just took the steps that they gave me and I made sure I rested a lot, hydrated. And I just trusted them in the process and they cleared me. And my coach instructed me to go out there and handle business.

So during the game itself, were you covering players, receivers you were familiar with or were these new guys on the Louisville roster or these like old friends of yours?

These are all guys that I knew. These are-- I can almost say like brothers. Two of the guys I came in with in the same class 2017, Justin Marshall. Those are my guys. Man, I got a lot of close bonds and connections down there in Louisville with the teammates. And it was really fun just being able to compete against them outside of practice but in a live game situation. So that was really fun.

So what was the back and forth like during the game? Were you guys talking trash to each other or--

Yeah. There's a lot of respect. Not really too much trash talk, just a lot of respect for one another. Just complimenting, good job here or good job here. Just a lot of respect for those guys in that program. And they felt the same towards me.

So as everybody who follows UVA football knows, both of those games came down to the final play. In each case, the opponent missed a field goal attempt. I should know this. I apologize for not. But are you on the field goal block team?

Yes, sir.

So you were out on the field for both of those kicks.

Well, I wasn't on the Miami kick because I had gone out like two plays before that with the concussion on a tackle attempt. And I had missed that one but I was running out on the field after. But for this one, I was out there on the field.

So what was-- I mean, the Miami kick was a 33 yarder, which is very makeable. This one was a 49 yarder, which is a much tougher kick. What was that final play like for you?

Oh, sorry about that.

No, go ahead.

It was just all the hard work and preparation that we go through during the week. And we're just built for moments like this. The battle back being down 17 is just something that our program stresses on just never giving up, holding the rope for each other, just having each other's back. And we're stronger together. So on that last play, it was a block kick. Everybody selling out. That was the plan to go in and block it. And everybody sold out, gave great effort. And the kick ended up going wide left. And I just think it just goes to show how much of a great team that we have and how much that we put forward during the week. And it just shows out on game day.

What was your reaction? I know everyone sprinted onto the field at Miami when that kick hit the upright. What about this time? It was a little bit different situation.

I was just-- man, I was really elated. I was just happy to get the win there. I went to talk a little trash to the sideline a little bit. And after the game, I just talked with my guys on the other team and I was just happy. And when we went to the locker room, we celebrated and had a great time in the locker room.

So you grew up in the Fort Lauderdale area. You graduated from Chaminade-Madonna College Prep, which sounds like a serious academic school. Was it?

Yeah. It's big on academics.

Yeah. How did you end up at University of Louisville?

University of Louisville was actually my first scholarship offer for football. Coach Petrino extended me a scholarship in my junior year in the spring. Came up on the visit, they really liked it, my size and my length. I was real skinny then. I was really, really skinny. And they stressed that they don't worry about my weight, that they would put the size on me. And I was locked in with Louisville. I love the atmosphere. I love the city. It just felt like home. And that was the reason why I ended up at Louisville. And they also had a really good business program. And I wanted to be a business major so I think that helped me with that process as well.

Now did UVA recruit you the first time around at all? Did you have any contact with the coaching staff?

No, not at all. I didn't have any contact with the coaching staff that I believe the first go round.

So you are one of a number of guys from Florida on the roster. And some are from South Florida, some are from Jacksonville. Did you know any of the guys who are now your teammates when you were in high school or before you got to Charlottesville?

I knew Dave Herard. He went to Stranahan High School. And he also played for a seven on seven team that I played for. But all the other guys I didn't know. I met in the process of me transferring. And they reached out to me on social media and things like that. But I only knew Dave Herard.

So you graduated from Louisville in December, right?

Yes, sir.

So once you decided you were going to enter the transfer portal and start, how quickly did things come together with Virginia? And who reached out to you first from the coaching staff?

So immediately, I'll never forget, I was watching a football game. It was Florida versus Alabama. And I'm sitting there watching the game. And I get a call from a 434 number and I just know I'm in the transfer portal. So I'm making sure I answer all my calls. And Coach Kyle, the defensive coordinator and the secondary coach, calls me. And he's like-- he introduced himself and he told me he was at Virginia Football.

And I was like, is this like the ACC Virginia? Let me look up who-- let me look up who Nicholas Howell is. So when I looked him up, I was like, oh crap, like this is Virginia ACC Football. I wanted to stay in the ACC. And I was just excited for the opportunity. He told me a little bit about their program and it just clicked from there. I got on the Zoom call with Coach Bronco Mendenhall.

And what just stuck out with me was his will before skill and you earn everything here at the university. And it was something that I feel like I put first in my life, is that you earn everything that you work for and that everything that you receive, you've worked for it. You've earned it. And Coach Mendenhall really stressed that. And I wanted to be a part of a program that philosophy was that and culture was around earning everything that you receive. So that really resonated with me.

I mean, that's a little bit of a different sales pitch than some schools use, isn't it? I'm sure a lot of schools talk about how much playing time is available and hey, you come here, you're going to do this. You're going to do that. We're going to help you do this. I mean, did it strike you as, hey, this guy's a little bit different, his philosophy?

Yes. That's what really attracted me towards the program. Because as you were saying, all the other guys that were recruiting me were just telling me how good I was, how they wanted me to come in and be the guy. And here's Coach Mendenhall getting on the call telling me, you're a great player but this is what you can be better at. This is what-- we can help you develop in these areas. And that just resonated with me like, OK, here's a coach recognizing my talents but also recognizing my flaws to help me be a better player to help myself and this team.

So you-- oh, I know you've told this story before. You told it to me when I wrote an article on your back during the spring, but you had been 0 and 2 at Scott Stadium, right?

Right.

Playing for Louisville. What was it-- what were those games? What do you remember from those games? I mean, obviously at that point, you're not thinking that one day you're going to be playing on the other sideline.

Yeah. I was just in the moment. It was the year we went 2 and 10. We lost at Scott Stadium. And just last year, we were at Scott Stadium and we lost. It was during the COVID year. And I was just, Virginia is a good football team. They have really good guys and they're disciplined. I know they played a lot of big corners.

And just so happened that in the recruiting process that they contacted me because it was an option that I was interested in due to the fact that I know they had guys like Bryce Hall, Juan Thornhill. Dudes that were bigger guys that played the defensive back position and always being known for that brand of having taller, bigger DB. So that was definitely-- I just felt like it was God's plan for me to be here because it just resonated so perfectly.

Did you overlap with Lamar Jackson at Louisville at all?

Yes. So yeah, on my freshman year. Yes, my freshman year.

I mean, what was it like-- I don't know how often you went against him in practice, but I'm sure it was pretty apparent how special he was and how special he is. What do you remember from going against him and just being around him?

Well actually, me and Lamar actually played Little League Football together on the same program. We played for the Pompano Cowboys. I'm originally from Pompano Beach so that's like where I'm from really, where I grew up. Like Fort Lauderdale is just like a more known area, but Pompano Beach. So he's been doing those things from little league to high school to college. And when I came in as a freshman, he was also another reason why I came in. We also had another guy, Devante Peete that was from the Pompano Beach area as well.

And he's just an elite competitor. I actually went to get some a lot due to the fact that I was on scout team. So I was scout teaming for them. So I mean just him making the great throws and the unbelievable runs and just seeing his leadership. Even when he's competing passes on me as a freshman on scout team, he's like encouraging me like, hey bro, you're in a good spot. You'll be great. Just keep playing. You're going against the best against the best. So I felt like he was a really great teammate and a really good leader and a great encourager as well. A very humble guy.

I don't know if you ever saw the film of him. But when he played here in 2016, I think it was, and Louisville came back to win. He had an incredible fourth quarter drive that he led to win the game. And I know the coaches here were not unhappy to see him go because he's obviously an incredible player.

This UVA defense, third game of the season, you give up 699 yards, 59 points to North Carolina. I mean that was-- I think it's fair to say that was the low point for the defense. Since then, you've steadily played better. You've won two of the last three games.

What's been the difference since the Carolina game?

I just think our preparation and our mindset and how we're handling things in practice. I think we're taking a better approach than we were before. We're doing a lot more harder practices, a lot more intentional practices, focusing on the small details, making sure that we're getting all the plays right, making sure that we're in our gaps, making sure we're in our drops, our coverage. And I think we're just doing a better job of hustling to the football. Coach is putting a big emphasis on running to the football and making sure we're having the halo around the ball. So I think that the mindset and the emphasis on practice have been much better since the week against North Carolina.

So how have you been playing this season? I mean, it can't be easy coming in. Even though you came in January and you went through spring ball, you're still learning a new system and a new defensive philosophy and all that. How have you been playing? Have you seen changes from week to week?

Yeah. I feel like I'm improving. I'm getting confident in my-- just more and more confident. I'm already was a confident guy in my press coverage and I just get more confident, confident as the weeks go by and as we execute as a team. And I'm just so happy to be out there with a group of guys that I'm on the field with and just my coaches and my teammates believing in me and having confidence in me to do my thing on the field. And I just really am grateful and appreciative to be a part of this culture and this team.

I'm just grateful for Coach Howell and his staff. And they do a really good job of making sure that we understand everything on defense, making sure we know what leverage, what drops we have, what gap we should be in. And I just think they do a really good job. They're a staff that has been together a long time and have a great chemistry. And I really do appreciate the opportunity to play for Virginia's defense of football. I really do.

You have a big personality. You're an outgoing guy. When you came in and you joined this new group, did you show like your full personality from day one or did it take a while to get comfortable?

Well, I wouldn't say it took too long. The first day you're just trying to feel things out, just knowing who's who, learning, meeting and greeting people. But I'd say pretty quickly I was acclimated and just being myself and the guys seeing that I'm a really cool guy, really funny guy, like to have a good time, but also a hard worker. So I think it didn't take long for me to get acclimated here.

The guys did a great job of just welcoming me in with open arms. Coming in as a grad transfer, it could be heated. It could be heated for guys that played a similar position. But I can say that no one here was like that at all. They just all opened me with open arms and welcomed me. And they just did a great job of making it feel like home and like a family. And I just feel like I've been here like four years. Like it's crazy.

So are you living with anybody on the team?

No. I was staying with Joe Comer, but he ended up moving out. So I'm just staying by myself right now.

So you had a nice interception in the Illinois game. The celebration might have been even more memorable. Was that spontaneous or had you been thinking, hey, when I get my first pick, I'm going to do something like that.

It was just spontaneous. It just in the moment. Like everybody asking me like, bro, what was going through your mind? And I honestly do not know. I just was so elated and just so happy of just all the hard work that we put in together. And I just thank my teammates for believing in me and my coaches for believing in me.

And it may have just looked like me making a great interception, but it was so many different elements that went into that, the pass rush, my guys being in the right spot and then me being in the spot and then making the play. So it just goes with what your teammates and your coaches believing in you gives you confidence to believe in yourself to make good plays. And I was just so happy and just happy that my teammates came to celebrate with me. It was just a great time. It was a fun time.

So you mentioned Coach Mendenhall, his philosophy of earned not given. But one of the ways that is manifested is in the jersey selection process. Had you ever gone through anything like that before where you had to earn your number? And how soon did you pick? You ended up with number three, number three on defense. Dontayvion Wicks is number three on offense. Is there a story behind that number at all?

Actually, there's no story behind the number three. I actually wanted the number four but I know it was an earned not given process here. I didn't know if they duplicated numbers. And honestly, I was just going to be grateful to have a number. I know like the number doesn't make the player but I guess this year they did something unique to where if you were able to pick in the first round, you could duplicate the numbers.

And for me to be able to pick in the first round, me coming in being new just to attest to the hard work that I put in and the guys believing in me and the coaches believing in me. And just it really just showed I must have really left the great mark on them that they knew that I was a trustworthy player and able to help impact this team in a positive way. And I've never been a part of a process like that.

But man, it really felt good hearing my name called. It almost felt like I got drafted, literally. Like it literally-- like I almost like had tears in my eyes because it was just all the things that I've been through in the past with my old school, me transferring to a new place. And then I just got the number three because it's a number I never had. And it just was just new beginnings for me. So that was the whole process in the jersey selection with me choosing the number 3.

So what graduate program are you in?

I'm in the Curry School, and I'm doing higher education.

That's a master's program, right?

Yes, sir.

When do you-- when are you on track to wrap that up?

I believe I'm on track to wrap that up this spring. So I think, yeah, this spring. I think so.

And then you'll have another year of eligibility, another season if you want to use it depending on how things work out. So off the football field, away from the classroom, I understand that you are a big time passionate fisherman.

Yes. Yes, sir.

What kind of fishing do you do? I mean, you live near the ocean. Are you--

Well, I lived by a lot of lakes and canals. So I was a big fast fisherman. We have a fish called the peacock bass, which is Florida native and also in the Amazon. I don't know if you've ever heard of that, but it's a very vibrant color fish. It's just like a bass but it fights way more harder, way more aggressive. And it's really fun, man.

And I just grew up fishing since I was really young. It's something my family always do. We would wake up early Saturday mornings and go out to A1A and Alligator Alley and we would just fish all day long. And it's just something I fell in love with. My grandfather really got me into fishing and my dad being really big into fishing. It's just something that's always been in my family.

For those of us who are not familiar with Florida, what is Alligator Alley?

So Alligator Alley, it's just the area out by the Everglades. There are alligators. There's a lot of alligators there, which is why it's called Alligator Alley. So you've got to be mindful when you're out there. So it's out of 27th Avenue and it's out by the Everglades. And it's a really good time. It's kind of fished out now for over the years because it's just been a highly populated area. But when I was growing up, it was a great place to go out with the family, have a barbecue, kids running around. Well, I was by the lake fishing right on my granddad's hip. And it was just something that I really enjoyed.

So you mentioned your family. Your mom has an interesting and dangerous job. So your mom is a firefighter, right?

Yes, sir.

Any aspirations of following her in that profession once you're through with football?

I got to say my mom is really tough. And I do not see myself being a firefighter. She also-- so currently now, she wasn't a firefighter but she's been promoted to a fire inspector. So now instead of going in and putting out the fire, she goes in and investigates it.

Wow.

But she was a firefighter for 17 years. And that's something that growing up, you just hope every time she goes out on a fire that she comes home to make it back safely. And God has done a good job of just making sure that she made it home safely. And I just think that she's-- it just goes to who she is as a person. Being a firefighter, when you're going into a fire and there's people in there, you're basically putting your life on the line to save others.

And that's just who she is. She literally sacrifices everything for me and my sister and others. And she doesn't have to know you. She'll just give you the clothes off her back and feed you and just love up on you. And she's just really a great person and just where I got all my drive to how to treat people and how to behave and just how to be mannerable. And I just learned everything from just watching my mom do it on a day-to-day basis.

So you got smoke detectors everywhere in the house at home, I bet.

Yeah. We got-- so when we first moved into our house, we got like this gate on the outside like by the door. And when we walked up, she was like, I don't know. This might be a fire hazard. She's always looking at things. Like she comes to my apartment like, AJ, why is your smoke detector beeping? Or this isn't right. So she's always particular with the hazards and the exits and things like that. But she means well with it. If you can hear my detector in the background here.

There you go. So back on the football field. Duke comes to town this weekend. Duke is in the Coastal Division with UVA. Louisville is in the Atlantic Division. So those divisions don't always-- those teams don't always play each other. Have you played Duke at all or will this be the first time?

This will be the first time that I've played Duke. I actually was recruited by Duke by Coach Derrick Jones, I believe, when he was at Duke. I believe he's at Texas Tech now. But I was being recruited by Duke out of high school. And this will be my first time playing against the university.

Is it wild-- I know this is just one of the little quirks of having a big conference and too many teams to play each other every year. But is it strange to be in your fifth year in the ACC and you're playing another team for the first time?

Yeah, definitely. And this is actually the only team that I have not played in the ACC, which was Duke. So yeah. It would be a fun experience and a good time. Looking forward to going out this Saturday with my guys and competing. But this will be the first time I play the Duke Blue Devils.

Well, good. Well, have a good week of practice. I appreciate your time. And we will see you out at the stadium on Saturday.

OK, thank you so much.

All right. We're going to take a short break and then we'll be back to talk UVA distance running. So stay tuned.

Did you know that more than 50,000 Wahoo fans have already downloaded it and are using the UVA sports app? It is the best way to keep track of Virginia athletic scores and news, in addition to some great fan contests. You can pick your very own sports preferences and never miss a final score or breaking news. And don't forget that you can listen to all of our coaches shows, live or archived, on the app. Go to the Apple Store or Google Play and search for Virginia sports or UVA sports. So don't miss out and download the UVA sports app today.

OK, joining us now is Nicole Freitag who's one of the distance coaches for the UVA track and field and cross country programs. Nicole, it's great to see you. Let me start by offering some congratulations. In late July, you and your husband had a son. How are you enjoying parenthood?

Yeah. It's definitely-- it's got its highs and lows I'd say. But no, it's fantastic. We always want to start a family. And honestly, I don't think we could have planned it much better with our sport being pretty much year round. So it's worked out pretty well.

So motherhood is a full-time job in itself. How challenging has it been to balance that with your coaching responsibilities?

Yeah. It's not easy. But I mean, luckily, I just have amazing support from our staff, my family. It's always-- it's going to be hard, but I don't think it-- I don't think I could have more support than I do right now. So I mostly work from home, putting together stuff for the team and recruiting and show up to all the practices. And we get the job done.

Good. You were hired midway through cross country season in the fall of 2019. Then the pandemic hits five months later. Does this school year feel a little bit more normal? I mean, year first when you came in late and then it abruptly stopped. Last year was last year. Is this a little bit more what you're accustomed to?

Yeah. Exactly. I know. That first year was rough because we really wanted to get to know the teams, the guys and the girls. You've got to get to know them before you start just really developing them and really kicking off this championship program that we want to build. So yeah, it might have-- it slowed our roll a little bit but definitely feels on track now that the team culture is great. The motivation on the team is fantastic. It feels like home. And it's going to be an exciting year. Yeah.

Speaking of home, you're a lot closer here to your hometown of Saratoga Springs in upstate New York than you were when you lived in Portland, Oregon. Do you still have family up there? And have you been able to-- if so, have you been able to see them?

Yeah, I do. We definitely waited when the pandemic hit. We didn't do any traveling just to keep the team safe honestly. But I've been seeing more of them lately. My mom comes down on weekends to watch Riggs for me, which is fantastic. And honestly, my parents are as much invested in this team as they were in my running career. I think they've missed it. So it's been really fun for them to relive it.

Were they runners themselves?

No. Yeah, my mom was a cheerleader. Probably should have been a runner but she crushes the local five kids these days. But no, they just-- they lived it through me and love the sport now.

So what was coaching during the worst part of the pandemic like? I mean, obviously distance runners are probably better able to stay socially distanced from each other than maybe some athletes. Did that-- for your distance group, was it able to-- was it business as usual to some degree at least?

Yeah. It was tough because every athlete handled it differently. Just mentally, what they were asked to do socially was just really difficult. So we just had to be pretty understanding that not everybody was going to get through it the same. And we definitely had to pay attention to the mental side of it. But as far as like training goes, they were certainly able to do what they had to do. It's just the life outside of practice, which is 22 hours a day, was obviously very, very different than what they were used to. So it had its challenges.

Your boss here is Vin Lananna who was your head coach back when you were Nicole Blood, an All-America runner at the University of Oregon. What's it been like being reunited with Vin on this side of the country?

Yeah. Pretty amazing. I mean, he's always been a mentor of mine since college. I obviously have a huge amount of respect for him. And it's been pretty amazing to learn what happened behind the scenes while I was an athlete, now just learning how much thought and creativity goes into every day of training. I had no idea as an athlete. So really fun to pick his brain on things. I'm learning so much. And I hope to be a resource for him as well, just being a former athlete, knowing what these athletes are going through. I think we're a good team.

Vin is still very involved with the coaching part of the job. How were the responsibilities divided with the distance runners among the coaches? Your other assistant distance Coach Trevor Dunbar also ran for Vin at Oregon.

Yeah. Yeah. I mean, it's so important, I think, to really understand Vin and him to understand us just because there are so many kids on the team. It's impossible for him to know what's going on with every single individual. So it's mine and Trevor's job to really just make sure nothing slips through the cracks.

And the three of us work together if something's going wrong or something's going right to figure out what we're doing. It takes all three of our heads to do that. Trevor and I can be a little bit a relatable I think with the athletes having just gone through the system not too long ago.

But certainly, Vin has the experience of coaching for however many years that he's seen and done these things before too. So I think the three of us-- all three of us are very valuable. Coach Vin is obviously the head coach. And Trevor and I are more, we call it like we're his extended arms I guess is probably the best description.

You and Trevor did not overlap as athletes at Oregon, did you?

Right. Nope. I was ahead of him four years. So basically when I graduated, he started.

Did you know him at all before he came to work here this past spring?

I did. Yeah. I was still out in Oregon training professionally. So yeah, we crossed paths. We've crossed paths a few times actually. In the running world all you know everybody. So yeah, it was pretty easy for us to just have a good relationship here already. He's doing great. And I'm happy to have him on the team.

Do you all work with both the men and women or do you divide it by-- do you divide coaching responsibilities by gender or does everyone work together?

Yeah. We all work together. I'd say obviously Trevor can relate more to the men and I can relate more to the women. So we take on those responsibilities maybe a little more so. But we're both all available. The athletes feel like they can come to any one of us three really for the support that they need. Yeah.

You were out of coaching for several years. You were in the working world. What drew you back to this profession?

Yeah. I mean, I loved it at Columbia. I loved coaching. It was just-- I was 23 years old and maybe two years older than some of those guys. So it was really good for me to figure out who I was if I wasn't a runner, I think, for a little while and grow up in a sense. So it was really neat working for Nike and working for On and really just growing as an individual and learning that I can be valuable in other areas of life.

And then coming back into it is awesome because I feel like I've experienced more that I'm a more well-rounded person. I'm not just a runner. So I hope to be a resource for these men and women, not just as a runner, but as someone who's grown up, went through college, taking those next steps in life because that's what they're here for in college, not just to run but to grow as individuals.

Cross country season, the men run a specific distance. The women run one two that there's a lot more variety in indoor and outdoor track and field. What distances do you work with in the winter and the spring?

Yeah. So from 800 all the way up to 10K. So we've got a big group of women. A lot of the middle distance stuff are more collaborative with the long sprints coach. So now Coach Bennett, we'll collaborate a lot on that types of stuff. But yeah, anywhere from 8 to the 10K I work with and keeps it fun for sure. They're all very different.

Well, in the 800, last season obviously, the big news for this program was what Michaela Meyer did. What was that like to witness that firsthand? And I know you've been part of championship teams and you've seen that happen. But for her to become the first woman to win a track and field individual title at Virginia, that had to be pretty cool to watch.

Pretty incredible. And just the growth she had over that year as an athlete, not just like her getting faster but her just really learning how to be a good competitor, making smart decisions in races, learning how to train. She was a student of the sport and she learned so much. So it was just really fantastic watching her grow and get faster at the same time. And she is so deserving. So I was going nuts. I wasn't able to attend NCAA. I was nine months pregnant.

Yeah. I wondered about the timing of that. So you watched it online and--

I did. Yeah. Coach Vin FaceTimed me while she was warming up and stuff. And he kept me as involved as he possibly could with me being 3,000 miles away, which I certainly appreciated. But we've been a team, the three of us, all year getting her through it. So it was nice to try to be there with them at the same time.

Hayward Field, that's your old stomping grounds. Does that make it even tougher to miss that? I mean, it would have been great, I'm sure, to go back to Oregon.

Totally.

For that event.

Oh yeah. I mean, I haven't seen the new stadium. Our team, our 2010 team is being inducted into the Hall of Fame this year. And they've all been back to the stadium and they've been talking about it. And I still haven't seen it. But pretty cool to see how far it's come since I've been there. It's a good place for our sport, I think.

I had Michaela. She was on this podcast. I don't have the exact date. I think it was in the late summer. It was after the Olympic trials and everything. And I asked her about cross country and she acknowledged it's not her-- that's not her Forte but she seemed like she was up for it. And having been through it last year, she was eager to see what she could do and how she could improve. What have you seen from her so far this fall?

Yeah. I mean, the fall is such an important time for middle distance runners. Even though they're not competing, it's so good to build strength. And so this is just a fun way for her to do so. I mean, all the pros, they're just grinding by themselves typically this time of year and it's less fun. But she gets to train with the team and throw in a couple of races. And she's really enjoying it. And she's getting stronger. Last year, she did this season and it was brand new to her. So it was a little scary and she was still building, but she seems like a better now. And I think it's going to be really good for the longevity for her season. Yeah.

When you ran at Oregon, the Ducks won one NCAA team title in women's indoor track and field. They were NCAA runner ups twice in women's cross country, twice in women's outdoor track and field. That's a lot of podium finishes. I know the staff here, Vin and the staff, have lofty goals for both of the programs here. How quickly can you close those gaps and reach those goals having been through it?

Yeah. We did it so quickly at Oregon. When I was being recruited there, Oregon wasn't even ranked. I think they were like towards the bottom in the Pac 10 at the time. So in the women's team, there were like five distance runners when I was recruited there. So by my freshman year, we were fourth in the Pac 10. And by my sophomore year in cross country, we were second at nationals.

So it happened so quickly. You just need to get the right people. And not necessarily the top recruits in the country but the right people who are totally bought in in what you're doing. And that's what we're working really hard to do right now so that I truly believe it's going to be a quick trajectory. We've already got a lot of the pieces to the puzzle and looking forward to the next couple of years.

At ACCs last year cross country, the men finished fourth. The women were seventh. So obviously still really early in this season. But how do you see both teams shaping up this year? Are they potentially better on both sides?

Yeah. I think we've definitely gotten better. I'd say we're a young team. So I think the championship racing is going to be a challenge for a young team, but they're learning as we go. We've already learned some lessons this season. We're pushing on moving forward. They're important lessons to learn. So yeah, I think we're certainly capable of running a lot better but we just got to walk the walk at this point.

The first race of the year was the Virginia Invitational last month at Panorama Farms. Mia Barnett, who's a first year, won that. I know that not necessarily every runner runs every cross country race in the fall before ACCs. But what has Mia brought to the program? And what about her class in general?

Yeah. I mean, Mia is a great example of her class. They came in, a bunch of them are state champions, a lot of them were top runners and had top times in the country. They are experienced racing at the championship level. It might be high school but competing for championship titles. So they bring that tenacity to this team here, which I think is really important.

And the returners, they bring the experience of running at the NCAA level, which we all know is very different from high school. You've got to be able to run for points. If you're not going to win, you still need to find a win in that race. So I think everyone really brings-- everyone is truly an asset on our team. They all bring something to the table. They're all very important. But Mia leading that race and really showing, hey, this is how you win. I really want to win and bring that mentality is very important.

How many distance runners this fall are you working with on each side?

I'm sorry. What was that?

I mean, how many distance runners do you have for the men and for the women in general? How big is the group you're working with?

Yeah, pretty big. I mean on the women's side, the women's side is a little bit smaller. We've got about 20, just under 20 women. And on the men's side, your mid 30s. I'd say about 34. And the difference is-- yeah. Yeah. They have a lot more middle distance guys that do cross for more of a fitness thing. Obviously, you bring 10 runners to ACC. So that's really what you need. Everybody else who doesn't make that top 10 is focused on how they're going to contribute throughout the rest of the year, whether that's in the track season or beyond that.

So yeah, I think our teams are, especially on the men's side, a little bit bigger. With COVID, we've got some people who have got 50 years and 60 years and all that kind of stuff. So things are a little bit wonky right now. But moving forward throughout the recruiting process, we're just really focused on quantity versus-- sorry. Quality versus quantity. So we don't need big classes anymore. We just need the right people.

Right. 10 runners go to ACCs. How does the scoring work? Then is it just top five or do all 10 get points?

Yeah. Only five count towards our score. But of course, anybody beyond the five displace other teams.

Yeah. Yeah.

Yep. So yeah, but just because you haven't run top five all season doesn't mean you can't potentially help and be top five that day. So it's nice to bring 10, especially with the groups that we have. It's very interchangeable with the places. We never have the same top five women or top five guys. It's always switching up.

What have you thought of Panorama Farms as a course? And had you ever seen it before you came here as a coach?

I had not. No. They hadn't hosted a lot of meets that would draw teams from across the country, I guess. But yeah, being here, I mean, it's a good fair course. It's spectator-friendly. It's difficult but it's certainly manageable. You can run a decent time on it. I think it's going to be a great championship course. We're super excited to host ACCs next year. And then obviously NCAA is the following year. We're going to be ready for it.

Yeah, you stole my question. I was going to ask you--

I'm sorry.

No. I was going to ask you about NAAs in particular. 2023 NCAA cross country championship's here. Is it fair to say-- and I think I know the answer to this because I've heard Vin talk about it. UVA doesn't want to only just host the event. It wants to be able to compete for titles on both sides. So is that just-- I don't know if it's posted in the office, but is that in the back of your mind at all times that you're building towards 23 and beyond?

Yeah. I mean, as we recruit, as we start to build connections in the community, like all that it's just setting up for that experience. It's going to be really cool. We want to have a good representation on the starting line because we know Charlottesville is going to show up. There's going to be lots of UV fans out there and we want to put on a good show.

Have you been at a school before where the university president routinely runs the Boston Marathon?

No. Just a president who-- I mean, he's shown up to a couple of our workouts and run with our men and our women. And it's awesome to, first of all, to have the support of our AD and for her to be so involved and asking what we're doing all the time is fantastic. And then you go all the way up to the president. I mean, it's pretty incredible the support we have for our sports here. And I love it. That's what's going to-- that's what's going to really make a strong program overall, is when you've got the support from the highest up.

I know it's not on the level of Eugene because I'm not sure there's any other city in the country that is. But what do you think of Charlottesville as a running community?

I was impressed from the first week I was here when I was walking to practice at 6:30 in the morning and there's runners all over the place with their headlamps on. So yeah, I think the running community has been super impressive. And even the involvement that we've gotten from alumni to want to be involved in what we're doing is incredible. So sure. I mean, there's track town Eugene, but I think Charlottesville is extremely impressive. And hopefully, we can build upon that because we really want to involve the community in what we're building here as well.

Great. Well, one final question and I'll let you go. You still getting out and running with your athletes?

Yeah. I definitely was before I got pregnant. And I'm the type of person I can't just like run to run. I'm not a jogger. So I've already got some stroller records set for the next couple of years that I'd like to chase. I need something to make me want to run. And the girls know that about me too so I'm sure they'll be helping me along the way.

You're a competitor. Well listen, thank you very much for your time. Oh, I meant to ask you one final thing. Tell me about the meet that you're hosting on Friday. We're recording this on a Wednesday, but it'll be posted before Friday. Their men's and women's are competing Friday morning at Panorama Farms.

Yeah. We're excited to be back there. The first meet obviously is our first cross country race. That was the first time all of our first years were in a UVA jersey. So that was pretty special for them. Got the nerves out. Now they've got some more experience. I'm excited to get them back on our course to really have a good strategic run on Friday. So we're looking for a strong showing.

So this is the XC23 Invitational. How many schools are invited to this?

There are eight women's teams and 10 nine men's teams, I believe, attending. So big, but not huge. It'll be good for us. I think good for that course to test it out in the first year that we created it.

Good. Well, good luck with that. And thanks again for your time. And good seeing you.

Yeah. Thanks so much, Jeff.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

All right, that'll do it for this week. Thanks again to Anthony and Nicole for clearing time in their schedules to join the show. The *Wahoo Central Podcast* is coming up on its 300th episode. We appreciate your support and encourage you to subscribe to and rate this podcast. To find previous episodes, search your favorite podcast provider for *Wahoo Central Podcast*. They are also archived under the Media button on the front page of virginiasports.com, our official website.

My guests in recent months have included Todd DeSorbo, Quinn Blanding, Steve Swanson, Val Ackerman, and Barry Parkhill, to name just a few. If you're looking for my stories, they're archived on virginiasports.com under the Content button on the front page. 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 50,000 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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