

Welcome to another edition of the Wahoo Central Podcast, which we record every week in our University Hall studio. I'm Jeff White, from [virginiasports.com](http://virginiasports.com), and as spring football continues at UVA, my guest today is Mark Atuaia, who coaches the Cavaliers running backs. Mark, thanks for popping over to U Hall. Good to have you.

Not a problem. Grateful to be here.

I guess the obvious place to start is with spring practice. You got some new faces in your group. How are your backs looking?

Well, to date, I'm very pleased with the production of Daniel Hamm and Jordan Ellis. Those two have a monumental task to fill the shoes of the two that have left, in Smoke and Albert. So I've been pleased with the leadership that they've shown thus far. They've really taken to that role. And Jordan, who is an introvert-- more than most, I mean, even more so than the boss-- having him step out of that comfort zone and to be a vocal leader is pleasing to watch, and to see him emerge as a leader in that regard. I don't know how he'll be in interviews, but--

You know, he's come a long way. When I first interviewed him after his first year, the first year he played he had the game winning touchdown-- I think against Syracuse-- and I interviewed him two days later and it was literally like pulling teeth. And then last year he was a little bit better. And I think he's better yet. I've seen some videos, and it's cool to watch a guy progress like that.

Exactly. And for me, in his game, we're going to lean a lot on him. So those two have been very pleasing for me. And then the other two that have just come in mid-season with Lamont and Jamari, those two are earning their stripes right now, learning how to be a college student while learning what we expect on the field. So they've got a ways to go, but I'm pleased with their effort and I'm pleased with the attitude that they've shown thus far in adhering to what we ask, and also taking the leadership from Jordan and Hamm and running with it. It's a great thing to see progress. And I'm hopeful for both of them.

Your offensive coordinator is Robert Anae. And in his system, running backs are divided into two groups, essentially, speed backs and big backs. For people who aren't familiar with that terminology, what are the attributes you're looking for in each position, in addition to the obvious, which is speed and size?

Yeah. So the primary ball carrier will be that speed back. And the speed back, obviously implied in its name. But also, there's a toughness aspect to it that's sort of analogous to a regular tailback. You've got to be somebody that's trustworthy with the ball, and being able to catch and to run and to do a lot of the things that their skill set

allows them to do, and be very effective at it. So then that's that portion.

The big back is the one that's intriguing to me, that I've loved all of these years. Essentially, you have to have a speed back skill set, meaning you've still got to be able to carry the ball and catch and do all those things. And people say, well, is that similar to a traditional fullback? In some aspects, yes.

But for the most part, I think the distinguishing factor is that regard that you are going to be leaned on to not only do what a traditional fullback would do-- in blocking, in being that physical presence on the field-- but if you don't have the ball skills to do what a speed back can do, then you're not considered a big back. And so it's very detailed in who I go out and look for.

So to say Jamari, if he was an ideal big back for me, I would say, so--

Because he is what? 240, 245, 250?

And that's down from--

When he came in.

From when he came in. But, you know, he was the primary ball carrier in his high school. And he's done a lot of things with the ball. And now, getting him ready for the NFL, in that sense, coming in and learning how to be a traditional fullback, while still using your big, your speed back skill set, I think that's what makes the position appealing, especially for young guys that are going to come in and do that stuff.

He was highly recruited to do that traditional fullback thing at other places. And in talking to him, I'm glad that he saw clearly that, hey, I can still develop as that traditional fullback, but have a lot of fun doing it in, you know, that speed back skill set, and using that and honing in on those things. So yeah, in that offense, it's really neat to see the two work hand in hand. And you know, we're working to build that group.

Now people who remember the 2014 game at Scott State in between BYU and Virginia, if my memory is correct, Jamal Williams had a big game, particularly in the second half for BYU. And he was a big strong runner. Was he, was he a big back, or was he just a very large speed back?

It depends how you look at it. For us at BYU, he was a speed back, in the sense that he, it was hard to get the Smoke type that, you know, that ran really fast and could do all those things. But Jamal, yeah. Although he was very big, we used him as a speed back there at BYU. And then lo and behold, you know, because of that, he had training with all the years that we were there. And now he's, you know, looking at a pretty promising future in the NFL. Same with like Smoke. Smoke--

Yeah. I was going to ask you, what are you hearing, what is the staff hearing about his prospects?

Well, you can tell how interested the NFL organizations are when they call you in. After all the work outs are done, after they've worked you out, and then they call you in for special meetings. And so that's what's happening with Smoke right now. He's meeting with multiple teams and going through detailed interviews, sort of getting to know him on a personal level, learning about his learning preferences and such. So yeah, I foresee for both Smoke and the guy that I coached over there at the other place, to have promising careers. And a lot of it has to deal with not only their skill set, but learning how to be in multiple places and being used in multiple sets.

To this point in his career, Daniel Hamm is probably best known for his work as a punt returner, though he did have some carries early in his career, kind of as a backup tailback. What role do you envision for him this year as a running back?

Yeah. That production that Smoke and Albert have left has to be filled. And we foresee Daniel being a huge part of that. He has a different skill set when compared to Smoke. But the things that Daniel does very well, we're going to highlight those things. And I'm kind of apprehensive about saying what those things are. I'd rather them manifests itself out on the field against our opponents.

But Hamm has a lot of strengths in a lot of areas. And we plan on highlighting those things. And I think yes, Smoke and Albert left a huge void, but Daniel and Jordan are going to be a very nice one-two combination, and we're going to see a lot of production from them.

Chris Sharp is a talented athlete who has kind of bounced around here. He was a tailback. Then he moved to wide receiver. Then he was at safety last year. I know he's recovering from an injury now, but is he going to get a look at running back--

Absolutely.

When he's healthy? I mean, he's a little different physically than the other guys. He's tall.

I made a play for Chris. And I wanted him to know that. And I knew his history coming in and the different rooms that he, you know, had to learn in when he first got here. And I wanted him to understand that he has a home in the running back room. And you know, sort of recruiting him, in that sense, where he felt wanted, I think, was imperative.

And so I talked to Coach Howell after, because I knew that-- it was a funny thing. Because Smoke, Albert, and Connor Wingo-Reaves, both of them, all three of them, in fact, left at the same time. And usually it's uncommon to have, you'd like to just replace one with one. But having three leave at the same time was very unhealthy for my

room. And so I had to find a way to-- it'll be devastating if I had to rely solely on the two incoming guys that have come in thus far. And PK, who hasn't come in yet, you know, that has signed with us.

So looking around our team and looking at the talent that we've had, I actually saw Sharp sitting in that room. And with Quin and with the others emerging, you know, I approached Coach Howell and asked him, hey, you mind if I poach there? And credit to Coach Howell and Coach Mendenhall, you know, because Chris was doing some really good things at safety. And he's unafraid. He's very fast. And so he has a skill set that I could see them liking a lot on defense.

But I, you know, I made a play for him, and gratefully they saw things my way. And while he's healing, he's also learning. And I'm appreciative thus far that he's doing a really good job getting all of his, you know, ancillary things done, like school work and getting all that stuff honed in. And then also learning while he's nursing his injury, I think, is a good thing for our team. And using another big, fast guy like him, I think that will play well for the University of Virginia.

I wrote a story last year about one of the unsung heroes on the team, Anthony Calloway, who played a critical role in practice as the scout team running back. Who, I mean, he had hundreds of reps, took a beating. How do you-- I don't know if that's your responsibility. I know other--

It absolutely is.

Other coaches are involved with the victory team. But who gets those reps to prepare the number one defense?

And that's one of the things that I really like about me being with Coach Mendenhall for the last five years as a full time coach. I've had people go from my room, and you know, trying to dispel that notion that if you're on the victory team, that you're just there to-- you can get better and development. And a credit to Coach Mendenhall. Everybody that I've sent to the victory team gets better, exponentially they get better.

And so I plan on using all of them-- Lamont, PK, Jamari, Chris-- everybody is going to have a chance to go over there and rotate, servicing the defense. And it works two ways. They get a really good look with a talented player, and my talented players get busted up and all of that. And they get game preparation on an everyday basis. So one of the great byproducts of being an offensive coach, especially with this group, is that you develop your guys, I mean, at a very high level with Coach Mendenhall and his defense.

You grew up in Hawaii. You spent most of your adult life in Utah. Was there any hesitation on your part about moving, not only yourself, but your whole family to Virginia?

You know, I left administration after I got done with law school. I was planning to go back and practice law in

Hawaii. And an opportunity popped up there in Provo. And I'll be honest, I had no intention of staying in Utah. I wanted to get back home. And I've been trying to get back home for a long time.

You're even farther from home.

Exactly. I keep moving away from home, in distance. Yeah. So when that opportunity popped up, and then an even greater opportunity to live my passion, which was in coaching. We had a talk with my wife. And I said, you know, along with my family, we all decided, hey, if we're going into this profession, it wasn't just to be, you know, just to stay in Provo and just to be the, quote unquote, BYU guy.

And so when we made that decision, when this decision popped up to come to Charlottesville, of all places, a beautiful spot-- you know, when we did our research, we were so excited. But yeah, it didn't take me more than five minutes to say, hey, this is where the opportunity presents itself. And so we're going to go. And we've been very happy.

You have one of the most interesting resumes of any coach at UVA, across all the sports. In addition to a bachelor's degree from BYU, Hawaii, you have a masters of public administration, and as you mentioned, a law degree from BYU. So why are you not in a law office right now, preparing a case?

You know, just to be honest, I rolled with my passion. I knew that I loved working with people. And what a law degree does is it provides you with multiple opportunities to-- I mean, you can find people that have been legally trained doing a lot of things, a lot of different things. And so for me, I was going to go the traditional route. And unbeknown to a lot of people was that while I was going through law school and getting my master's degree, I worked as a student assistant with Bronco Mendenhall. And well, mostly with Coach Anae. You know, we're from the same place.

I was going to say, you went to the same high school as him, right?

We did.

A few years apart.

He was actually the GA. He was a graduate assistant at the time at BYU, that recruited me out of that high school. And so, you know, we've had a long lasting relationship over the years. And so I would go after my law classes and my master's degree classes and go. And it was almost like a decompression stage, you know, after being in the academia realm for the whole day. Then I'd go, I'd go down and love the smell of the grass and, you know, just being around football stuff. And so it was evident that I wanted something in that realm.

You worked at BYU first, though, outside of athletics, right?

I did. I worked as--

Dean of Student Life.

Uh-huh. Student Life. And so, which was valuable at the time. I cut my teeth working with professors and such. And mostly with students outside of student athletes. Real, actual students that come in with their issues that they have. And so I've dealt with that. I've actually dealt with endowments and other things that come within that demographic. So yeah, so I learned all of that.

And then there was a need in the athletic department in Provo, because there was sort of a disconnect between the two, you know, upper and lower campus. And quite frankly, I was prepared in one and had experience in the other. So that's when I ended up at the athletic department. And then Coach Anae comes back to BYU. And literally, after he finishes his interview and gets hired on, he walks to my office and said, bro, if you want to do this thing, you'll be, tomorrow there's an interview process. And it's at 8 o'clock.

So I had from that time to really think, am I going to do this or not. And so gratefully, and I'm so, so thankful for that opportunity. Because this is really what I love doing. I love the development of young men through the sport that has changed my life and that I love very much, in football.

You went back to graduate school long after your playing days were over at BYU.

Very astute.

Did you gain an appreciation for the importance of education, kind of later in life, that you didn't have--

Absolutely.

When you were an undergrad? And do you, is that a big part of your message to your players now?

Yes. And that's, I mean, you ask any of them that have played for me. Ask Smoke and Albert. They all know my story.

And I know when they graduated, I saw on Twitter how happy you were for them.

And my colleagues know, I will wrap up a kid's locker. And if I get a report that's bad, I will not hesitate one bit to go and take all this stuff, box it up, throw it down, and say, buddy, take your butt off the field and you're going to the deal. Because again, there's a 12 year span in there when I was trying to find myself. And having to go back and actually pay for school on my own, and then working full time. And you know, I worked as a valet at a golf

course. And so I worked there all the way until I had my classes. And then that was an everyday thing for me.

And so, yeah, that's the message that I tell them. I said, you're wasting time if you don't take this opportunity, right now, to just grind through it. And yeah, there are going to be a whole bunch of emotional issues that you're going to deal with, like if you're not playing as much as you want to, or all of that. But that can't stand as an obstacle in the way of you garnering your education.

You played on very successful teams at BYU. And when you joined Coach Mendenhall's staff there, those teams were successful, too. For someone who's basically known only success on the football field, how difficult was last season.

It was very difficult. And I'm going to be candid.

Was that the first losing season--

Ever, ever.

Part of?

Yeah. And so for me, it was eye opening. But you know, one of the great things about having Coach Anae, Coach Mendenhall, and Coach McNeill on our staff is that they've been through these rebuilding processes before. And I trust them with my life, all three of them. And so now, you know, after going through it, you know, we still stay on that grind. We still are up every morning, doing what we got to do. And the young men that we have stewardship over, they feed off of that. And maybe it's just my personality. I'm never going to have a bad day. And so being around that positivity, you know, reflects not only my character, but the character of our staff. And then also it rubs off on our players.

So yeah, last year is done. And we're working towards this year, and hoping that we've learned from everything and working towards a better season this year. But again, that's all talk until it happens on the field. You know, I totally understand that regard, too. So yeah, so we're going to continue to do what we do. And success is right around the corner. And I know that sounds like, you know, just total front runner speech. But it is what it is. And we're going to continue to grind and do what we do.

I know you play a mean guitar because I've seen the videos. But you are not the most accomplished musician in your family.

No, no.

For people who don't know, tell us about your wife's musical career.

Yeah. Unfortunately, meeting me wasn't the pinnacle of her life. I'm quite certain she would beg to differ, but yeah. She, in the '80s, there was a group called the Jets. And she was the lead singer for them. So a lot of the adult contemporary stations still play their music. And you know, she was the voice of what they do.

And yeah, we met when I was in high school. But I was like, dude, this girl's way out of my league. And our paths crossed later on when I was in college. And then we sort of consummated our relationship at that point. But yeah, she's supportive, very supportive of me. And the great thing I love about it is that not only her, but my family has been exposed to not having me around. You know, this job is very--

Time consuming.

Very time consuming and taxing. And you come home with different moods a lot. But much like her profession, before she decided she wanted to be a mother full time, and you know, she understands what it takes to be successful in this deal. So it's a family affair. And you know, she has a lot more earning potential than I'll ever have. And that's saying something.

But she, in this juncture in her own life, the kids are what she loves and what she wants to invest in with her time. And I'm quite certain she'll go back into that profession after the last one leaves, the last one leaves the brood. So you know, we'll see. Hopefully by then I can retire and then she can go to work.

So if you check on YouTube, you can find videos of the Jets and your wife singing. If you look really hard, you can also find some clips of you from your playing days. I know. I had Shane Hunter here a couple of weeks ago. He said his players have seen him playing for BYU. Have your running backs seen clips of you--

Absolutely.

In your heyday?

Somebody-- again, my days were VHS, that tape. And once that tape breaks, it's done. So yeah, pre-digital times. So you know, I don't know if it's floating around there.

There was something of high school, I think somebody posted.

Yeah. I saw that. And I was cracking up because that was like about 80 pounds ago. But for me, I think what resonates with these young men are the characteristics that you bring forth, and whether you really are proficient in your craft. And so being able to teach these young men, I think, they understand that at one point, there was a pretty studly dude there. I'm glad that that's mythical now, just like the unicorn. They don't know whether that thing existed.



Well, good. Well, listen. Thanks again for making time for this. I know it's a busy, busy time of year for you.

No problem. Go Hoos.

I would remind listeners to add the Spring Football Festival to your calendars. It will be held at Scott Stadium on Saturday, April the 29. Between now and then, Virginia Athletics will be extremely busy. For schedules and information on all our teams, check [viriniasports.com](http://viriniasports.com). I'll be back next week with another Wahoo Central Podcast. Until then, thanks for tuning in.