

Welcome to the official podcast of the University of Virginia Baseball Program, 1186, the podcast. We will be talking UVA baseball throughout this spring as the Hoos try to get back to Omaha, make that 1,186-ish mile trip back to Omaha, Nebraska in the college ball period. My name is Damon Dillman. I am joined by Andrew Rampsbacher, and we are joined every week by the head baseball coach of the Virginia program, Brian O'Connor.

Oak, I know you're really excited podcast off the ground.

Well yes and thanks for thanks for us to now because of technology, all Virginia cavalier fans can learn about the ins and outs of our programe As everyone knows, you, Andrew, Fitz, that we have a storied history in our baseball program here and a lot of great information and historical things that have happened over the years that I know Cavalier fans would love, as well as a lot of talk about this year's version, the 2024 Cavaliers. So I'm really excited to start this weekly podcast to give everybody as much information as possible about Virginia baseball.

I forgot about Scott Fitzgerald. Scott, I'm sorry. You know, are going to be fact checking us at every turn. That's our first mistake this week that I forgot to mention him.

But yeah, you mentioned obviously three games at home this weekend. It is opening weekend for the college baseball season. Hofstra here for three games, three o'clock Friday, and then the one o'clock starts on Saturday and Sunday. Really quickly, we don't want to belabor it too much, but how much are you looking forward to getting this started?

Damon, I'm really excited. Every year, this time of the year, when you start the preseason practice to prepare for another year, it's just really exciting as a coach. You work all year long for this opportunity, but most importantly, the guys are fired up to you know, take their journey wherever this year is going to take us. And they're excited for this year to be their opportunity and their journey. And hopefully it ends up in Omaha, Nebraska. And that we all know that that takes a lot of work. But that starts this Friday, February 16th against Hofstra at three o'clock and it starts the 2024 season and our guys are looking forward to it.

You've been coming back to the season after coming off a trip to Omaha. Every year has their different expectations. I think of your 21 seasons now, you've been ranked preseason 16 of them. The only few times you were not ranked includes your first year way back in 2004. Let's start there. What do you remember about the expectation level for this program for you taking on this program 21 years ago?

Well, thanks for asking that, Andrew. You know, I was just excited. I was a 32-year-old, never been head coach here, and just felt like the University of Virginia was a golden opportunity, really, that, you know, a year prior to that, the new stadium had been built. You know, and the combination of elite-level academics at our institution, really great high school baseball in this state, an outstanding conference for baseball. We all know how great Charlottesville is, and the combination of those things I just think was the recipe for success. You know, certainly right away, you know, surrounded myself with some really great coaches and Kevin McMullan and

Karl Kuhn. And, you know, just got to work right away and instilled in the players a belief that they could accomplish anything. And, you know, that first season. we inherited some pretty special baseball players. A number of guys that made a journey to the major leagues and stayed there for quite some time. Certainly not having sat in this seat as the head coach and completely responsible for the baseball program. Certainly there's some uneasiness, but that was overtaken by excitement that year.

Being ranked in the preseason is something in all those years that those teams have earned starting the year out. This is just another one that there's a lot of people out there that think a lot about the talent. on our ball club. We know that the rankings don't mean you're going to win the games. You got to go out there and earn them. But it's a testament to, you know, the ability that you have on your team. And I think back then, 20 years ago, Maybe people didn't quite know who Mark Reynolds and Ryan Zimmerman and Joe Koshansky and Scott Head and right on down the line, how great of players those guys really were at that time. And certainly they earned it in that first year to host the first NCAA regional in the University of Virginia's history. That said, every year starts out with excitement just like this year does.

This year's team is ranked as high as number 10 in the preseason poll. Through the years, those expectations vary in terms of ranking, things like that. Only one year, though, you were preseason number one. That was 10 years ago. I can remember it fondly. Damon and myself were members of the Charlottesville media at that time. And that Baseball America poll came out that morning. And it was immediately you had a kind of a press availability to discuss being number one in the country, which was a big deal the first time. And the only time this program has been ranked number one in the country in the preseason. Being that was 10 years ago, and you've had obviously success since then, the next year you went on to win the national championship. What do you recall about that specific preseason and the expectations potentially that weighed on a team that was number one and was loaded with a very talented junior class?

Well, first I want to acknowledge about how great it is to have the two of you now on our side, right? When you were working for the local media, you were on the other side, right? Asking the tough questions, right? Yeah, that's right. And now you're on UVA's side. So, you know, I get to drink my coffee. Compliments of Andrew there. So it's great to have you guys on our team now. It's awesome to start the year off as the number one ranked team in the country like we were in 2014 I think it's a you know it's a milestone you know moment in a program's history Wake Forest earned that this year in 2024 right and and They've earned it. Right. They made a great run in the College World Series last year and they got a lot of really talented players. And that's what those rankings are about. And, you know, that 2014 preseason and season. And wouldn't it work out that we ended up playing in the national championship series that year? But it's interesting. It's very interesting as a coach managing expectations when you're the preseason number one. And I remember vividly deciding how I was going to handle it with that team. And that was to just say a bring it on kind of attitude that like we do have special talent. We have earned this right. And to not shy away from it, to talk about it and address it and say this is something that we've earned because of the talent that we return from the years past.

And you're exactly right. We returned a ton of talent. So it was not only managing the expectations of the overall team to be the number one ranked team in the country. It's also, you know, in that draft eligible year, the player's junior season, the individual expectations that they have on themselves of what they want to accomplish. And that's a whole separate management individually of how do they handle that year. And so I, Fortunately, it worked out. The individuals on that team managed it really well and performed at an extremely high level. And that year, that journey in 14 led us to Omaha and gave us a chance to compete for the national championship. And so I just believe that as coaches, you can sit there and say, hey, the rankings don't matter, right? And we know that it doesn't mean that you're going to win the games. You go out and earn that, but it's a statement of what people that follow college baseball closely believe your skill talent is on your ball club. And so obviously there's a certain amount of people this year that believe in the skill and the ability that we have as individual players on this year's team.

I think that's a really good example of, and we were talking about this a little bit before we started recording, but In your two decades here, and you mentioned how young you were when you first took this job, but the lessons you've learned along the way over these past two decades, how do you think you've kind of grown and evolved as a head coach? Yeah. Evolved a lot, right? And I don't know if we have- The game's evolved too, not just the game, but everything has evolved in that time. There's no question. I mean, what you can do for players now, the resources available to them, the stadium's different. All of college baseball is different, the emphasis on college baseball. So the game has changed, the surroundings has changed, and we as coaches- As you start to move through your coaching career, you learn so much from the players about how to handle them and how to manage them. We don't have enough time on this podcast to talk about, you know, all the things. I mean, Andrew could write a book about that. Right. And so but it's really in. the day to day management of how you talk to the players, how you run a practice, you know, how you foresee things that are going to happen later in the season and how do you manage those situations today for where you want your team to be down the road? And those are lessons learned, right? I mean, I got to tell you, our first four years here, As the coaches, we won a lot of games. We changed the standards and the expectations of this program, not only within it, but nationally, right? But everybody was saying, hey, they get to a regional and have a great team and host a regional, but they can't get through that regional, right? And why is that? Well, sometimes that just doesn't happen ever for some ball clubs, right? I mean, there's great teams in this country, right? that haven't been to Omaha, and they've been great teams for 20 years. And I'll tell you guys that I came to the realization that we as coaches on how we interact with the players when it's coming down the stretch run is critically important, that we have to trust and believe in what we've instilled in them and the work that they've done all year, that when we get to that point, yes, we need to be prepared, we need to be excited and energetic, but we got to go out and let them play and let them perform. And once we started making some adjustments as coaches on how we manage them, we just took off in what we were doing in the postseason. And, you know, even today when we play in Omaha, I'll have friends text me or, you know, people that support our program and they'll say, geez, you know, I watch you in the dugout when they put the camera on you and it seems like a comatose. Right. And that's a lesson learned over the years that as you start to get

to that time of the year, let the players play and let them do what they do best. And that has served us really well.

You know, here at Virginia, there's so many successful programs, you know, men's tennis, swimming, basketball that have won national championships in recent times. Do you, is there a camaraderie among you coaches that you kind of talk about how to handle success or lessons you've learned?

Oh, 100 percent Fitz. And there's never enough of it. Right. You wish we're all in our individual situations trying to manage our programs. Right. And there's as you guys know, there's a lot that goes into that. Right. But there is opportunities to consult with other coaches in this athletic department because we have one of the great athletic departments in this country and the resources of other coaches. Coach's knowledge and experience of dealing with situations is great. I mean, I can't tell you how many times back in the day when I was at the McHugh Center as a young coach here, how many times I was in Dom Starsia's office asking him, hey, Dom, how do you handle this in your lacrosse program? And he's one of the great coaches we've had in this athletic department. Or the other day, our men's tennis coach and I, Andres Pedroso, had a long conversation about things we've done and things he's done throughout seasons to manage your team and manage the expectations that we all have on us. And it's an incredibly valuable resource, Fitz. And I just wish there was more time to do it, to see what Tony Bennett is doing this year and the management of his team. right the foresight that he has shown that maybe back when things weren't going up to everybody's expectations how he can see how it's going to be three and four weeks down the road and make it adjustments and tweaks and stick with what the standards are of their program and knowing that they'll be there in the end is so powerful and it's awesome to witness

How hard is that as a coach? How hard is that a coach when you maybe have the foresight to know that, hey, I'm making this tweak now that it might not show in the results in the next game, but down the line when we need to be peaking, when we need to be, it'll show up then. How hard is that? And how do you develop that as a coach? Like how are you, I guess patience maybe is the right word in that sense.

Yeah, patience is a big word, right? We talk to the players all the time. You need to be... impatient in how you work and you work at a feverish pace but you need to be patient with what the results are right and so and that holds true to us as coaches and so Andrew, I wouldn't say that it's hard. It's challenging. But those are the things we love, right? Those are the things that coaches that are leaders of the program love being in a situation where you get to make those kind of decisions. Right. And I mean, I think about 2009, our first trip to Omaha and consulting with the rest of our staff, you know, Coach Kuhn, Coach McMullan, our entire staff and thinking about what are some adjustments we need to make in this stretch run to be the best team we can to have a chance to get to Omaha. And that decision that year late in the season was to plug a a second baseman in the lineup by the last name of Werman and move our first team all acc second baseman Phil Gosselin to left field right and sure those conversations are are not easy right but because it negatively maybe impacted Phil Gosselin but

that was the right thing to do for that team and if it doesn't work it falls on my head, and those are the decisions that you make. Fortunately, it worked and made a difference in our ball club. But those are the things that I – it's one of the three reasons I love to coach is to be in a situation where you have to make difficult decisions. That isn't always whether to take that starting pitcher out or not and who you're going to bring in. Those decisions are more often – What are you doing personnel wise and moves you're making to give your team, that team, the best chance to be successful?

What are the other two reasons that you love coaching?

Well, I mean, first and foremost, I love building something and making it better. And even all the things that we've accomplished in this program, we're still building. We're still trying to get better. And the second one, Damon, was I love the impact that you can have on young men's lives. I really do, you know, like the impact in the moment, but the impact for years down the road, right? Nothing puts a smile on my face more or gives me more pride when you have a 28 year old player or a 28 year old that stopped playing for you six years ago and he calls back and says, hey coach, I appreciate what you and the other coaches did for me. I didn't realize it in the time with the values and the lessons you were instilling us. But now that I have a two-year-old at home and I'm highly competitive in my job, I get it now. And the impact that you can have on the rest of their life is significant. So those are the three reasons, top three reasons I'd say I love to coach. I love building something and trying to win championships. I love the impact you can make. And I enjoy the opportunity to make difficult decisions.

I think that's wild, too. So Phil Gosselin, first team All-ACC at second base then he moved into left field and he's first team all ACC in left field that's uh there's a number of examples in the program's history with that but that's just kind of remarkable it speaks to like how he took those that news you know like not obviously he's a great player MLB player but that's I wasn't around the program but that's wild to me.

It is, but Fitz, that's what happens when you have players that are completely bought in into what is best for their team. Right. And when they put their team first and foremost, rather than what they want as individuals, it's amazing what you can accomplish. And look how it plays out. Look at all the positions Phil Gosselin played in his major league career. Look at what Chris Taylor has done. You know, Chris Taylor, when he came here as a freshman, he started in right field down at Auburn the opening weekend as a freshman and then eventually moves on into the infield and plays shortstop. Right. And look at all the positions he's played with the Dodgers. So an unselfishness. out of our guys, is vital. One of our coaches right now, John Hicks, who retired from the major leagues, he's back here finishing his degree, played first base here, caught. His opening day debut in the major leagues, he played third base. So you just never know. As a young player out there, whether it be in college or prior to college, if you take the attitude of, hey, coach, whatever's best, it ends out working out.

Really quickly before we wrap things up, we were talking a little bit about this earlier before we started recording, but you had a pretty good story about your first win. What do you recall from that first win, your first season here at UVA?

Yeah, boy, Damon, thanks. That was 20 years ago, and we actually went down and played a three-game series at North Carolina A&T. When I got the job and got the schedule, that weekend actually was not even on the schedule. We added to it, and back then, you know, the season started a little bit earlier. There wasn't this universal start date and things like that. So we added those three games to schedule, went down to – North Carolina A&T with something to prove and had the guys really, really believing in themselves. And that year we actually we started off the season, the greatest start in the history of the program started out 11 and one. But that first win was game one at North Carolina A&T. That game ended in a triple play. to Ryan Zimmerman, I believe, a 5-4-3, if I recall that correctly, Fitz. I know you weren't here, but I think you've looked that up before. And then it was a great win. It was our first win here. And the players were excited. We went on to sweep that series. But it was a different time back then, right? Back then, you know, after the game was over, the coaches' wives were doing the laundry at the Drury Inn, okay, to get ready for the next day. And wouldn't you know it, 20 years later, we outsourced that. And, you know, the home team does it now and things like that. So completely different era of college baseball. But – I'll never forget it because I know how hard it is to win college baseball games.

Was that the last time UVA baseball stayed at Drury Inn? Might be. I don't think I've ever heard of that one. What does that bring? I don't think I... Well, you get what you earn. And that year we hosted a regional that year. And since then, hey, I love the Drury Inn, but since then we haven't seen the Drury Inn. Well, you know, you mentioned you're happy that Damon and I are now on this side. Back when we were on the other side, you know, we stayed at some fine establishments as well that probably were comparable. That day's in in a nice neighborhood out there in Carter Lake. A nice sleep inn. Damon and I were roommates in a few times to pinch some pennies. So it's nice to live lavishly like this. But speaking of of Omaha and obviously the name of this pod right is uh is 1186. That is four digits that have been referenced several times or more than several a bunch of times in association with this program um I think the diehards maybe know exactly what that is can you explain the the origins of of 1186 and what that means to this program um and how is that something you reinforce with your guys every year about what that means?

Yeah, well, it started our first year, and it's actually something that Coach Mac (McMullan) brought to me. about a mantra for our program. And at that time, we computed how many miles it is from Charlottesville, Virginia to Omaha, Nebraska. And depending on how you put that in your computer, it might not be 1,186 miles anymore.

It's branding at this point, right? It's just branding. Yeah, so it's branded now. They built that new bypass. That was four the bridges along the way.

Your bypass screwed us all up. And so, you know, it's has been branded from year one and we have it up in our, you know, in our locker room and in different places throughout our stadium. And it's been on our hats before and things like that. And it's, it's kind of been our branded mantra of, of Omaha, Nebraska and the miles that it is from Charlottesville to get there. And it's, and it's stuck. And, and, You know, there was a movie done, you know, after we won the national championship, 1186 to Omaha.

Andrew was the star of that movie.

There's two stars of that.

Yeah, two of the stars are on this podcast. And, you know, a lot of people thought when the movie came out, it was actually the flight number, right, from Omaha. from here to there. But so it's, it's awesome. It's stuck with us and, and it's great. And it'll continue to stay with this program for sure.

One last thing before we let you go. The road to Omaha is obviously starting here in Charlottesville this weekend, here at home. And I know how proud everybody was, how awesome the environment was, especially down the stretch here last year. These last couple of years, that electricity has kind of come back here to Disharoon Park. What has that been like from your perspective and the way you've been able to allow kids to come to these games and just to have that electricity back in the ballpark?

Well, Damon, listen. The growth of our fan support over the 20 years has been an integral part of us having success. You can recruit great players. You can develop them. It's hard to continue to recruit great players if they – play in the stadium and there's nobody in the stadium, right? It's a tentacle that's part of having an elite level college baseball program. And we have that here at UVA. And I'm just so proud to see what's happened over the years, really. But as of recently, the last couple of years, we did this great stadium addition where we put \$22 million into the stadium five years ago. You had COVID and all that that was driving fans away. And what we've done over the last two years to institute a 18 and under, kids are free at the stadium has helped just blow up our attendance. And last year to have the greatest attendance for a season that we've ever had in the history of the program we're really, really proud of that and to see the environment in the regional and super regionals you know I just remember walking out on that field looking around right before first pitch and say this is why we expanded this stadium is for these fans this six these six thousand fans to come to the dish and support our baseball program at the most important time. And let me tell you, we lost that first Super Regional game, and that crowd was a huge part in helping us win the next two and advancing us on to Omaha. And the policy is still in place this year, right?

Kids get in for free again this year, starting this weekend?

Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. 18 and under is free at the dish. We've had so many players over the years that have You know, come to games as a young person, right, as a fan, and then ended

out wearing our uniform. We have one right now in Henry Ford, a first-year for us who's going to impact our lineup right away from day one. Henry Ford grew up in this stadium. And for him to have the opportunity to wear... this uniform now in the stadium that he grew up as a youngster going up and watching the games is so cool and you know 5, 10, 20 years down the road there's going to be young people that have the same story and that's why I want those kids to come into our stadium and be welcomed and enjoy baseball to play baseball and maybe for a few of them it'll realize their dreams.

Okay, I have one last one before we wrap up our first episode here. Last year, it was very popular and really solid during those games you mentioned here in the NCAA tournament that were played at home where a certain player got to walk off with a really cool retro jacket. that was kind of derived from the players in the preseason, I think, right? And they were able to, you handed that out to a, not necessarily a player of the game, but a player that you felt made the biggest difference in that game. Has that kind of token or has the jacket returned this year? Anything that fans can look for?

Yeah, well, I'm not going to reveal yet on this podcast what exactly.

No spoilers? I'm trying to sell subscriptions here.

Yeah. leave that up to the players to decide they decided on that jacket and how they wanted to do it this year's team will decide the same thing and the reason behind that Andrew is winning college baseball games is so hard to do when we win one I want the players to enjoy it and then when they put their heads on the pillow that night they turn their attention to the next game And we cannot take ever in this program winning for granted. And I want them to celebrate it and recognize teammates that do things in a game to put us in that situation. And so that's why they do it and they enjoy it. And we'll see what the 2024 version is. Whenever that is that we get our first win, we'll see what this team wants to do.

That seems like a pretty good spot to wrap things up for the inaugural edition of 1186, the podcast. One last reminder, the Hoos are at home all weekend, 3 o'clock Friday, then 1 o'clock Saturday and Sunday against Hofstra to open up the baseball season. Oak's in a hurry. He's got some BP to throw.

No, I've got something to show you here. This is a card that Coach Mac (McMullan) made for the players in our first year. For them to put it in their wallet. Nobody carries a wallet anymore, right? But this was a card. That's Rosenblatt Stadium, and I have it here on my desk. And he made this for every one of our players and staff members to put in our wallet. Well, nowadays, right, it can go and... the back of your phone right um so I just this is something speaking of 1186 in this podcast that has stood the test of time and um it's awesome that we're doing this guys I can't wait for next week and I can't wait to see who you all have on as future guests Maybe that's what we'll do.

Maybe some like lock screen backgrounds we can make. He's pretty good graphic design these days.

Who's that? Mac? Everybody see Mac's cameo? He popped through back there. All right. I think we should probably wrap it up before we get off the rails here. Thanks again for listening to us. We really appreciate it. Yeah. 1186, the podcast. We'll be back next week.