

## 1186 | The Pod – Episode 8 with Assistant Coach Matt Kirby

One weekend of baseball remains on the regular season schedule for the Hoos. Those Virginia Tech Hokies will be in town Thursday, Friday, and Saturday to wrap up ACC play before everybody heads to the ACC tournament. This is the latest episode of 1186, the podcast, the official podcast of the University of Virginia baseball program. I'm Damon Dillman, joined as always by Andrew Ramspacher and Scott Fitzgerald. And we are joined by the assistant coach of the Hoos, number one in your program, I don't know where he ranks in your heart. Matt Kirby joining us this week here on the podcast, the newest full time assistant here at UVA. He's been here for about a dozen years, but now a full time assistant. And yeah, that's that's a great way to start this. And what's life like now as a full time assistant after all those years as a volunteer?

Well, first, thanks for having me. Been a long time coming, I guess, since we've been talking about this since January.

We got to get the ratings up. So we've called in the, you know, the closer.

Correct. No, it's been awesome. It's been, you know, I guess the, the, the best, the best part of it is you feel like, you know, I've always had a hand in a little bit of everything, but you all, but not always been able to go out on the road recruiting and do those things. And that's, that was kind of the biggest thing that the, becoming full-time allowed me to do. So having that hand and being able to do that and be more involved in that piece has been great for me.

What is, because not only do you now have your hand in recruiting, you're the recruiting coordinator now. That's an additional job title that came with all this. What does that involve? What has that meant for you?

Basically, it's been more kind of organizing, taking some things off of those guys, you know, Mac (Kevin McMullan) and Drew's (Drew Dickinson) plate and Coach (Brian) O'Connor's plate, taking things off their plate and trying to organize some things to, you know, a lot of spreadsheets. I've gotten pretty good at Excel and trying to, you know, maneuver scholarships and different things like that. and play to see what we have available and what going forward. So that's been, that's been interesting. You know, I've been able to go out and see our 24 commits, you know, a majority, a good amount of those guys play. But for the most part, it's really been supporting Mac and Drew and Oak and whatever they need from that standpoint.

Now that you're going out on the road, Is Mac going to let you go to Jersey or is that something that you just don't touch?

I actually was there two weekends ago. I was allowed to go. I walked up to the game and the first scout I see says, oh, Mac let you out? We laughed. But yeah, I was there. I was up in

New Jersey two weeks ago during the exam break. got to see one of our former or one of our current 24 commits.

We kind of joked about this with Anthony Stephan on last week and like what that's like and Max reputation kind of in the Northeast. You've obviously, you know about it because you get these guys, they would come in and you coached them up and stuff. And, Obviously, Mac, you know, tells you tales in the road of being up there. But now that you got to go out there and can you kind of like feel his influence? Like what is what is his reputation up there? Why is UVA so good at recruiting the best athletes in that area?

Well, one, as soon as you walk up, everybody, the first question they ask, how's Mac doing or where's Mac? That's the first thing. Everybody from a scout, from a high school coach, from a travel coach, anybody from Jersey, that's their first question to myself or Drew. So, obviously, he has – everybody in Jersey knows him. you know, not only as a baseball coach, but, you know, as a baseball player, as a football player growing up in Jersey. So obviously his reputation precedes itself with those guys. So being able to go up and actually talk to people that have known Mac for a long time is a cool experience as well.

Is there, with you now, kind of like in the... the thick of the recruiting process, is there anything that you kind of uncovered that you are surprised about, maybe from a student athlete perspective or something that student athletes or prospective student athletes are looking for now these days?

You know, obviously, I think it's going to continue to evolve and change with NIL. I haven't had as many of those conversations about NIL and different things like that. Obviously, we were limited in what we can discuss with the recruits in that standpoint. But I think it's starting to play a whole different avenue. then, you know, you would think with... You see it more with transfer guys, but it's starting to creep into the high school piece. And a lot of that, in my opinion, it has to do with their advisors because they know what's going on with their guys that are already... that they're advising in the college game. So they know that there's opportunities out there and they're trying to prepare those guys. From a travel standpoint, from a recruiting standpoint, you know, there's not... There's nothing I've been surprised about. I think the biggest change in the last, I would say, two years is that we moved to a system where you can't have contact with guys until August 1 of their junior year, which I think is huge for both the player, the recruit, and us as a coaching staff in college baseball in general, just because you're not having to make or have conversations with eighth graders or ninth graders. And that's what we were doing. And you're having guys with who haven't having conversation with guys who haven't even played their first baseball game at their high school level or haven't played their first varsity baseball game. They're already committed to a UVA or a North Carolina or an LSU and things like that. So I think that has helped a lot from that standpoint of allowing kids to be kids, enjoy playing. And then, okay, when August 1st comes, they have at least played at least two years of high school baseball. They played two years of at least the summer circuit at a competitive, a high competitive level. to be able to evaluate those guys and not just say, hey, what do we see? What do we think these guys are going to be in five years? Right. I mean, you're trying

to look into a crystal ball and you get some of them right. You don't get some of them right. But this hopefully moving to August 1st allows us as coaches to make better decisions, but also for the players to be able to make better decisions. I think that's a huge piece in it that they actually understand and value more than just baseball and kind of understand what, okay, I'm a little bit closer to college and I can make a little bit healthier decision.

I've always wondered about that. What what how hard is that? Because obviously there's so much projection involved when you're talking about an eighth grader. What what what are you looking for? What kind of traits? What kind of like what what kind of things jump out at you? It has to be impossibly hard.

Athleticism is the first piece, right? That's the biggest thing, you know, you're. We tend to recruit up the middle, catching, pitching, shortstop, center field. And those guys are extremely athletic players for the most part. And at that age, you're looking for a guy that maybe has more, throws the ball pretty well, has above average arm strength, can run better than his peers. you know, is a little bit more twitchy than his peers. A lot of times those guys that you saw committing as freshmen in high school, they had basically matured faster than their peers. And it's interesting because if they don't continue to work, the guys that weren't as good as they were as freshmen, They continue to work. They kind of put in a little bit more extra work because they have to to keep up and hang with those guys that once they do mature, they either catch up to them or they end up passing those guys if those guys don't put in the work. So the biggest thing is athleticism and probably, I mean, arm strength and, you know, seeing how guys move. I mean, it was a total, you're taking an educated guess, right, of what you think a player is going to be. And we we've done that. We've been pretty good at projecting those guys. But again, you're you're flipping, you know, you're quite honestly, you're flipping a coin with hoping that you're at an 80 percent, 90 percent mark of getting it right. Or even higher. I mean, you're hoping you're doing it at 100% rate, but, you know, it's never. Nobody is. Yeah.

Yeah, it's wild to me.

On this current roster with guys, you know, prior to those rules, right, where they could commit earlier. Obviously, Henry Ford is someone that, like, how long did you know about him? Because he was in your backyard. I mean, McIntire, Little League, the whole thing.

So I used to see traits in him when he was like, you know. I used to go over to McIntire all the time because, you know, obviously running our camp business, I would go over there and put up, you know, try to put up flyers or make my, you know, put myself in front of the families and the kids. So one, they knew that I genuinely cared about the kids playing, playing in that little league. And the same with Central and, you know, going to those little leagues and being and being available and present for those kids and seeing, you know, okay, hey, you know, the look when they see, hey, Coach Kirby's here, somebody that they've seen, you know, all the time in the camp aspect, right? You know, because, you know, part of my job as a, as a camp coordinator and camp director was to give those kids

an unbelievable experience. And part of that was me trying to do my best of trying to learn every kid's name within two days, within 24 to 48 hours. And I got pretty good at it. So even when I go to Little League games, I actually went last Thursday to see one of my buddy, Kevin Badke's son, Connor Badke playing a coach pitch game or machine pitch game. And sure enough, as I'm walking over the over the hill, Coach (Tony) Elliott's son drills one off the wall. Right. You know, so and he's been and he's been in our he was he's been in our camp. So you see guys that have been in our camps and stuff like that. So, you know, seeing Henry Ford and saying, OK, here's a kid who's again, much more physically mature than his peers and dominating at the level he is. You know, it's fun to watch, you know, you sit there and you say, okay, hey, you know, eventually at some point this guy's going to be hopefully a Cavalier, but, you know, you also want to see how those guys progress through Little League. But, yeah, it's pretty cool seeing him come up through at McIntire Little League and then, having him end up committing here and now having a ton of success here as a first year. Did you learn his name pretty quickly? Oh yeah. Oh yeah. How old was he when you first saw him? I probably saw him first time I saw him was probably 10 years old. You know, obviously at a young, at a young age, you know, you see, you see guys, You know, I think about like going to watch Connor Badke, who, you know, kind of like I'm Uncle Kirby to him, right? I've spent so much time with his family that I'm the uncle, right? So that he knows and you sit there and watch and you say, okay, hey, I've seen this kid at camp and you remember that kid and you see these guys put good swings, you see them make good plays. And, you know, you remember that from even remember that from camp. So. it's pretty cool to see those guys in camp and then see them have success at the little league level.

I'm fascinated by the names part. If you do the numbers, so 12 years during camp, I don't know, how many campers do you guys usually have? In a year? Over 600? 600. And then you got 40 guys a year per roster. And then you're worried about another, you know, I don't know, a pool of another 100, in your recruiting class, do you have a trick? Because I thought I read somewhere like that the human mind can only like process like 500 people.

So my whole thing of trying to remember everyone's name, you know, when you're running a camp business, you're putting so many kids into an Excel spreadsheet. So I created Excel spreadsheets for each camp. And then, of course, you know, when you're putting together teams or rosters for each camp to divide kids up, sign out sheets, sign in sheets, you start to learn, okay, if a kid can give me his last name, I know I can give you his first name. And then it was just putting together the face because I'd put them into the computer so many times. And then it was like, okay, if I can, when a kid walked up and he gave me his last name and I said his first name and seeing his eyes go wide, I'm like, OK, that makes a difference. And then when I can walk around throughout the camp and talk to a kid and not calling by his number, but calling by his name, again, the experience that gives a player and how much you truly care about an individual. To me, it was just me making that impact to try to say, OK, I'm going to do this. you know, putting in the work to try and to, to actually remember their names from year to year as well. So that's, that's been my whole trick is try to put those guys names in. And then once I, once I can, once I know their last name,

remember their last name, I've got their, I've got their first name. You put their, You put their faces together with that, and it came pretty easy to me. My wife is, again, she's the same way. She's like, I have no idea how you do it. But again, I mean, the experience, again, of trying to give a kid a great experience in our camp, whether it's the youth level or the high school level, it didn't matter to me. That was an important piece for me.

The legwork is what you got to do. You can't pass that Excel sheet off to student intern or anything. You got to do that.

There's the option too of always just copy and pasting something here or having the registration system create your Excel spreadsheet. For me, I always wanted to put the information in because it also helped me learn their grad year, what positions they play. down to what T-shirt size, right? I mean, you start to figure out, okay, when you're putting together teams, you're trying to say, okay, hey, I've got to be wary of putting all the guys with extra larges on one team and then all the guys that are smalls on one team. It doesn't make a lot of sense and doesn't make for a competitive camp.

We were talking before about you've been here long enough now that you can remember Henry Ford when he was 10 years old. And going back to Mac, do I remember correctly, was Mac your connection to this coaching staff that originally brought you here? Do I remember that right?

Yes, he was. So I actually worked a camp here. I believe it was Coach O'Connor's first fall. I was at VMI in 2003, or the fall of 2003.

2003.

Yeah, sorry, 2003. I was at VMI in the fall, and I came here and worked at camp. And that was my first experience. And I actually remember, I believe Tyler Cannon was actually in that camp as a young player. So, yes. You know, so I was here then. And that was just a weekend fall camp. And then I came here. I was at Georgetown in the summer of 11. And our volunteer there, Ryan Metzroth, was supposed to come work two camps. And he was in he was engaged, going to get married and basically said, like, I this life. isn't for me at the end of our season. So I had to call Eddie Smith and say, Eddie, our guy's not going to be here. I'll come down and work his camp in his place. So I filled out all the paperwork, did the background checks. And after the first camp, you know, I was driving back, actually pulling into the house I was renting, you know, a room I was renting in the house in Georgetown. And Coach Mac called and said, hey, would you have interest in know joining our staff and of course obviously yes um you know so within by the time I came back for the second camp I had you know basically talked to Coach O'connor um over the phone had talked to a bunch of people and like you know what this is the place uh where I need to be but you know my first kind of interaction with coach Mac was probably in my freshman year at William & Mary. We went and played. We played at East Carolina. We were on spring break, and that was our first CAA series. And that Tuesday, we got snowed out somewhere

in South Carolina. It might have been around Winthrop. Got snowed out, and then on Wednesday, they asked me, you know, I threw one inning in the fall. I was recruited as a catcher at William & Mary. And my senior year, I actually caught three games in high school. And Marlon Eikenberry, who was the catching coach at William & Mary at the time, and John Cole both came to see me. And Marlon Eikenberry, actually, the first time he saw me, I pitched seven or pitched ten innings. of a game and then caught the next five. We played a 15 inning game. So my brother, my brother caught me the first 10 and then I caught the next five. And then the next time Coach Cole came to see me play, I was actually catching my brother and he threw a perfect game against King and Queen. So You know, I was brought in as a catcher, but, you know, hey, we'll give you a chance on the mound. And my first outing in the fall, I gave up a grand slam to Brian Rogers, who was our All-American catcher at the time. And I remember Coach Farr saying, hey, you know, you got good arm action, you got good delivery, but, you know, if you were 6'3", 6'4", we might give us, you know, give us a shot. Well, we were down some injuries, stuff like that in the spring, and... that Wednesday we basically did it like an inner squad and I threw from the mound he's like hey we need we need somebody to throw I'm like okay I'll do it um and did pretty well so on Friday um during bp after I took bp he's like hey come on down to the bullpen can you can you uh throw like a 15 pitch bullpen so I did and he said hey would you be ready if we need you today I said sure so I caught the seventh inning. We were getting our doors blown off. And I caught the seventh and then pitched the eighth. And Coach Mac was the assistant coach at East Carolina. And that ended up striking out four guys in the inning. So that was my first interaction with Coach Mac. And then obviously him being at East Carolina during the time and competing against each other. And then obviously seeing him on the road when I was eventually at Brown and at Villanova and then Georgetown. So, but yeah, that was probably my first, that was my first interaction with Coach Mac.

Did he coach first or third at ECU?

He coached third, I believe. Okay. Yeah.

So yeah, you had a front row seat then.

Yeah, it's been a while. I mean, I remember certain things about that game. One of them was a guy, a pitcher by the name, a left-handed pitcher, Chris Rozak. He was also a pitcher. And Chad Tracy hit a ball that I still don't think, like if it wasn't for the plant trees at the time in center field, that ball would still be going. He just absolutely crushed the ball. So I remember things like that. And obviously, I was behind the plate when that happened. So I got to see that pretty well, too.

Obviously, your Georgetown, being your previous thought, what you just said, and we talked about recruiting earlier, but I believe this is correct. Your Georgetown connection is what helped recruit Brandon Waddell. Correct?

Correct. Yep. What all went into that? Pete Wilk, he just passed away last month. He's a huge reason why I'm here, right? because what people, a lot of people don't know is there was a, there was a time at Villanova. I left Villanova and spent a year out of baseball. Um, I was actually working in it for a construction company, cleanup company and in Philadelphia. Um, so for about nine months I was Basically, I was a scab. I was working for this company and had all of these guys that were in the union, and I was not. It was all through a recruiting. I recruited this kid whose family had ties in Jersey to this cleanup crew. I ended up getting a job just to pay the bills and to try to figure out, okay, what was my next move? So I spend a lot of time on trains going back and forth between Villanova and Philadelphia and putting up blinds. Basically, this company was putting in new windows at a high rise in downtown Philadelphia. So I was there at 7 a.m., knocking on people's doors, moving things, taking down blinds. These people come in, put in new windows, new sliding glass doors. I would clean up afterwards, and then at night, I would drive to Harrisonburg and then put new carpet in at what at the time was Wachovia's. And at my time at Villanova, every year, Pete Wilk would call and offer me a job. And I said, no, I was actually, I was dating a girl at the time who was also at Villanova, coaching at Villanova. Timing didn't quite work out. And then, okay, he basically calls me and says, hey, look, I know you're out and you want to get back in. I said, I'd love to. And Georgetown was in a hiring freeze. So I actually went there my first year as a volunteer and worked at L'Enfant Plaza Hotel at night. My first week there, I was basically parking cars, valet attendant. Within seven days, the manager quit. I became the manager of the L'Enfant Plaza Hotel. I forget what it was, like Capitol Parking or something like that. So basically, we would get down at practice over in Bethesda, Maryland, and drive our guys back. I'd get back to Georgetown at 7 o'clock and then drive to L'Enfant Plaza Hotel. and work there till 4 or 5 in the morning, go home, sleep for a couple hours, then go to the office. And that was my deal for a year while Georgetown was in a hiring freeze. And then once the hiring freeze lifted, he hired me. But he would send me out to Stanford camp. And every year, Stanford runs these camps for two weeks, basically. And me and him would go out there. We'd spend the week in the hotel. And Brandon Waddell was pitching in the premier game, which is, you know, the premier games are always the night games at 7 o'clock. And he was pitching against another right-hander. Pitching against a right-hander was pretty good as well. And Brandon was like 86, 88. Nothing that was like overpowering, but he threw a ton of strikes. It's like, all right, this kid's got something. But the guy he was pitching against was like 90 to 93. So the guys at Stanford, they take this guy off the side, and they're talking to him. I'm like, okay, I like this kid, so we continue to talk. And, you know, I had some conversations with him on the phone. And I remember I'm driving down 95, going to my house in King William to take some things home and then to be able to bring stuff back to move to Charlottesville, which I had no idea where I was gonna live other than Oak's basement for, which ended up being for like three months.

Are you still there?

No. But on my way there, I called Brandon Waddell and basically to tell him where I was going. And he answers the phone, and I said, you know, hey, how's everything going? He

says, Coach, I got to get something off my chest. I got to talk to you. I said, go ahead. He's like, hey, I appreciate our conversations, but I've narrowed down my choices, and Georgetown's not in my top two. I said, okay, understand. I said, well, I'm actually calling you to tell you that I'm actually going to the University of Virginia. and wanted to see if you would have interest in UVA." And, of course, like, absolutely. So, of course, you know, I talked to Oak. I talked to Ks (Karl Kuhn) about it, and then Ks takes the ball. He heads to Houston to see Brandon pitch in, like, a high school scrimmage. And Ks did the rest, but that was kind of the start of kind of getting at least a look from our coaching staff.

What did that mean to you then to see his career? I mean, obviously you're, you're, you know, you're sitting in front of the national champions thing and he obviously played a huge role in that. Didn't you write that or something?

I might've, I may have written it.

Have you seen the movie?

But me aside, how, I mean, do you think about that at all when you're in the, you know, in 2015, when he is playing such a huge role in that run?

You know what? Not at all. To be honest with you, not at all. Because, you know, it's a collective effort when you get guys committed, right? I mean, yeah, was I the first one to see him? Yes. He wouldn't have been at UVA if it wasn't for Case, if it wasn't for the conversations he had with Oaks. I mean, I remember being in Oaks. We would sit down in the basement and do work while everybody else went to bed. And him having conversations with Brandon Waddell and me being sitting right next to him, listening to him, and then get off the phone and saying, hey, it's basically come down between us and Stanford. listening to them have conversations about and that was part a lot of it for me was learning okay what's the next step of actually landing guys like this that for us for me at Georgetown would have been a huge get right and listening to how Oak talked to Brandon and how he talked to his parents. And, you know, that was a huge learning part for me. But, you know, and then once he got here, seeing how everybody interacted and everybody's part in actually landing Brandon Waddell. So when all of this happens, like, okay, you know, and we're going through everything, you know, he's just, he's a player that we all got, right? It wasn't just... And that's been a piece for every guy that's come here. You know, obviously there's somebody that sees him for, I mean, it'd be like Jake or Zach Gelof. I mean, Ks saw Zach Gelof pitch first, right? I mean, that was the first piece of it. And then he became this, you know, really good position player. But again, everybody has a hand in landing these guys.

One last thing I wanted to ask you before we let you go. We were talking about when you first got here and your connection to Mac. What were your initial impressions, especially once you started working for Oak and living in his basement?



It's so funny because my first day, I had lunch with Mac. and the first thing he says to me is hey all of your buddies are going to reach out to you and know and want to say what do we do what makes Virginia um you know special what makes them great right and obviously you're trying to you know I i understand his you know, the conversations like, hey, what we do here kind of stays here. You know, what happens in the woods stays in the woods. So I 100% understood that. But within my first, 30 minutes, not even 30 minutes, probably 15 minutes of practice, my first practice. I knew right away what separates, what the difference was from the places that I had been, and it's the attention to detail. And it starts with, you know, the practice plan that's put together, that's put together by Oak, Mac, and Ks at the time that you say, okay, Every part of practice is detailed. I mean, it's down to the minute of knowing. And then it's the responsibility of not only us as coaches knowing what's going on, but the players. And probably the one thing that I was doing is trying to, okay, how do I, again, how do I study this and memorize this? Because I don't wanna be the guy that pulls out the paper to see what's next, right? Of knowing what exactly is the next thing that comes up or the next thing that we're doing. So that was probably the biggest piece, the attention to detail in everything that we do. I mean, and having, the next big thing was probably having our own language. um that we that we talk and that was my probably the second biggest learn um is creating a language that you can con you know because of baseball and how you know what everybody tell you there's 100 ways to skin a cat right and having a specific language and being detailed in that manner allows everybody to kind of uh develop quickly and stay on and stay on task and being able to understand each other was a big piece of one of my first learns.

All right. That seems like a pretty good spot to wrap things up here. I know, like we said, the Hokies are in town starting Thursday night. You guys have practice coming up here today. So, Kirb. He's like Cher. He's like Bono. He's Kirby. Thanks for joining us. I'm sure this will be the most popular episode of 1186, the podcast to date. A high bar to clear. By the way, I forgot to mention my son's favorite UVA baseball player, Jacob. He got his baseball cards on Sunday. He asked, is Coach Kirby in there?

Hey, quick, quick story. Uh, My dad, right? Okay. He passed away on October 1st of 21. Okay. Very similar to Buck's (Matthew Buchanan) dad. Had cancer. Came, I mean, found out in August, passed away in September, right? But funny story that my dad would always, my brother, I was called the chosen one in my family. My brother, that's what my brother called me because I, in his eyes, I could do no wrong to my parents. And here I am, you know, 38, 40 years old at the, you know, this was a few years ago, but my brother would ask my dad, hey, what are you doing this weekend? He's like, I'm going out to watch Matt play. And my brother probably goes, dad, he doesn't play anymore. You're not going to watch him. So at least to my dad, I was still a player as well.

Jacob Dillman, you're still playing too.

There you go.

I do throw BP every day. Every day. I can be the BP pitcher.

What is your BP ERA for this team? It depends. Yeah. If I want it to be a feel good BP for them or do I want it to be a feel good BP for me? 99.9% of the time it's feel good for them. Okay. All right. I think that's going to wrap up this edition of 1186, the podcast for Kirby. For Scott. Thanks for watching. We'll see you next time here on 1186, the podcast.