

Welcome in to another edition of 1186, the podcast, the official podcast of the University of Virginia baseball program. I am Damon Dillman, joined as always by Scott Fitzgerald and Andrew Ramspacher. And we are joined this week to wrap things up on another historic season for the program by the head baseball coach here at UVA, Brian O'Connor. Oak, I think that's the best way to start this off is just obviously You're removed now about a week and a half, almost two weeks removed from the end of this 2024 season. As you reflect on it now, especially you've had a little bit of time to reflect on it, what stands out to you the most about what your team was able to accomplish this season?

There's so many things that I'm really, really proud of. First of all, I'm proud of this podcast, right? I'm proud of the work that you guys do to bring, you know, our fans and of our program some inside information on our Virginia baseball program. But, you know, I'm just really proud of the resiliency of this group. You know, the fact that all season long that, you know, only twice did we ever lose two games in a row. You know, once at the University of Miami, the opening weekend of ACC play, and the second time happened to be in the College World Series in Omaha, Nebraska. So just really proud that this group showed an ability to bounce back when they did, you know, have defeat. And that's a, that's a great trait to have as a team. It's a great quality to have for the rest of their lives. And so just really, really proud of them, how they, you know, continued all year long when they might've had a tough game to put it behind them and be prepared for the next day. And, you know, the overall development of the team and, you know, what our pitching staff did, you know, in the, in the regional and super regional to, you know, give us a chance to compete for a national championship in Omaha. And, you know, listen, getting to Omaha, Nebraska is incredibly hard to do. We know that, that, you know, it's, there's a lot of teams that care about their college baseball programs. And, you know, just to say that this is another year that we made that trek to Omaha and, you know, it didn't produce us results out there, but we had the opportunity and just to get, just didn't get it done. So, you know, Damon, I'd say overall, just the, you know, the, resiliency of this group but even more than that is how they represent this baseball program uh you know this community in Charlottesville is just loves our team our program and to see all the fans come out again another record year of attendance uh at the dish um you know we just keep building and continue to push the goalpost forward. And that's what excites me about continuing to be the coach here at Virginia.

Yeah, the numbers that jump out to me are obviously seven times in 15 years getting to Omaha is really impressive. But to do it in three of the last four years, what does that say about where, especially when you consider what was just prior to those four years, the COVID year and a couple of years missing regionals, and then you bounce back and you go on this run these last four seasons. What does it say about where this program is and how it continues to build on itself?

Well, thanks for bringing that up. We're proud of all those trips to Omaha, and that puts us in really elite company nationally, not only the last four years, but the last 15 years. And certainly the couple of years prior to COVID were a couple of down years for us. There were

only times in the 21 years that we haven't made the NCAA regional. And we were very, very close and you know, it just shows the resiliency of the program that we didn't stay down for long. We recognized what we, we need to do and the adjustments we needed to make to get the baseball program back on top. And that's where we've been coming out of COVID. So just you know, extremely proud of that. And the young men that decided to make the, the commitment to come here. You know, I think about the, the junior class that just finished in the three years that they had here and, you know, and, and the sophomore class that's been here for two years and have been to Omaha twice. So, you know, just impressive young men that, you know, wanted to make sure that we got Virginia baseball back to where it needed to be. And there's a little bit of a dip there and we figured it out and got it back on track. And, I'm extremely proud of that.

Brian, you mentioned the junior class, and I think a moment from that final press conference in Omaha kind of went viral in a sense, right? And what Jay (Woolfolk) said about you on that podium, what did that mean to you to see him kind of get that emotional and to talk about what you have meant to him and what this program has meant to him in his career here? Well, you know, when you're on the dais and you're speaking to the media as a player or coach, you've earned the ability to say whatever you want, right? And, you know, I didn't want Jay to do that, but, you know, he's an invested, emotional young man and – Very appreciative of the kind words that he shared and how much this baseball program and his relationship with me has meant to him. And, you know, I'm sitting there listening to it and I've got tears in my eyes because you see about... and hear about how passionate a young man is and how grateful he is for the opportunities that he has. And so just really proud of him. We wouldn't have been in Omaha had he not stepped up the last couple of weeks in the regional and super regional. I'm forever proud of Jay Woolfolk because he'll have for the rest of his life when his team needed him the most, he was the best he's been in our uniform in his career. And he will always have that when he hits the other potholes in his life that he can reflect back to when his junior year, when his team needed the most, he stepped up. So certainly as a coach, you work every day. to try to do the best you can to impact young people. And it doesn't work out for all of them. You set out to try to make that happen. But, you know, Jay's somebody that feels like this program made a difference in his life. And that's, I'm extremely proud of that. And, you know, I know it was heartfelt what he shared. And I actually just had Jay in my office this morning for 30 minutes and we were meeting again and You know, I hope the Major League Baseball draft works out for him because he has worked extremely hard for it.

Is that the kind of stuff like why you got into why you get into coaching to see someone like his story this year was pretty remarkable. I mean, right. Did not his first year just concentrating on baseball. There's these high expectations on him from the draft for your team, doesn't have maybe the regular season that he wants, but then it all comes together when you need him most. You have other stories like that that you've through the years where, and what does that make you feel like as a coach and a coaching staff that see that development of a guy like that? Yeah. You know, I, I've got, I've got many stories that are a lot like Jay Woolfolk, you know, um, You think about what Griff McGarry did in his career

and the talent that he had, and he harnessed it at the most important time when his team needed him. I think about Brandon Neeck stepping up in 2021 and what he did. There's just many, many stories about guys that are their best when they need to be their best. What a great lesson to learn. Again, those guys have that for the rest of their life because they'll encounter challenges down the road in baseball and outside of baseball. Andrew, that's at its core, why I got into coaching is that my college coach, I've said it many times, made such a profound impact on my life. And it was an opportunity for me to do the same thing. And when you start this journey as a young coach, for me, it was when I was 22 years old. And when I got into coaching is you have to get in it and stay in it for the right reasons. And sometimes, you know, a lot of wins, championships, coaches of the year, money, all these kind of things, new jobs, all that kind of stuff, you know, happen. And it can get clouded at times for some people. But, you know, I've just – I've really always focused on doing the best I can to stay present and understand and remind myself – You know, after every season, why do I do what I do? Right. And, you know, I take that time every year after the season's over to reflect and, you know, write some things down. What did I learn this year? Where can I be better? that's part of the evaluation of the program that I do after the year's over, we have exit meetings with every player that they sit individually in my office. And, you know, we talk about where they're at and where our program's at. And I take notes and then I reflect myself on, and then with the staff of, you know, where can we get better? And so, you know, But at its core, it's what I love to do is through the game of baseball, through the opportunity that we have every day in practice and games, you know, get these young men to learn. you know, how are they going to learn personal responsibility for their own self-direction in life? And if they have learned that through the game of baseball and learn self-confidence and what it takes to be successful, then I've done my job and they'll go on and make positive contributions to society, you know? And so that's what their parents entrust me with. And, you know, I know every day I wake up and, come to the stadium or out recruiting with that intention. And I think if your intentions are right and you understand really what your job is, the wins will happen.

Obviously, you've had that style, that approach here for 21 years, and you've had a lot of wins. One part of successful seasons is names pop up, job opportunities come up. It's the nature of the sport, particularly college sports at this time. Um, and Hey, Damon and I have been, we've talked about this podcast before. We're once, you know, independent reporters of this program and we're used to seeing your name sometimes pop up or linked or what have you when prime offer or other job opportunities come up. Um, yours came up again this week with another school. And how do you, when that stuff comes up, like how do you as a coach approach it, um, kind of, and deal with that? Yeah, that's a fair question,

Andrew, and I appreciate you asking it because a lot of people don't know. First of all, somebody's got to tell me about it because I deleted all social media off my phone this year after the Miami series because of the – hate that I was getting on social media directly towards me. And that's fine. I'm a big boy, but I decided to delete all of it off my phone. So right now I don't pay attention to it. But it's just part of it. When you have success, there's going to be people that speculate that There is other opportunities. And, you know, that's

always going to be the case. And that's tied to success. And that's fine. That said, you know, all that matters is what, you know, I believe. with my family and my staff believes that is the right thing to do. And the University of Virginia has an incredibly strong foothold in the landscape of college baseball. You know, Damon had mentioned it earlier, you know, going to Omaha three out of the last four years, seven out of the last, you know, 15 years. you can count on one hand the amount of programs that have done that. So if the outside world measures us by success and wins and getting to Omaha, Virginia is doing it at a rate as good, if not better than most others out there in this country. And so that makes this an incredible job, an incredible opportunity. And I am completely committed to this university and this baseball program. I was fortunate enough to, few weeks ago that Carla Williams thought enough of me and our staff and the job that we're doing here to offer me a contract extension. So y'all are stuck with me for a number of years. That's great for the pod. That means the podcast signed a long-term contract too. All right. Our players come here for a reason. They want to get a great education. They want to compete at the highest level of baseball. They want to win championships. And they want to develop. And they know what they're going to get out of our coaching staff every day and the track record that has been produced here. And so just because somebody writes that a certain job might be, in their eyes, better or more money or whatever it is, that doesn't necessarily mean make it the right job for Brian O'connor and his and his staff and so um you know I just don't pay much attention to it certainly sometimes you got to put out fires because players and recruits look at social media and sometimes people take it as the gospel and um you know all that matters is what uh my staff and I believe in. And the University of Virginia has an incredible foothold in college baseball, and that's here to stay.

You would pay attention to it when we were reporting it though, right?

No.

That's terrible. We're going to edit that part out. So with all that out of the way, what has it been like? We landed here, we got back to the ballpark when we got back from Omaha. How quickly did you get to work then on 2025 on next year's team?

Immediately in some ways, but part of what you have to do is you have to put 2024 to bed. You need to have the individual exit meetings with the players. I was in this office for about 16 to 18 hours for two straight days because the players need to get going and report to summer ball. We had... a handful of players that flew to phoenix for the MLB combine and they needed to get going so um you know that that's important is to spend the time to talk about their career and their future and the success we had this year and then looking towards the future you know while you're doing all that you're on the phone you're recruiting and doing what you need to do to have the best team on the field that you can have next year. And then, you know, one day after those meetings, I got in a car and drove to Atlanta, Georgia, and I was just got back last night and to go see all of our 2025 recruits that had committed to us. So I was down there for five or six days, seeing all them talking to their families. And, you know, it just, it doesn't stop. We'll be, we'll be recruiting feverishly all

summer and, You know, you got the high school players you're recruiting. You got, you know, you're trying to fill some gaps with the transfer portal. And, you know, before we know it, I mean, it's June 28th. Before we know it, the guys will be back at the end of August, and we'll be starting to prepare for the 25 season.

Oak, what's the offseason like now? Or I guess maybe what's the difference between the offseason with the transfer portal and without the transfer portal? Because I feel like that might have put some stuff on your guys' plates over the past couple of years.

Yeah, sure. I mean, Fitz, it's different now. Anybody can leave when they want to. You can acquire anybody, all of that. Yeah. you know, that, that said, we, year after year, since the portal's been in place, we retain a very high percentage of our players that have eligibility left or, and don't sign in the draft. And so, you know, and then you just got to, you know, I have roster projections for the next three years on Excel spreadsheets in my computer. And you look at it and say, okay, well, where are we at? And then what do we need? And, Certainly, we've got to get through this thing called the Major League Baseball draft that's in the middle of July. We have a lot of high school players that are very highly thought of from that standpoint and our current players. There's a lot of moving parts to it. We really won't know for sure what next year's team looks like until the latter part of June. And that said, you know, guys can also still sign free agent contracts after that, whether that be, you know, transfer recruits you have or any of your current players that are eligible. So it's always a moving target and you're just trying to. narrow in and zero in on what you believe your roster will look like and we return a great core of players next year and we'll be in a great position but we're actively recruiting every hour of every day the high school player but also the player in the transfer portal that we feel needs to kind of fill in the gaps for what our needs are for next year.

Have you already landed, though, your biggest recruit for next season with Jacob Ference announcing he is coming back for another year with your program?

Yeah, you know, certainly I'm excited for Jacob, excited for our program because he was a D3 player. He got two COVID years and we knew him coming in that he had two years and, you know, I had my end of the year meeting with Jacob and, you know, then a couple of days he followed back up with me and, you know, expressed serious interest and just really said that coach, I don't, I don't want to, you know, leave anything out there. And I love college baseball and I'd really like to come back and, uh, play one more year. And, uh, you know, and part of a degree plan and things like that, there's a lot of things tied to it. And so, you know, I certainly was excited about that, did not expect that, but, um, you know, he made that decision and, um, You know, certainly we're excited to have him back in our uniform. He's going to be a terrific leader. Obviously, he's a great performer on the field. And, you know, he's a guy that just loves to play college baseball. He loves to play to win. He loves his teammates and the environment that we have here. And, you know, we're fortunate that we've had him for one year in the season he had. And, you know, he'll be back next year in a Cavalier uniform. And certainly it was a big get for us.

How valuable is it that he's a veteran catcher? Yeah, very valuable. We all know Kyle Teal basically caught every inning for two years for us. So him and, you know, Jacob and Ethan (Anderson) did a great job behind the plate this year. And, you know, catcher's a position that you have to be strong at, you know, obviously you've got to be strong on the mound, but that guy back there touches every ball. You know, he touches the ball more than anybody on the field. And, And so his experience back there, his leadership is a really huge, valuable asset for us moving into next season.

You mentioned earlier about guys going off to play summer ball. How much how much are you keeping tabs on them while they're out there or are you in contact with them? How does that all work while they're out there, you know, on the job essentially this summer?

Yeah, well, fortunately I get emails every night from a, you know, a stat system that sends me emails about where our guys are playing and, you know, not specifically how did they do in that game, but how did their team do? And I can kind of follow it a little bit that way. And then, you know, just keep in touch with them via text or a phone call now and then. That said, I want them to go out there and live their own life and figure it out and be on their own a little bit. So I don't, hound them you know um you know I did talk to Eric Becker and Henry Ford yesterday to make sure they're settled in it at USA which is an incredible opportunity for them but um you know so there's we track it and follow it and you know communication sometimes with their coaches and stuff just to you know uh make sure that they're doing all right and doing the right things.

How big of a deal is that for those guys? You mentioned Becker and Henry. How big of a deal is that for those guys to get this opportunity with Team USA?

Well, it's huge. You know, I think most players... high-level players have a goal that they'd love to wear the USA uniform. And I feel so fortunate in my coaching career that in 2018, I got to coach the collegiate national team and be the pitching coach for that team and go to Cuba and Play be in Cuba for 10 days and play Japan in a five game series and, you know, help put the team together and decide the pitchers that we're going to wear that uniform. And, you know, USA Baseball this summer is a little bit different. There's a freshman team and a sophomore team. And so there they have to fill those two teams by ages there. But great opportunity for them because they're going to be facing some of the best arms in college baseball for a couple of weeks. And I'll tell you, you know, I love looking down at my uniform and it says Virginia every time I put it on. But let me tell you, there is something really, really special when you look down in those three letters on your chest and you're wearing that uniform representing your country. That's something really special when you're in the other dugout playing Japan on July 4th or you're in Cuba and you're wearing that uniform. It's just something that's really, really special and I'm proud of those guys that they've had that opportunity. In the 21 years that I've been the coach here, there have been a lot of former Cavaliers that have had a chance to do that. I know they'll say that it's one of the great experiences in their baseball life.

They're super thorough, I feel like, in their selections going around the country. I guess when they're getting down to the nitty-gritty, which Eric and Henry are at this point, how much involvement does the coaching staff, the on-ground coaching staff, have in selecting the final team? Because they're two of 56 that are going to be in training camp. So what's the process like, I guess, from your insider's perspective when you were a coach?

Yeah, it's a – It's a challenging process in the selection of the players. Because of the way USA Baseball did it this year, two teams, there was a lot more players that got invited. That's not normal. Typically, it's half those players. And then they cut down to make the final team. They did it a little bit different this year. And so... How it starts is really in the winter months, the general manager of USA Baseball, Eric Campbell, starts to put together a list with the coaches that are actually going to be coaching the teams. The different college coaches that are there and carry right now and they start to vet through everything and major league baseball is involved in that process because a lot of the funding to USA baseball comes from major league baseball so their scouts and things like that are in that process as well as recommending players ultimately the final decision comes down to USA baseball and the coaches that are coaching that team so throughout this spring You know, I got phone calls from USA Baseball checking in on really three players, Henry Godbout, Henry Ford, and Eric Becker. And they continue to track those players throughout the year. I don't give those players names to them. They come to me. And, you know, it's not a suggestion process from the college coach. They come to us and just kind of find out how they're doing. And then ultimately it falls on the coaching staff of USA Baseball to make the final decisions. And so, you know, it's a, it's a vetting process. You know, some people think there's, you know, some politics involved and things like that, like where do the players play and all that. But, It's a very, very thorough process to ultimately get to the guys that they invite.

Yeah, you don't see it like it's not a ceremonial job. The coaching staff there, there's work to be done, it seems. I remember when you did it and even when these guys are going through it, we kind of get some of the requests and whatnot. But it's not a ceremonial job. They really do a thorough process there.

No question. I mean, when I was involved in the selection of the team in 2018, I mean, we had – Pretty much the whole spring, we had a weekly phone call every Monday talking about how guys did and starting to narrow the list down and things like that. And then when you're coaching the team, it's full on. You're on the ground. You're practicing every day. You have games. You're traveling, things like that. It's a serious commitment those coaches make. But the process couldn't happen without them.

That's cool.

You got any mementos in your office there from that time? I do. I have my framed USA baseball jersey on the wall with a team photo. And then I have a signed baseball here from our team in 2018. And I can't tell you that I can read many of the signatures, but we had an

incredible team. I'm looking at the roster right now. Just, yeah. Yeah. Bryson Stott. Bryson Stott. Yeah. Adley Rutschman. Yeah. From Oregon State. Shea Langeleers. Yeah. Like, you start reading off those names. Torkelson. Torkelson. Andrew Vaughn.

Oh, wow.

Andrew Vaughn. Yeah. We had a really, really impressive team. And that was a lot of fun. You know, we beat, uh, Japan in a five game series here, uh, in the United States, which was the most challenging series. That was a lot of fun trying to win those games. And then, uh, we, you know, we, we went to Cuba and I believe I'm right about this. When we beat them in a series in Cuba, it had been the first time in 20 years that USA baseball has went to Cuba and won a, won a series. And, um, You know, so much that they canceled game five.

An international incident.

Yeah, really, really special group of guys and a lot of talent was a lot of fun.

You worked with Paul Mainieri again in that role, too. How great is it to have him back in the game at South Carolina?

I'm excited for Paul. What a great opportunity for him at South Carolina. And he's ready and has his energy and had some health issues when he left LSU and got those cleaned up and just had been feeling for about a year that he was ready to roll. You know, his buddy and athletic director at South Carolina, Ray Tanner, felt like Paul was the right guy to take them to where they need to be. And he's ready to go. We lost one of our staff members, John Hendry, because of it. But that's a great opportunity for John and just really excited for my friend and the opportunity he has to coach college baseball again.

We'll miss him in the broadcast booth.

Yeah, yeah. In the elevator in Omaha. He might need to get his eyes checked.

Now we'll get to question him.

Yeah, there you go.

All right, well, that seems like a pretty good spot to wrap it up. The 2024 season finale, I guess. Is this a season finale? Well, post-season finale. Okay. Yeah, and then we get into the off-season. So, yeah, this seems like a pretty good place to wrap it up. Oak, glad to see your offices. You're not, you know, it's still fully stocked. You haven't started packing up, you know what I mean?

You didn't have to go there. Come on.

But for Oak, for Scott, for Andrew, I'm Damon. I want to thank you for joining us all year long here on 1186, the podcast. And we will, yeah, we'll keep it going in the off season here. Thanks for joining us.