

University of Virginia Men's Basketball Media Conference

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Tony Bennett

Carla Williams

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Welcome to the University of Virginia. It's my pleasure to welcome everyone and thank you for coming to today's Tony Bennett retirement press conference. We're joined today by Director of Athletics Carla Williams and Head Coach Tony Bennett. First, before we get started, Carla would like to make some opening remarks.

CARLA WILLIAMS: Good morning and thank you for being here with us this morning. I've been in college athletics for 40 years as a student-athlete, a coach, and an administrator. I came to Virginia in part because Tony Bennett was here, a person and an institution that stands for everything that is important to us. The University of Virginia is an amazing place because of people like Tony.

Tony is a Hall of Fame coach and a world class human being. He poured his heart and soul into this program and the UVA community for 15 years. He elevated the UVA men's basketball program back to national prominence and to our first NCAA Championship. Tony has led the program with his guiding pillars of humility, passion, unity, servanthood, and thankfulness, and we're all better because of the way he has represented college basketball and college athletics.

The accolades are numerous, but his impact on the young people that have come through his program and the young people in his program today and his impact on every single person that comes into contact with him, those attributes are immeasurable.

So I ask that you please join me in thanking Coach Tony Bennett.

TONY BENNETT: Thank you.

First, thank you, Carla. It's been a joy to work for you and be under your leadership and what you've done for this university and your time here. President Ryan, thank you, during this time, what you did. I see Craig Littlepage. Thank you for taking a chance on me.

I can remember 15 and a half years ago sitting with you here. My son and daughter, Anna and Eli, were seven and eight years old. Laurel was right there. You still look the same, Laurel. I look about 30 years older, that I do know. But how special that moment was, and I'm so grateful for the opportunity.

It's been an emotional couple days obviously, and I'll share kind of the reasons and all that, and hopefully through questions I will get to it. So I might stumble around a little bit.

In thinking about this, what I would share, a quote from a missionary, Jim Elliott, came to mind, and it says, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

I've been here for 15 years as the head coach, and I thought it would be a little longer, to be honest, but that's been on loan. It wasn't mine to keep. This position has been on loan, and it's time for me to -- excuse me. I knew that would happen. It's time for me to give it back.

But to give it back to gain what I can't lose -- to be a better husband. I love Laurel with all my heart, and we're going to find out if you love me with all your heart because I'm going to be around a lot more. To be a better dad to my daughter Anna and my son Eli. My parents are both 81 years old, and I don't want to live with any regrets. Just to be around them, to be a better friend, a better brother. I know my sister, if she's watching, would be saying that to me.

I look forward to the relationships with the former players and even with the current ones and the staff that you don't always get to have when you're grinding away. So I think about that.

And it's mine to give back, and I've given everything I can for 15 years. I go back to the reason why I came here. I was so excited to test myself as a coach against the Hall of Fame coaches: Coach K, Coach Roy Williams, actually Coach Gary Williams, Coach Boeheim. I wanted to see if I could, with my staff, who's the reason why we've had this success while we're here, could build a program in our unique way to compete against the Blue Bloods.

I was so intrigued and excited about being at a school that had academic excellence and the degree mattered and it was important.

And what happened, I hoped I didn't know, was beyond probably my wildest expectations. To win six regular season ACC Championships, two tournament championships, to be in Sweet 16s and Elite 8s, win the National Championship. And the hard losses, the hard losses in the tournament. It's all part of it. I wouldn't trade it for anything.

There's no chance it would happen without the young men and how we did it. We did it in a unique way. That was my vision, our vision as a staff. Can we build this program that maybe is a little different than the way you do it? That's the beauty of this sport, you get to choose how you do it, with who you do it, in the style you do it.

I won't miss answering questions about pace of play or style of play anymore from the media, but we chose a way that we thought was the best way to win, and that's the beauty of this sport.

So I am so grateful. I think about those pillars Carla mentioned, and the first two, humility and passion. Humility means know who you are and have sober judgment, and passion means do not be lukewarm, be wholehearted in all you do.

I think those are the ones that caused me at this time to look and have sober judgment about where I was at. That's probably the thing that has choked me up the most and the hardest thing to say is, when I looked at myself and I realized I'm no longer the best coach to lead this program in this current environment, and if you're going to do it, you've got to be all in. You've got to have everything. If you do it halfhearted, it's not fair to the university and those young men.

In looking at it, that's what made me step down. There's still a way in this environment. There's a way with Carla and President Ryan and the board to do it and hold to our values, but it's complicated. And to admit, honestly, that I'm not equipped to do this is humbling, but it honors the pillars. Maybe that's why I knew I was going to do this.

Sorry, you can make fun of me later. My son is like, 'geez, Dad, get a hold of yourself'. I know it, I feel it. I make fun of one of my friends who's interviewed every time he gets emotional, and he knows who I'm talking about.

But that's it. This game, I think it's right for players, student-athletes to receive revenue. Please don't mistake me, I do. I think it is. But the game and college athletics is not in a healthy spot. It's not, and there needs to be change.

It's not going to go back -- I think I was equipped to do the job here the old way. That's who I am, and that's how it was. My staff has buoyed me along to get to this point, but there needs to be change. It's going to be closer to a professional model, Coach Carlisle, I think it is, where there's got to be collective bargaining. There has to be a restriction on the salary pool that teams can spend. There has to be transfer regulation restrictions. There has to be some limits on the agent involvement to these young guys.

And there are good agents, and there are bad agents, and they're driving some of this stuff that we're in.

I worry a lot about the mental health of the student-athletes as all of this stuff comes down. Sometimes when you're in it, you have to step away. Maybe I can be an advocate for the student-athletes and the coaches to get the changes, but this is a place that will not compromise and do it the right way. I wish it could be me, but it can't. When you know in your heart it's the time, you have to give it away.

I'll go through, just so you understand, and then I'll take questions. I'm sorry to be this long. There's a lot there. After the season, I thought about maybe stepping away. Every coach, you get to that. It was a long season. It was a hard ending.

And I thought about that, but the way the recruiting calendar works, you literally jump in. For two straight months we're in the transfer portal, and you guys know that. You're involved in situations and conversations and things that I'm not great at, but because my staff, because of Coach Sanchez, Coach Williford, Coach Vandross, all the coaches, all the staff, Coach Zay, we got excited. We landed a really good group of transfers. We had two good incoming players. And I was excited about that and going forward.

Then I was offered a contract extension, and I signed it. I didn't know if I'd be able to do the whole six or seven years obviously, but I was excited and thought, I think I can do this. I'm excited about the way forward.

As the season -- then we got a great commitment from a local kid. I don't know if I can say his name. He hasn't signed. I can't. What does it matter? I can't get in trouble, can I?

You can. And I was encouraged and it excited me for this way forward, and I kind of went through the summer and the fall hoping to do this. I felt some things as it went along, and it really wasn't until fall break that we have here, where Laurel and I went away and just kind of processed about what the future would be.

That's where I kind of came to the realization that I can't do this. It's not fair to these guys and to this institution that I love so much to continue on when you know you're not the right guy for the job. The reason I did it then instead of waiting -- I've always wanted this to be taken over by one of my staff members. I always have. I just felt, if I knew it was the time, instead of trying to delay it, I wanted these guys and the staff to have a couple scrimmages, three weeks before they play games, to get together and just to step out of the way and get away.

I'll still be around. I'll still try to encourage, if I'm allowed to be, but I won't overdo it. But that was the timeline, and I didn't know it would happen like this. But as I said, when you know in your heart it's your time, it's your time, and it's wrong to stay in this. It's hard to admit that.

I'm so grateful, all the young men I've gotten to coach, the stories of guys who no one thought were quite going to be that good, and they came here and they bought in and they played in a way of unity and passion and honored the pillars, and to see them take off and what they did for us, to see the coaches, it's been amazing. Again, that stuff's been beyond my wildest expectations.

To see these guys, one cool thing -- and maybe it's a recruiting pitch for these guys -- we have the most active players in the NBA that weren't ranked in the top 25. UVA does. I think we're sixth in all colleges for active players.

You can come here and get the degree, be a part of winning, have a pro career because of the leadership of these guys.

I'm excited. I'm excited for these players. They'll have to grow together. They have a very tough schedule coming up, but they have a chance to be good. The staff, with Coach Sanchez leading it and the rest of the staff, have a chance to take this group and do the job. They're more equipped than I am, and that's the reality of this situation.

I'll be around, but I'm going to miss you, but I am looking forward to gaining those things that I can't lose as I started out with and giving this back.

Q. Tony, when you were introduced in this room 15 1/2 years ago, you said you wanted to build a program that lasts and had sustained success. Knowing that you did that, does that make this decision any easier for you?

TONY BENNETT: It does. There's a piece in it, and I think I quoted it when we hung the National Championship banner. It's a proverb that says "A desire accomplished is sweet to the soul." And how we did it and who we did it with, that's the beauty of it. And what we went through and how we handled adversity.

My father always taught me recruit young men, hire a staff that you can lose with first before you win because you're going to have to go through true adversity, and that happens. And the fact even how it all played out. There's no question.

I don't think I had any gray hair at that time. There's a lot of things I remember. But it was a day of celebration at the press conference, but it was about what was to come and the relationship and how many years.

Q. I'm curious, you mentioned your father. He stepped away from Wisconsin a few games into the season, that was a little different circumstance. What was his advice to you during this time and his counsel?

TONY BENNETT: We talked. You know, this is more Laurel and I, but I told him what I was thinking, and he said, you have to do what's in your heart. He said, I love watching you coach. I said, really? You never watch us. How does that work? You're never there.

I wouldn't be in this spot without him, but he and my mom, like I said, they've been a rock for me, and I'm blessed to have parents like them. But he always says, honor the pillars the way you coach, and if you can't coach with your whole heart and you can't honor what it's about and do the best job for your staff and these young men, he said, you have to look at that. He said, you have special people around you. Don't ever take that for granted, and I know that.

Q. When we talked to you a week ago at ACC Tip-Off, it seemed like enthusiasm was there. I'm just curious, can you take us through the last week? Was that when you had talked to the players? Had they known before that?

TONY BENNETT: No. I was feeling some things, but I was hopeful. Fall break -- you know, you don't get a chance in this profession to really reflect and step back. You literally go. I hope the NCAA will change the calendar when the season is done. You just kind of go, and you go through it.

Fall break, Laurel and I went away to a beautiful place we found -- I think it was the Tides Inn on the Rappahannock. It was beautiful. We just sat and talked. I was honest with myself and started feeling some of those things again and realized again that stuff. It was at that time.

I even shared, I think, at ACC Media Day my concerns for where the game is. There's still great things about the game, but there needs to be change in it for it to go forward. I'm worried about the opportunities that aren't going to be present for a lot of the Olympic sports.

There's so many wonderful things about college athletics, and I know it has to change, but I hope it will change and it will get back to some regulations and guardrails so it can be what it's supposed to be about and adapt to the new model because it is a billion dollar industry, I understand that, but there's things that need to change.

Q. Have you and Laurel had the opportunity in this brief period to process what might be next, what might be your next chapter?

TONY BENNETT: First, as I said, to do those things I opened the press conference with. Carla and I have been talking, if there's a way that I can assist here part time with long vacation time, but if I can serve this university and help out in any way. I care so much about this. It's not like I'm just leaving, so there will be that.

I know there's something for both Laurel and I to make an impact and be who we're meant to be and a new chapter and encourage in ways -- I think my former players and these guys, when I'm around them, will be like I like Coach Bennett a lot better not being a coach, and that will be the reality.

No, I don't have any specific thing I'm walking into that way.

Q. Tony, you're a pretty religious-based person. What role did that play, your faith, in coming to this conclusion and pulling the move out?

TONY BENNETT: Sure, my faith in the Lord is everything. It is, and I've always tried to be respectful about it, but it is the hope that I have. It's the peace that gives me perspective and the guidance.

I don't do anything without going to the Lord in prayer and seeking Him and my wife and I and relying on sound counsel. Again, when you feel something impressed upon your heart and in your spirit and you're faithful about it, I think that's a significant part.

I think I want to make an impact in that area after this in many ways, and that definitely played -- it is the role. It's the hope that I have for sure.

Q. Tony, you're the latest championship winning coach.

TONY BENNETT: Before you ask that question, I'm looking at you. Matt is one of the biggest Dave Matthews fans I know. How many concerts have you been to?

Q. Thanks for injecting this into your retirement press conference, Tony. Appreciate that. Hall of Fame induction is tomorrow in Cleveland, by the way, for DMB. If you need me to publicly disclose this number, I think I'm at 104.

TONY BENNETT: I want to tell the story as I see you because I knew that. 104, that's amazing. When I first got the job here in the first week, I'll never forget this. You're working crazy hours, and I'm walking to the back of this hallway, and Dave Matthews had a concert.

I kind of pulled back the security, probably didn't know who I was, I pulled back one of the concerts and looked inside, and this place was packed. I remember thinking, man, someday if we can build this program, it's going to look like this for basketball games because it didn't look like that our first -- Craig, it didn't look like that the first couple years.

I got the vision, and I thought of Dave Matthews. Obviously I know what he's meant to this community. That's what reminded me. I know you're a big fan. Proceed.

Q. Actually made contact with the DMB camp yesterday, and your news has made reverberations there as well. Roy Williams, Jim Boeheim, Mike Krzyzewski, Jay Wright, all of these championship level winning coaches have made decisions that have sent shock waves through the college basketball world. You are younger than all of them. I know you said obviously you're a big man of faith, in making this decision, do you have 100 percent assurance on this, or are you going on some level of faith? Obviously the timeline is highly unusual and has become sort of accelerated. I'm wondering, I get the feeling where you are

spiritually, but mentally making this so close up against the season obviously is big news.

TONY BENNETT: As I said, I didn't have a lot of time to process. There are some things that I went through. I am at peace, and as I said, when you know in your heart it's time, it's time. Will I miss the game? Do I love the game? Absolutely. But I don't think I'm equipped in this new way to coach, and it's a disservice if you keep doing that.

I'm very sure this is the right step. I wish I could have gone longer. I really do, but it's time. I wouldn't have done it if I didn't think we had the right group of young men and the right staff to lead them forward in this way.

That was the one thing President Ryan and Carla and Laurel and I talked a lot about, you don't want to have regrets. You don't want to have regrets. Think through this. Sit on this. I think I'd have more regrets staying longer and not being able to be all in and not sure and giving everything to these guys than stepping away with maybe a little more energy in the tank but giving it in the right place. That would be the bigger regret I'd have.

Again, there's things that I'm so looking forward to. So thank you.

Q. You alluded to this a little bit, but how much of the fact that you're leaving the program in what you feel is a good spot influence your decision, give you some freedom maybe to do it?

TONY BENNETT: No, that came into it, but this was not premeditated. It was just I was hoping to get through. You always evaluate after each year, but because of what was brought in, the young men -- they have to gel together and go through stuff, but because of the staff and because of these young men, I'm so hopeful for them. I shared that message with them. That was hard to share with them and the staff, who I care so much for.

No, I feel it's in a strong spot, and I feel like the support in how it wants to go forward that's aligned with the mission, and what this staff believes and what these players are about give it the best chance.

Quite honestly, you just don't know in college basketball what rosters are, what teams have. The staff -- one of the reasons, Matt, I stepped away, the staff was the one that they pulled me along. They would handle the talks with the agents. They would handle things. I realized, if I'm going to do this, I have to be involved in everything. They made it easy for me, because of how they reacted.

And they're forward thinking, they all are, and they have I think the right way. I'm a square peg in a round hole. That's what it is. Maybe that's the hard part to admit, but it's okay because, when you tell the truth, there's freedom in that. That's the reality of it.

I think it's in a good place for sure, and you always hope. I love these coaches, and I love this group.

Q. Coach, when Ron was coming back, is this something that you eventually envisioned for him? Also, what was yesterday like talking to the staff, talking to the players?

TONY BENNETT: I always hoped that, when my time was done, that whether it was Ron or Jason, the two associate head coaches, that someone would take this over because it means it's in a good place, and because if you like what you've seen and how we've done it -- they'll have their own twist, this staff will, and what we'll do hopefully going forward.

I think this group is going to be together for two years. That's what's special. Most of them, with the exception of Jalen and Taine, will be so important this year. And Taine will be getting his degree at the McIntire School of Business at the end of this.

But I think you always hope that when you're a coach and it's your time. Like I said, I didn't think it was going to be this soon, but for sure, there's no question about it. So I'm grateful for that.

And I didn't mention Isaiah Wilkins and Kyle Guy and Chase Coleman. Those guys are special. They're stars in this coaching profession going forward, and they can make a difference as this thing changes too. I know that. I see it.

People can go. Trust me, this is getting long.

Q. What are you going to miss the most? And can you just tell us what you love about Ron Sanchez?

TONY BENNETT: Yeah, what am I going to miss the most? I don't know if I've even processed that. I know you get to a point sometimes when winning is a relief more than a celebration and losing sticks with you and that's a pain. That stuff has started to take a hold.

But I'll miss -- the competition's awesome. I'll miss -- I love watching film. I'm not a great -- I like to talk to the group. I wish I had more time to have a smoothie with the guys and do that. I will now more, and that's what I'll enjoy doing.

But I just called Carla, did you see the three Sabrina hit to win the WNBA Finals? If I could buy stock in the WNBA -- and the NBA, sorry, Rick -- but I love it. I enjoy the game, the strategy, the way your mind thinks. That will still be there.

Ron, he's been with me. His wife Tara played for my sister Kathi at Indiana, and my sister said, if you ever become a head coach, she said, I got a guy for you. He's dating one of my players. He's special. So when my father took the Washington State job and

Ron came and that relationship was founded, and then Ron got to go away and get head coaching experience at UNC Charlotte.

He's as faithful and a servant oriented man than I've seen. I've seen him grow in his knowledge of the game. But what I like is he and J-Willi, the whole staff, they carried me through this transition. I think it's been like three years is when it started. I like the way they think. They're younger than me -- not that much.

He, they, how they relate, how they are, the way their minds are in this landscape is what's needed. So I'm so grateful. I just want it to go so well for these guys. I'll stop there because I'll probably get choked up.

Q. Did you talk to any other head coaches? There was a comment about maybe talking to Jay Wright. Did you talk to other coaches? Have you talked to other coaches since the announcement, and did that guide you at all?

TONY BENNETT: I've always, just when you see Coach Boeheim would do some of our games, talked to Coach Wright over the years and different coaches. I got so many warm texts -- I guess they have to be nice when you're going into retirement, or most do -- but really from so many of the great coaches that have influenced me.

Yeah, in just listening to them -- I remember I talked to them, why did they step away? I remember -- actually, you mentioned Jay saying he had fought so hard to build his program in his way, and I think he foresaw maybe the changes coming for him, and I think he maybe didn't want to change on those. That's valuable information.

We adjusted, I adjusted some, but you can't fight against yourself. But all those coaches, a lot of them say you won't miss it, but you'll miss the players, the people, and always seek the advice of others. But this was between Laurel and I and my family and the Lord.

Q. If you could give one quick message to the fans, what would you like to say?

TONY BENNETT: I'm incredibly grateful for embracing me, for standing up when the shot clock violations were about to happen. I know at times it was probably, you know, we weren't the prettiest to watch, but beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

They let us do it. Carla and President Ryan let me do it my way. And, Craig, you did, and Jon Oliver and President Sullivan. President Casteen was here, I think one year, if I'm not mistaken. You guys let me do it my way. Whatever you need, you do it your way, we'll support you. That's rare. Sometimes you can get micromanaged, and you've got to do it this way, that way. I stand on all that.

The fans embraced -- most of them. There's always going to be critics. When you're the man in the arena, you're the head of the team, there's always going to be critics. But

overwhelmingly, they liked what they saw in terms of you can have it all at Virginia when you're here, and we tried to build that.

They were an unbelievable fan base. The faithful ones when we weren't great and the ones we picked up and the support that I've gotten, and I'm grateful, and I'll always have that special place in my heart.

Thank you everyone for coming.