

Welcome to a special edition of the Wahoo Central Podcast. I'm Jeff White from virginiasports.com. And on the eve of the baseball team's three game series with Notre Dame at Davenport Field, I'm talking today to graduate student Robbie Coman, whom you could call the Cavaliers' elder statesman. Robbie, thanks for stopping by.

Not a problem. Glad to be here.

So you graduated, if I have this right, in 2012 from Park Vista Community High School in Florida--

Yes.

--in 2012. Noah Murdock and the other first years on the UVA team-- this UVA team-- were finishing up the eighth grade.

Yes.

Do the youngsters on the team give you a hard time about the generation gap? [LAUGHS]

Yeah, not a hard time, but we definitely joke about it. Keep it lighthearted. But it's fun.

I mean this is a sport where it's not uncommon for guys to leave after three years. So in almost every other sport, the fifth year senior is not rare. Baseball is a little bit of an exception. So because of your experience you have, how do you see your role on the team? I mean, you've been through things that most your teammates have not here.

Right. I mean, I just take it day to day, honestly. My role is obviously to do anything to help this team win, whether it's catch, play first base, DH, wherever coach puts me. But then, the role of helping out the young guys, give them my experiences, they can take it for what it's worth. But I think I learned a lot last year helping out some other guys. Even though I wasn't playing, I still traveled; just giving them any piece of advice that I can. They ask me questions all the time. And I just keep everybody engaged in the game, learning stuff, and getting better every day.

So how did you end up in Charlottesville? What's your recruiting story?

Pretty short and sweet. I had good grades in high school, didn't want to stay in Florida, so I ended up looking at a few schools outside of Florida. I went up to UPenn, went up there for a baseball camp. This is my sophomore year of high school, so I was just going to narrow it down as I got older and decide where I wanted to go. And then I ended up going to camp here. The coaching staff saw me. I ended up staying after one of the camps for--

So the staff had not been recruiting you before that point?

I mean everyone sends out those, hey come to our camps, and stuff like that. I wouldn't necessarily say I had any contact with them. But I got here, they asked me if I wanted to stay and watch one of the practices, see how they did things. I fell in love with the way that practice was handled by the coaching staff. Obviously, this is a beautiful place. I came in the fall. I mean, it doesn't get much better than this. And then ended up going back home and committed on my 16th birthday, actually.

And you graduated last spring with a bachelor's degree in economics and a minor in history. Were you always going to come back and use this final season of eligibility or did you debate that at all?

It was a pretty short debate. I got injured. It was, you can rest for a little while and try and finish out the season, that was an option. But because of the severity of the tears in my UCL, I needed surgery. And so whether it was done after the season or right now, it was necessary. And so I ended up deciding that it's a good idea to get it done now and have 11 months to get ready to play the season next year. And I had an extra year. I could apply for a fifth year. I had a one-year masters that I could do. And so it just made sense. And it's a pretty easy decision for me.

So I believe the last fifth year senior in the program was Whit Mayberry, right?

Correct.

And you played with him. So that was your second year?

That was my first year.

First year. So you talk to him about it at all?

I didn't, no.

Not that you necessarily needed to.

No, Whit's a great guy. And in my time as a first year and second year when I was young, and those guys were the older guys, I always looked up to them. And he was a great role model and great teammate. So having the opportunity to be that guy for the younger guys, I think it made it a pretty easy decision.

So you will leave Virginia with two degrees?

Correct.

Which is no small feat. Tell us what you're doing right now. You're in the Curry School?

I'm in the Curry School of Higher Education Administration. Learning a lot. A little bit different than my undergrad career, but interesting stuff and keeping me learning new things.

So before we talk about the present, you've referred a couple times to, I guess, the watershed event of last year in February. In February, 2016, you're on the mound pitching against East Carolina and you hurt your right elbow. You ended up needing Tommy John surgery, right?

Correct.

For one thing, there's not a whole lot in your bio in the section on that high school about your background as a pitcher. How much did you throw in high school?

I used to just catch and end up closing pretty much all the time. I'd catch six innings and throw the seventh.

Throw the seventh.

And then when I got here in the fall, I did pretty similar stuff. In the Orange and Blue World Series, I would catch and then pitch at the end in maybe the eighth or ninth. And then when I came back, after the fall, because of that team and the position players that we had at that point-- you know, Fisher, Papi, Downes, like all those-- I was going to pitch. And then, I got hit in the left cheek, ended up having four facial fractures, and so I missed a good 12 weeks there before I could get back on the field. And then it was just to catch. Because Irving was catching every day then. So I made I think it was like nine starts or something like that. And all of them were at catcher. So nobody really saw the part of me--

The pitching.

--pitching at all. And then, last year in the fall, coach came up to me and was like, you know, just throw in the bullpen every now and then. See if you still got it. And so then in the spring, when we needed some guys in the bullpen, a freshman, I was like, yeah, sure.

Well, sorry it didn't work out, because I'm sure it would have been pretty cool--

Oh it would have been fun.

--to do that.

I love pitching. It's fun to be on the other side.

Is that a cumulative injury? Just stress over time? Or was it kind of one traumatic thing that happened?

It could have happened at any time. I mean, it's [LAUGHS] my fourth year and I'd been playing a lot of baseball. I've been playing since--

Yeah you've thrown a lot.

--since I was a little boy. So I think it happens. It's a common injury nowadays.

Yeah. What was the rehab like? I mean, I guess if there was any kind of blessing, it happened early enough. Better to happen early than late. I mean, I know Derek Casey-- his happened later when he had it. And it can run into the next season. So how was the rehab?

It wasn't bad. I had Brian McGuire-- we call him B-Mac-- he's the trainer. He does a great job. Pretty smooth process. The first week I was in a cast, then it was really getting the mobility back, you know, full range of motion. That's important. And then, obviously, just strength. And then I think it was like six months. So you start swinging first, and then six months, you start really extremely light tossing. And then, it's just a throwing program from there.

You were not the only guy sidelined with a season-ending injury last year. Jake McCarthy, Evan Sperling, and Derek Casey were all out. That's a lot of talent. Those are four guys who were all playing big roles this year. How difficult was it-- as much as you helped as a coach of sorts-- to not be able to play in NCAA regionals? Ends here on a disappointing note. I'm sure it was tough for you guys, wasn't it?

Yeah, it is. You wish you could do stuff and wish you could be out there, but I think obviously last year you had key players step up and play important roles as well. And that gives them the experience that they're going to use this year if they get an opportunity. And me and Jake got pretty close, obviously, because we had surgery on the same day, I think, and went through a similar rehab process.

You got hurt on February 28. Do you have surgery quickly or do they need to let the swelling go down?

It was March 15.

OK, so a couple of weeks.

Yeah. I got it done by Dr. Andrews and he's a pretty busy guy.

[LAUGHS] Yeah.

Just fitting into his schedule. But yeah, I got it done as soon as possible. And then, like I said, me and Jake had it only a day apart-- surgery. And then, we were just going through the rehab process together. Good kid.

So onto this season, heading into this series with Notre Dame, the Hoos are 31-9. You are second on the team in hitting, with a .366 batting average. You recently had a 12-game hitting streak. Did you see this coming? I mean, the way you've been hitting the ball? It'd be impressive anyway, but you're coming off a major injury; and even if that doesn't affect you that much, the way it would throwing, you were still out for a while.

Right. I mean, I would say certainly I knew I was capable of doing it. I think it's just a matter of getting at-bats and getting used to it. And so I think my first three years of playing-- playing quite a bit my second year, and then almost the whole year in my third year, I would say I just got more comfortable playing at this level. And then coming back, it was just getting used to a lot of pitching again. But I swung the bat well and felt comfortable. And so I think it's working out pretty well.

You came into this year with exactly two career home runs. One in 2014; and one in '15. You already have five home runs this season. Maybe it's contagious because the team is hitting a lot of home runs, but what's your explanation for this power surge?

I don't know. I don't know.

I don't want to jinx it.

No, I never hit home runs in high school, either. I would have just, like you said, maybe one a season. But I think it's just Coach O'Connor. I know he said after some of the games, it's been warmer outside. The wind usually blows a little bit more there. Maybe I got some help there on a couple of them, but I don't know. Just I think some of the older guys are leading the way. Haseley's got 11 and Pavin's got 10.

Pavin's got 10; Cam Simmons has five like you; Caleb Knight's got three; Charlie Codey, four; Ernie and Weber have two each; so yeah. Jake has one. Tell him to pick up the pace a little bit.

[LAUGHTER]

What about the way the whole team is hitting? I mean, I know there are games still to be played and you can't stamp this as the best hitting team of the Brian O'Connor era; but right now, it's really hitting. Is it contagious at all like people say? That's kind of one of those cliches--

Right.

--that floats around in sports.

But it just gives you the confidence. Especially when you face good arms in this league, and you get first pitch of the game, Ernie comes out and gets a single. It just gives you that confidence that you can. Ernie got a hit off him, I can get a hit off him. It's not like you go out there and the first 7 guys get retired and you're like, wow, this guy is tough. And certainly, you're going to face good arms in the postseason. So I think having that depth and having anybody one through nine that can start a rally for us, I think it just gives you confidence as an offense; and certainly is contagious.

Let me ask you about two of your fellow Floridians, Adam Paisley and Pavin Smith. I mean, both are having monster years. Adam is still hitting above .400. He's at .407. As you mentioned, he's got the 11 home runs. Pavin's hitting 365; he's got 10 home runs. Adam is 5-1 as a pitcher, 3.31 ERA. What about the talent of those two guys?

You just said it. It's just talent and experience. They've played every day their first three years, and I think with that class, you got Ernie and so I think those three guys have played extremely pivotal roles. And I mean having 400 at-bats in Division I baseball helps you out a little bit. And so I think there are always guys that are working hard in the cage and in the off-season. They're working on their swing and getting better. And so they're producing, and I'm not surprised by it.

You've started 19 games at catcher in addition to being the DH and playing a little first base. Where is the pitching staff right now as opposed to early in the season? There've been some changes in the week in rotation. Noah's in there now. Daniel pitched a complete game last night, Daniel Lynch, which was fantastic. He's done well mid-week. How has that group evolved in your opinion?

You know, certainly things happen early in the season and you mess around with it a little bit. And certainly, from an offensive standpoint, we've changed. Adding Caleb Knight to the lineup and now-- to keep him in the lineup-- play first base-- and I think that's an extremely effective lineup. But from the pitching staff, I think you started out Daniel on Friday, and then you had Sperling throw Saturday, and Adam on Sunday. Some guys struggle a little bit early on and you give other guys opportunities. And I think Noah Murdock has done a tremendous job. He threw extremely well against Virginia Tech through seven strong innings, and I think that's key for us. We're going to have to have guys step up, but it's always good to have Daniel Lynch, even though he got moved from the weekend rotation to the midweek rotation. I think him going out there and doing what he did last night is going to be important; especially in the postseason when you need that extra guy to come out-- and especially him throwing well. I think he's going to do a great job for us.

I know baseball takes up most of your time. Do you get out to the golf course during the year? You're an avid golfer, right?

Yeah, well, I mean I grew up around golf. My dad played at Rollins College. He's been a director of golf in South Florida for at least 35 years now. And so whenever I go home, I love spending time with him, going out and playing golf. And so I just grew up around it. But I try and get out if I can. I only have three clubs here. It's two long drivers and a six iron. So if I go anywhere, it's usually just the range.

Who's the best golfer on the team? Would that be you?

No. Ernie, for sure.

Really?

Yeah, he's a really good golfer.

Geez, from way up there in Rochester?

Yep. Yep. He's just got a smooth stroke. Kind of like his baseball swing short and simple. And he puts it right down the middle.

You have something of a unique perspective among the players on the team just because this is the fifth team you've been a part of now. I know the story won't really be written till the post-season is done, but what do you see as the potential of this team? Is this in line with some of the better teams you've played on?

For sure. Yeah I think [INAUDIBLE] the other night, he interviewed me after the game and he was talking about the '14 offense and this offense and what kind of teams I've been a part of. And I think certainly, every team has potential to do great things. It's a matter of doing the right things at the right time. And so in '15 we started out, it was a slow season but then caught fire at the end. And we're doing things the right way and ended up winning the whole thing.

And so it's not necessarily defined by how you play in the regular season. But it's when you get into the postseason play and you get into the 3-2 games, and the 5-4 games, and tough situations. You got to be able to win those games at those times, and certainly, last year we didn't do that. But that team had the potential to do pretty good things as well. So I think we'll see come playoff time.

So if you compiled a list of the guys you've played with at UVA, it would be a long one. To put you on the spot a little bit, who is the most-- in terms of maybe just raw talent-- the most talented guy you've played with here?

I mean there's a bunch.

[LAUGHS] I know.

I mean names that come to mind-- obviously, like Pavin. I mean, ever since he stepped on the grounds here, just a beautiful left-handed swing, raw power and talent. Papi. Fisher was just a raw athlete; ran fast, threw well, hit well, was just pretty dangerous. Howard.

[LAUGHTER]

Just obviously a good arm. I mean throwing 100 miles an hour, you can't really teach that. So it's a long list.

Yeah, got a lot of good choices. Your second year, UVA goes to Omaha for the College World Series, gets to the championship series, loses to Vanderbilt. Your third year, get back to Omaha, obviously win the whole thing. I'm guessing those are your favorite memories-- are 2015?

Well, they stick out for sure. I would say number one, they should do a 30 for 30 on those two years because that would be like two basketball teams making it to the finals two years in a row.

Well, Florida did back when you were younger.

[LAUGHTER]

But it was just ridiculous the way it panned out. And we played Maryland at home two years in a row and then in the finals playing Vanderbilt two years in a row, you just can't really write that up. And so I was told in '14 that this is just a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that I got to live again the next year. And so I think that kind of sums it up for me is how indescribable that feeling was to go so far and fall short in '14 and then come back and win it.

Have you allowed yourself to daydream at all about-- I mean, I believe you would have to be the first and only player in program history to get to Omaha three times if the team were to get there this year. I know you want to stay focused on the next game and the next day, but do you allow yourself to dream about what that would be like?

I mean, Omaha is just a different place. You make it there and it's just such a cool experience. You get 30,000 fans and everybody is there to see college baseball, and it's at the highest level, and it's so competitive, and so much fun, and you're competing for a championship. So I think it's certainly maybe in the back of my head a little bit. But I think right now, yeah, we're focused on finishing out a strong regular season. And we got four quality opponents on the weekend coming up. And so I think we take care of that and put ourselves in a good position. I think certainly we'll make a run for it.

Yeah, well good luck the rest of the way; starting this weekend against Notre Dame.

Yes thank you sir.

So the weather forecast for the weekend is, as you people may know, looks a little questionable in Charlottesville. But hopefully, we'll get the baseball series and all the other scheduled events in. Remember to check viriniasports.com for schedules and information on baseball and all the other teams. I'll be back next week with another Wahoo Central podcast. Until then, thanks for listening.