

Welcome to another edition of the Wahoo Central podcast, which comes to you each week from our studio here in University Hall. I'm Jeff White from VirginiaSports.com. We're still more than a month away from the start of spring practice, but it's never too early to talk football. My guest today is UVA's All-America safety, Quin Blanding. Quin, thanks for stopping by.

Thank you.

Last time you were on this show, you were about two months into your college career. And you were Anthony Harris' protege. Now you're heading into your final college season as the unquestioned leader of the secondary. We've seen you obviously on the football field. How have you changed and grown as a person over your time here?

Just learning the game more. From the time I got here with Anthony Harrison in a meeting room, him teaching me the defense, and now me teaching the defense to the my young guys, and learning the defense off of them, and learning the defense from the coaches. My role has just increased a lot, to being the leader of the team, and making all the calls, and making sure everyone's doing their right job. So I feel like I've grown a lot as a player. I've been learning more about this game each and every day.

What about away from football? You feel like you've grown too as a person?

As a person, just hanging around my teammates all the time, and just being with them. When you get older, you just start seeing things differently. And so I feel like that's what's happening.

You gave UVA fans a late Christmas present on December 26th when you announced that you were coming back for your senior season. Had you made your mind up a couple of days before then, or were just waiting until then to make the announcement?

I think it just happened at that time. Like I said in my letters, just a lot of unfinished business that I have to attend to. It just has to be done, and it's going to get done.

Micah Kiser went through the same process you did, and he actually made his announcement before you did that he was coming back. I know you're close, but you each had to make the decision that was the best for yourself. But did you talk about it much with him? And did his decision to come back influence your decision at all?

We talked about it a little bit.

He had fun with it on his video.

He did a lot of fun with it. Because he knew in his mind he was coming back. Mine was a little different because I had no clue what I wanted to do and how I wanted to proceed with the next level. So going through that process, I talked to him a little bit about it. But it just came down to me, and me and my family, what's best for me.

Is it fair to say that you would not have come back if you didn't believe in Bronco Mendenhall and his plan for building this program?

I believe in it. I strongly do believe it. I trust the process, and I trust the program that he's set in place for us. We've just got to go out there and execute it.

You and Coach Mendenhall seemed to have a really strong connection. Were you surprised at how quickly that bond formed between the two of you? Were you confident that that would happen, or were you kind of uncertain what was going to happen when he took over?

I think it was the best thing. I knew coming in as a free safety in this defense, the free safety makes all the calls, and so why not the defensive coordinator, which just happens to be our head coach, why don't I get close to him as well as with my position coach to learn everything from them and then teach it to the young guys so they won't have to do much teaching, so we could just go out there and play?

He has talked a lot about where he lives out in Ivy and having players out there. How are your horseback riding skills?

I haven't rode the horses yet. I rode horses before, but not here.

You looking forward to that? Is that on the bucket list before you leave UVA?

It's definitely up there.

Obviously your goal is to play at the next level. When you requested feedback from the NFL, did they give you any specific areas to improve in? Or do they just give you kind of a flat projection on if you come out, you're likely to be drafted here?

They give you that, but they also give you ways to improve as well. So that's what I'm getting the feedback from, taking the feedback in. And that's what I'm working on each and every day with my training. So they won't have their questions no more next year.

So was that process beneficial to you, educational just going through that?

Yeah, I believe so. Most people kind of take it in, feel bad about themselves, or take it and don't know how to act or respond about it. But I'm going to take it with confidence, and I'm going to accept the challenges that they put in front of me. And I'm just going to show that I can play football.

So how are the off season workouts going? And how does this program under Coach Wintrich compare to last year's? I know there was a ton of running last year.

Well, last year it was brand new to all of us. They didn't know how we would act, and we didn't know how they would act. So now they have a plan that they're sticking to, and that they know is going to work, especially with how we train now. So the bigs do what bigs have to do. The outside the box do what outside the box have to do. The front seven have to do what the front seven have to do. So it's just geared for us and our individual skill sets. So it's really helpful.

Are there specific things physically that you're working on going into this final season, particularly given the feedback from the NFL?

Just being bigger and faster. That's what they want to see. And that's what I'm going to give them.

What's your weight these days?

I'm still around the same, 215.

You trying to get bigger or heavier, or just stronger?

I'm going to stay where I am, but I'm going to get stronger. And I'm also going to get faster.

You are a task unit leader, right?

Yes.

For people who aren't familiar with that, what does that involve? And who's in your task unit?

A task unit leader is just someone who is reliable, someone who's older and who knows a little bit about the program, and also just someone they can count on, someone that can lead by example. So that's what I do as well. And under me is Joe Reed. So he's like my co-captain.

You've got a second year guy? Or still a first year, actually.

Yeah. So I got a co-captain with me, Joe Reed. If you do so well and you're reliable, you can lead by example.

That's basically what your role is. And what our role is as a task unit is just basically we come together on issues that the team has or we have, and we can present them to Coach Wintrich, which will present it to Coach Mendenhall, or we can go to Coach Mendenhall. It's like a voice for the team.

So how many people are in your task unit?

It's like 12 of us in each task unit. So it's like five task units, I think.

So do you work out together, or is that just separate? The task unit, do you guys train together as well, or is it kind of an off the field thing?

It's different levels to our program. So it's like navy, delta, white, orange. So that's the level of where you train. But then we have games and stuff where we come together as a task unit, and we play them together. But we also each and every day is an individual fight. And then within the individual fight is helping for your task unit.

There are a lot of players with experience back on defense this year. You and Mica, Andrew Brown, Bryce Hall, Eli Hanback, Jordan Mack, Chris Peace, Juan Thornhill among others, and then you have Malcolm Cook, Tim Harris, Darius Latimore coming back from injuries or health issues. Do you have the sense that this could be a really strong defense if everything comes together?

Oh yes, I believe so. Because we played a lot of first years last year. They came in and stepped up. Someone had to play the role, and they did it, and they did it well. They're a little older now, so now they have a little experience under their belt. So now they're just going to be better than what they were last year. So I think we're going to have a strong defense, especially with the guys coming back. They also played in a lot of games for us. I think it's just going to work out for us best.

Your secondary coach is Nick Howell. What's it been like working with him?

It's been great. He's very energetic. Most people don't know him.

He's got a little lower profile than some of the assistants, by choice.

One thing about him, he loves football. He always is in the meeting room waiting for us to come in. He's always talking ball, like when he texts us in the group messages, just to keep us going. He's just doing his job. He just really loves this game.

When you're in the meeting room, are all the DB's together, or do you split into corners and safeties?

We're all together, so corners and safeties are all together. We go through every position. And so we might stay

on one play or one clip for 10 minutes just to hit every point, and just keep going from there.

Juan Thornhill started at cornerback last season and played well. On the 2017 spring roster, he's listed as a safety. I think he was a safety when he came in here, so he's got some familiarity. Are you looking forward to playing with him at that position? What do you think he can bring at the back of the defense?

Yeah, I'm looking forward to it. He's also playing safety, but he's still playing corner as well. He's interchangeable right now. So that's what makes him kind of special right now, because he's interchangeable. So he knows how to play corner. And he came in as a safety, and moving him to safety is no difference. You still have to cover a receiver, or you have to cover a back end. It's just like playing corner still. So I think he's going to be a great asset for us back there.

Four freshmen enrolled here in January. Two of them are DB's, Riah Burton and Germane Crowell, whose name is familiar because of his brother and his uncle who played here. What are your early impressions of those two? Have they been training with you or with the secondary group?

Well, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, we have individuals after our work out. So we're all together on Tuesdays and Thursdays. And after our workout, we train, do it indeed together. So I get to see them at that point. But I also see them when they work out on their own as well. But my hat's off to them, because they came in and bought it real quick. It's just amazing to see what the program looks like and what it's going to be.

How important is it to you-- I mean, you've picked up a lot of individual accolades along the way, all ACC, All-American tackler, all that. I'm guessing the winning portion is just as important to you. How much are you driven to kind of turn the program around, or help turn it around in that aspect, as well as distinguish yourself individually?

It means a lot to me. I've been here going on to my fourth year now. We really haven't had a great success as a winning program, and it sucks. Because at the end of the day when we lose, all they're going to look back it is Quin Blanding is on the team, and that's his team. So they're going to blame me for the loss, so I've got to take it, and I've got to lead the team. And we've got to just win.

You'd be disappointed if there are, as we talked about on defense, there are some-- nice Peace is back, the same thing on offense, Kurt Benkert is back even though he had an up and down year. Would you be disappointed if this team does not show improvement on the field? Do you expect that to happen just because of the familiarity everyone has with the system this year?

Well, that's why we go through spring ball, get all the kinks out right now and go through spring ball, and have a great spring. And then when the time summer comes, there's not going to be no ups and downs or bumps and bruises. It's just going to be straightforward and we're going to win.

You're a sociology major, right?

That's right.

Where are you in your studies? Would you like to wrap that up by the time you get out of here?

Oh, yes. I'll be done by December.

So how challenging is that to do, to get to graduate in 3 and 1/2 years?

That's the plan I came in with, and that's the plan I'm going to stick with. It's been going great for me so far. So I'm just going to keep pushing.

I know you're popular among your fellow student athletes here. What is your favorite sport to follow here at UVA other than football?

Actually, I follow all the sports. I actually like trying to go see other games and other teams play because it's a big community here. They come and watch us play all the time, and they're the actual ones who actually stay for the games. No matter what we're losing, they're still there for us. And they always talk to us. So I try to go watch every sport and just try to see other teams do great and have success.

Who's the most impressive athlete you've seen outside of football?

Pobo. He does throwing, the shot put, and he runs track and field. So he does the shot put.

Who, Filip?

Him and Filip. Pobo and Filip.

Oh, Pobo yeah.

Pobo Filip. They are very impressive guys. I love going in the weight room and watching them lift, because--

So do you go out to the track to watch the track and field if you can?

Oh yeah. Because we don't have an indoor here, so they're in indoor season.

They work right out in the hall there.

So now they're about to come outdoors, so I will go to track meets and see them participate. And my other track team members, I go watch them as well. I just like going to support other teams.

Pobo is a pretty good chess player. I don't know if you knew that.

He's a smart guy.

Did you do track in high school at all?

I did a little bit of it, just to train for my speed.

Right. Well, good. Well, thanks again for stopping by. It's always good to see you.

Thank you.

As is often the case, this will be a busy weekend for UVA athletics. For information on everything that's on tap, check VirginiaSports.com. Thanks for listening to this Wahoo Central podcast, and I'll be back next week with a new one.