

Welcome to another edition of the Wahoo Central Podcast, our weekly look at the University of Virginia Athletics. Final exams ended here last week. And graduation is this weekend.

I'm Jeff White from Virginiasports.com. My guest this afternoon is Brian Fetzer, who directs the cross country and track and field programs at the university. Brian, thanks for stopping by.

Thank you, as always, for having me.

So as I mentioned, final exercises are Saturday and Sunday. And I know a number of your fourth and fifth years will be walking the lawn. These are all your recruits at this point too, right?

That is.

For the most part.

Yeah, everybody that's here is who our staff has recruited. So it's exciting to see how well they've done academically, and to have as many young men and women graduating this weekend is pretty awesome.

What is that group-- and I guess the group consists, some of them are fourth, and some of them are fifth years. But what are they meant to the program? Because the program is in better shape now than when they came here so I guess some of them kind of took a leap of faith, didn't they?

They did. And I know Henry Nguyen, when he was talking to our team down at the ACC championships, that was something he alluded to, specifically in the men's side, that they were here when we weren't great, and now have kind of since helped build the program to be what it's become, and to be a top 10 program nationally, and to be able to be in contention for an ACC championship on a regular basis.

And that says a lot going forward about that group of young men. And the women were part of winning their first ACC Championship in cross country in 33 years last year. So it's exciting to kind of see what they've produced.

And academically, we've had some Incredible years the last couple of years, 1,000 plus in the APR. Or 1,000, I guess it's the highest you can go in the APR. And to be an all-academic team each of the years nationally for this group, and to have the highest GPA, if I'm not mistaken, in the department in a long time. Those things are just part of what we're trying to accomplish. I mean, obviously winning championships is very important.

But graduating student athletes, which we've done. That whole class has graduated. So it's getting things done in a bigger picture.

How much has the perception, like when you go out to high schools and clubs with the coaches and young athlete, how much is the perception of Virginia track and field and cross country changed over your 5 and 1/2 years here? I'm guessing you get a better reception, in some quarters, than maybe you did.

I'll say when I first got here I actually had a high school coach from the state of Virginia tell me, we do not send athletes to that school. And we have no intentions of sending athletes to that school. So when you fast forward, and you look at the majority of the student athletes that fit the profile of Virginia academically this year are coming here.

Recruiting is all about finding the right fit. And we definitely have begun to find the right fit for our program. And it's definitely helped out, the success. We have a lot more people call us than we had in the past.

And this is a good track and field state.

Virginia is one of the best track and field states in the country, without question. If you look at some of the Olympians. I look at Queen Harris, and Sean Merritt, and Allen Webb. And you just kind of go down the list of all the great high schoolers that have kind of been around. So many of them are from Virginia. So for us to start being able to get those student athletes out of high school to come and put Virginia at the top, that's definitely where we want to make it, where we want to go.

You were in Atlanta last week for the ACC Championships. Under controversial circumstances, your men finished second by one point. The UVA women placed eighth.

Now that you've had some time to digest the conference meet, what are your thoughts on kind of the way each team performed? And how did you address the situation on the men's side with the team afterwards?

Well, I think, one, when you look at the women's side of things, I think we performed very admirably. We redshirted a lot of young ladies this year, specifically on the distance side of things. And we're really, really young on the women's side. So that was very encouraging to see them produce the way they did.

The women's conferences is probably a lot deeper from a team standpoint than the men's conference is from top to bottom. When you look at some of the teams that finish, all really the top eight or nine teams.

The men are kind of top heavy.

The men's conference is very top heavy. So I was really excited about how the women performed. We have seven young ladies that will be going to the NCAA first and second round. We have 20 guys. So almost our whole men's team made it to the first and second round of the NCAA championships, which is a major difference of what it's

been in the past.

Obviously, for the men's side of things, definitely disappointed, but not in our performance. I was ecstatic on how we performed. I think the men really have learned to step up and to perform at a very high level when it's needed. And that's exciting.

I think that bodes well for them in life, to be able to handle adversity, and kind of go forward from it. After the meet, there was a lot of emotion. I think the encouraging thing was to see how far our culture has come as a program, because the women actually took it-- I think the women took it as hard as the men did.

You saw a lot of emotion, because they're invested as a team. They're invested as a program. And that's what you're trying to teach. You're trying to teach young men and young women how to handle adversity.

You're trying to teach them how to overcome obstacles, and how to bond, and kind of share a common goal. I would always rather lose something with character than to win something without any integrity. So we talked about class a lot. We talked about how we would handle things. And I think our men have definitely done so going forward. in just how they've kind of responded to how things have happened.

Each of your teams has big guns who performed well in Atlanta. Who kind of emerged, or maybe surprised you, at the ACC meet with their performances?

There was so many surprises, to be honest with you. Kelly McKee in the women's triple jump, she made some-- she's basically gone through to two levels of progression in two meets. So she had a great performance overall. There were some individuals that really stepped up and did some things.

Christine Bohan had a great from a throw standpoint. And really, actually, placed lower than she had in the past, but had lifetime bests in almost everything. So that was kind of surprising.

On the men's side of things, Pobo never ceases to amaze, has come up with some big performances. I think a lot of times, people look at Philip and see how well he does, and how high he's ranked. But to win four straight discus titles at the ACC Championship, and I think he's up to 10 individual titles, that's hard.

I think if you'd asked any coach, is it easier being the one that's hunting or the one that's getting hunted, I think he's got such a bull's eye on his back that people come after them. From the standpoint, he's got to produce. And he's really responded well. And you see his maturity level go up. And he's a big gamer.

We had three guys score in the 10K, three guys score in the 5K. I think Brett Demarest did a phenomenal job, from a standpoint. He really came through big. Just overall, there was a lot of-- especially our older athletes,

Jordan Young, and Nathan Kiley, and Zach Herriott, and I could just continue to rattle off names of individuals that stepped up and did some things.

But I think when you're performing well, it's a lot easier to do that, because if you're not performing very well, you're not going to have a list of people. And I'm sure I could forget people that I think performed admirably.

One of your first years, Jordan Scott is best known as a triple jumper. But he got fourth, I think, in the long jump.

Fourth or fifth, yes.

Do you see today day as he gets-- even though that's his second event--

Absolutely.

Could he end up being a double winner one day?

He could definitely be in that category. And you're talking about one of the best young men, triple jumpers, in the country, who's considerably performed well. And he's got some big things ahead of him.

And the misfortune of what happened in the triple jump was absolutely not his fault. And he had four jumps that were better than what won. And So I'll just kind of leave it like that, although none of them counted. He's a gamer as well. I would not be surprised if you don't see some pretty awesome things come out of his performance in the next couple of weeks.

Looking at the next couple weeks, you mentioned the first and second rounds of the regional. That's in Lexington, Kentucky, right? And then the championships are in Tracktown, USA, Eugene, Oregon. What do you have to do to get, as an athlete, from Lexington to Eugene? What is the qualifying standard?

You better be pretty doggone good, for one thing. They take the top the top 12 in east region, the top 12 in the west region, advance on to the NCAA championships. And it's a best--

So they don't do north, south, east, west. They just do two?

Two, and it's the best-- really, it's considered the first and second round of the NCAA championships. They handle it. They have the first round. And then they have the quarterfinals. And then the semis and finals are both out in Eugene.

In most of the events, the 10K, it's a semifinal. And they advance on from that. It's definitely-- you've got to be on your game from start, because you're talking about the field events, you have three attempts.

You don't qualify-- I mean, you have to do it there.

You have to do it there.

You don't qualify into Eugene.

It's no different than the NCAA basketball championships. You have to be on when it counts. And that's tough, because you could be the best person in the country all year long. And it only matters what happens on that day.

Have you been to Lexington before? Have the teams competed there?

We've competed at UK every year that I've been here. We've usually gone there for an indoor meet. We didn't go there this year. We went up to Notre Dame instead.

But it's a great facility. Edrick Floreal is the head coach there. I've known Edrick for a long time. He's built that program into-- the women are tremendous right now. And they have an incredible facility.

They have some of the best facilities. Their administration has really invested in making them a top rate program. So hosting it at UK will be an exciting chance.

Hopefully, there's a there's a good crowd. And I know the competition is going to be amazing, because the east region is heads and tails above the west.

So your men placed 7th in Eugene last year. I know there are a lot of variables. But does this group have the potential to do that well or better? Or is it too early to tell?

I mean, you're going to find out a lot this weekend how many people advance, because it's all about scoring opportunities. Unlike other sports, you have to have scoring opportunities. If you don't have them, you can't score points.

The goal from the beginning of the year was to win a trophy. And we don't have a trophy yet. So hopefully, we can walk away with one.

It takes super performances on the day as well. And I think a lot's going to be told out of Lexington, whether we advance more athletes than not. But I think we have a large opportunity.

We have 27 athletes on the men and women side going to the region meet, and essentially our whole men's team that participated competed at the ACC championships. Almost our whole men's team has made the NCAA meet. And there's not many teams that get a chance to do that. That's definitely the exception rather than the norm.

You were hired here in December 2011. So it's been roughly 5 and 1/2 years. I know programs have kind of progressed. One will take a step forward, another will take two. Right now, there is a little gap between the men and the women.

Sure.

You're high on the recruiting class coming in on the women's side, right?

Very high.

Do you see that gap closing?

Absolutely, I see it closing. The trend nationally is it's very difficult to be successful on both. And that's just the way it is, because of the number of coaching staff that people have, and so on, and so forth.

But I think winning a championship in cross country last year, which hadn't been done in 33 years at Virginia I think definitely says something. And our women's recruiting class, we're super excited. We have some big points scorers.

And when you have a conference as large as the ACC, it's not necessarily about depth. You have to have superstars. And I think we've got a few coming in that can fit that mold, that can be your national level scorers.

Very few of the individuals that can score in the ACC meet now can't make the national championships. That's just the way it is. That's just how good the ACC has gotten.

Over the last five or six years, with the addition of adding Notre Dame, and Louisville, and those schools in, Syracuse, so it's really definitely changed the makeup of the conference. Whereas in years past, when we were looking at the list, and we looked at-- we were saying, shoot, 119 points, I wonder if Virginia has ever scored that before?

They used to score that a lot when there was only eight teams in the conference. It's so different. You had people scoring that might not have been NCAA level athletes.

I think the women are going to be substantially better next year. We had some injuries this year in cross country that cost us. And that is part of it. And also, when you're limited in the number of student athletes you can have, or number of student athletes that just academically fit Virginia, it definitely puts you at a disadvantage. It's not that you can't win. It just make things a little more difficult than at counterparts that don't have admission standards.

You mentioned Kelly McKee, who's one of your triple jumpers. I interviewed her yesterday for a story. And she

transferred here from Kansas.

And she talked about how she's been struck by the chemistry here between the men's and the women's teams, and how close the program is as a whole. Is that uncommon? You've been associated with a lot of college track and field programs.

It is very uncommon. It is something that, from day one, that we set out to try to establish to bring a culture. Is everybody ever going to be on page? No.

But I don't think that that's that way in life at any level. But just to see how well that they all get along together and they're all for each other is definitely the goal. That's what we've been working on.

And like I said before, the women showed as much emotion for the men finishing second than them. And you could never tell who's performing what, because everybody is supportive of each other, in all the event groups. And that goes to the leadership of the young men and young women on our teams.

My goal is to always-- it's their team, and to let them be the leaders, and say, hey, this is your program. We're just guiding the ship. But you have to make the ship run.

And so they've done a great job of following our core principles of what we're all about. And we talked at length this past weekend at ACC's, one of our principles is it only matters who matters. And that's about, the people that matter are the people that are on your team. The external, the people down at the local coffee shop, or the local store, the newspapers, those people don't matter.

It's who is important to you. And your teammates are important. And I know they've done a great job taking hold of that, and really running with it, and supporting each other.

Your male throwers had an unbelievable ACC meet. The leader of that group, Philip Mihaljevic, you mentioned him. He will graduate with 10 ACC gold medals between indoor and outdoor shot put and discus. He's been an Olympian.

He's competed in the Olympics. For various reasons, a lot of athletes never reach their potential in college. They get hurt. They get derailed somehow.

I mean, what's it been-- he's basically done everything that you thought he could do. I remember he enrolls here in January. And you talked then to me about his potential, and what he could do at UVA, and in the sport. And it's like he's for 3 and 1/2 years later, he's right on track.

He is. And his best years are yet to come. And what he's brought to the program, he's very honest, and very

straightforward.

That's what Jordan Scott said about him.

I mean, he is-- politically correct would probably not be the word I would ever describe with Philip. I mean, he's pretty straightforward with what he believes, and what he thinks, and the accountability level that he holds others to. The crazy thing is he was hurt most of indoors.

And most people didn't realize that. I mean, he was banged up. And it took him a while. He's just now to the point of being healthy.

And most of the country probably didn't realize that. I mean, he wasn't 100% of the NCAA Indoor Championships or the ACC Indoor Championships. He wasn't even close. And now, he is to that point.

So you're starting to see that performance kind of increase. And he's going to be one that he has done a great job of setting our program up for years to come. He's definitely made his mark, not only in the field, but in the classroom, and as a leader.

And it's a rare occurrence in athletics that your best athlete, or one of your best athletes, is one of your biggest leaders. And the teams that are great, those are instances that come about, that I'm sitting here looking at some of the football guys from yesteryear, with Herman Moore, and Sean Moore, and Terry Cobrey, and all the stories I've heard, Chris Slade, and know how they were when they were here at Virginia.

Great things were said about them is how they performed, and how they kind of rose to the level. And I think Filip is in that same level. Will we have another Filip? I hope we do.

But maybe it's in a different event group. Maybe Jordan Scott can take over that role, and take over that pedestal, because I think he's going to be an incredible one as well. And he's got a great head on his shoulders.

The Whose Choice Awards show was held early this month at JPJ. Filip was honored as UVA's top male athlete for the 2016-17 school year. The emcee for that show was one of your alumni, Jordan Lavender, who did a fantastic job. That had to be a pretty cool moment for you as a coach, to just sit back in JPJ, and watch the whole thing unfold, but see Filip get that award, and see Jordan.

It's an awesome thing. I mean, you just see the personalities of the young people that have been in our program last couple of years, and who we have. As a coach, it's very fulfilling to see that, and to know where everybody is. Jordan has done a great job.

And she continues to compete post-collegiately, and is such a bubbly personality. And for her to do that, I know

she was excited. She was very honored to have a chance to emcee that first Whose Choice Awards, which has come under incredible praise from the students. They thought it was a great choice that the administration made to kind of go forward and have that. It's pretty exciting.

Yeah, it was. Well, listen, I know you've got a lot to do, get ready before you leave for Lexington. Good luck in Kentucky, and then in Eugene.

I appreciate it, Jeff, appreciate it a ton.

With graduation dominating the local calendar, this is a quiet weekend in Charlottesville for UVA athletics. But it'll be a different story down in Georgia. The UVA baseball team is in Atlanta for an ACC series with Georgia Tech. And the men's tennis team is in Athens, where it's bidding for its third straight NCAA title.

For information on these and all our other teams, check Virginiaspports.com. I'll be back next week with another Wahoo Central Podcast. Until then, thanks for tuning in.