

Welcome to the Wahoo Central Podcast, our weekly look inside UVA athletics. I'm Jeff White from virginiasports.com, and back today for his fourth appearance on the show is Mark Guilbeau, head coach of the Virginia women's tennis team. Mark, as always, thanks for stopping by.

Thank you, Jeff. It's good to be here.

Officially, we have two more months of winter to go. But spring sports are about to get underway here at UVA. And your team will be the first one out of the blocks. Your season-opening duel match is Saturday morning at 11 o'clock against Boston College indoors at the Boar's Head Sports Club. How is your team looking so far?

Well, I can tell you just from a team chemistry and work ethic, fantastic. It's just been a really fun group to work with. They've got a young group, no seniors. But they have certainly worked very, very hard together. They've helped each other. They've been very open to Troy and myself as coaches. And we have a lot that we're going to continue hopefully progressing with, but they certainly have given themselves and us as a staff every chance to really do some good things right away.

When your players come back from the holiday break, do they typically need time to get their form back? Do they come back in good shape, or is that always a little bit of a mystery for you?

It's probably the most stressful part of this whole process. And again, not to get too much into NCAA kind of parameters. It's really a difficult situation that these athletes are put in, where essentially seven weeks removed from their team and their coaching staff. Even if a student athlete chose to stay here over the break, we can't work with them. So it's about seven weeks where they really have to be disciplined and hopefully also have access to the--

[INAUDIBLE].

[INAUDIBLE] of training. So I can tell you that certainly last Saturday the 14th was our first day back, and I could see that these kids had really done everything and more. I threw some unique workouts out their way and just requested that, and they did a lot of communicating back and forth to each other to hold each other accountable. But you could see they came in right away last Saturday really ready to go.

So you literally though have one week before-- in your case, before competition starts.

One week.

I don't think any other team has something like that, where--

No, and that's--

You come in cold and then practice.

It's-- number one, the athletes have to understand, it's not something we decide. That is based on the playing and practice season of the NCAA season. So it's really not conducive for the best of the student athlete. But regardless, it keeps them on task over the break. And good kids and good teams do that. And I'm very proud that it looks like for sure our kids did.

The NCAA championships in tennis are held in the late spring. So technically, it's a spring sport. But the men and women compete in the fall too. As a coach, what are you hoping to accomplish in the fall? What do you want your players to get done? I don't know-- do results matter as much in the fall? Are you focused more on development?

They really don't matter in terms of team ranking or team standing directly. They're very important because you do want individually-- the tennis system is an individual and team. And so for each individual, you really want them to put themselves in a great spot to be able to progress and then go through the spring and hopefully make the NCAA individual championships.

But really much more importantly than that is getting the team together. You really want to build off of the key fundamentals and philosophies that you really try to instill, both within a team concept and then also a teaching of tennis concept. And we did that really well. We had a very structured fall, a very solid fall. The results were progressing, and some good results and some mixed results. But overall a good fall. And it's mostly an individual fall that then leads into the team portion in the spring.

This is your 12th team at Virginia. And I don't think it's a stretch to say that this team looks considerably different than your 11th team did. From a team that reached the NCAA quarter finals, you said goodbye to Danielle Collins, Julia Elbaba, and Stephanie Nauta, who were three of the most accomplished players in program history. And now you have four freshmen and no seniors on your roster. Does it feel like you and your associate head coach Troy Porco are starting a new chapter--

A little bit.

At Virginia, and do you like that challenge?

It's a little bit that way, and again, the chapter kind of starts a year or so ago when you're working with these recruits basically as they're heading into your program. Every year is new and different. It doesn't matter if you

add one new player, or if you graduate one or four or five. But certainly we understand what graduated and what moved on.

And the main thing we try to do with this young team first and foremost is build off of that and really recognize and appreciate what the teams before have done. And they put us in a good position to be able to hopefully continue forward with this young group. But it does feel very new. And I will say that we've gotten back to the roots of some of the fundamentals and philosophies, whether it's teaching or just team concepts, and that's been fantastic. That's always a fun thing.

Danielle, as I think most people who follow UVA athletics, [INAUDIBLE] won two NCAA single titles during her three years of Virginia. Did her individual accomplishments, did they help the program overall, raise the profile of it? Does it help in recruiting? And I know she's having success professionally now too.

Yes, it does help in the exposure. And also, she's out there playing. And that's more exposure. So she's able to see even prospects, recruits. She's just spreading more good word on our program out there as she's playing the professional circuit, as well as Julia Elbaba. It helps very much, and certainly we want to build off of that.

You have eight players on your roster. Can you tell me a little bit about them, starting with your upperclassman, Cassie and Dora?

Yep. Cassie Mercer is third year, and she's come through a lot. She's had some medical issues that she's been able to work through. And she's really a great kid that's really had to toughen up because of that. She's always been pretty tough, but this really created a pretty seriousness to that. And very proud of what she's doing. She's developed a lot of power in her game. She's going to be a force this year. I hope to really see her do well, and very likely very high in the lineup.

Dora is a transfer, came in from George Washington, and also a big powerful player. A lot of range in her game. She's been impressive. We got bad news just the other night with her health. Hoping that she can work through it, but right now she'll be sidelined for a short period of time. And hoping that she can get back in there. She competes extremely hard, probably has the highest spirit level of anyone in the program right now. And it's a great thing to see on the court.

Then your two second years, Meghan Kelley and Erica Susi.

Right. Both have gained a lot of experience. Meghan was in every match last year, both singles and doubles, playing at the highest spot in the doubles with Danielle. And she did a fantastic job. Meghan had to kind of inch her way up the line up from essentially six to four and really went through most of the dual season without losing. She had a lot of very tough matches, learned to win three sets and valued every bit of that and really did a great

job all the way through the NCAA.

So again she'll lead us in many ways, and she will be a big factor right there in the top area of the lineup as well. And then Erica played a lot last year as well. She's a hard, hard worker. Great student. I'm excited about both parts of her process. And I know that she's willing to do everything and more that we ask, and she works really, really hard out there. So hopefully good things ahead for her as well.

And then there's your first year class, which consists of four players. What were your thoughts on this group when you recruited it, and now that you're actually working with them, have you been pleased with what you've seen? Have they lived up to what you thought they'd be in terms of potential, at least?

Yeah, very pleased. And it's still early to maybe measure that degree of things. I've been very, very pleased with them as people and teammates. They've been fantastic. There's a lot on their plate because Troy and I have asked them to be leaders. We really want everyone on the team to be a leader. This year our captain is our entire team. So kind of a unique approach. But I really do want them to step up and have a voice, and they've done that.

They're willing to do the thinking and kind of do some of the leading. On the court, they're going to need to lead us as well. We'll need every bit of those four young ladies to be high level players. And it does take time. They're learning new things, I think, and they're also trying to really make sure that their confidence and their fundamental base foundation of trust in their games is there.

But I see the areas where we can progress forward. I see a very solid foundation, very steady, very willing to work hard. And now we'll just try to top that off with some of the things that have been present maybe in the past, which is maybe a little more of a powerful game. You're trying to build a little more offense into what this current group has come in with.

Who among that first year group has impressed you on the court? I know in the fall, looking at your fall statistics, Hunter had 11 and 3 record. They all had winning records, it looked like, so.

Yep. They all worked very hard to have those winning records. I think sometimes the records can be a little misleading. Rosie was playing at the highest spot. We played a couple of team events in the fall, kind of what they call a hidden dual format. So you're getting used to the team format. So her level of opponent competition there was a bit higher. She's really shown herself to be one of the very best players out there already. A top 10 incoming freshman on the rankings. And then ended the fall with a good ranking in the national rankings. So that's quite an accomplishment.

But really, all four-- Hunter, Camille, and Chloe-- they've all been rock solid on a day-to-day basis. Chloe probably

came in right away and really was kind of dictating things on the court within a practice setting and had some good tournaments. Camille's been an extremely hard worker. She stepped up in the doubles area. And Hunter has been very strong with a high winning record in the fall. Had some health issues in the fall that she's worked through now. So I think we're headed in a good direction with all four. And they've done a lot already.

Depending on if they played high school tennis or not, some of these players may not have a lot of experience as part of a tennis team. With it being an individual sport, is there an adjustment period for first years in some cases, when they come in, to learn that they're playing not only for themselves, but part of something bigger?

Sometimes there's a huge adjustment process, and that's sometimes the biggest thing. With this group, it hasn't been the case. These are very, very team-oriented young ladies, all of them. And including the first years. They've come in. They did some communicating over the summer within the group prior to even getting here. And so that team adjustment concept, that's only been a positive and something that's probably one of the strengths of the group, is the way that they're willing to do things together and for each other.

How fluid is your lineup at this point of the season?

Extremely. Probably couldn't be more fluid. We're probably going to talk about it today with the team actually for the first time. And again, it's another area that even before Troy and I discussed this with the team and announced the lineup more or less for Saturday's match, I can already see that that's not the primary concern of these young ladies. It's-- they want to do this for each other and as a group, and I think they're happy to be wherever they need to be to help the team do the best it can.

We were talking a little bit before we started taping about the weather and how that affects what you do. You like to practice outside whenever possible.

We do.

Even if a lot of your early season competition will be indoors.

Exactly. We may know that we're going to play an indoor match, say, if we have a week or longer. And we'll maybe start that week, if the weather allows, outside. So we'll be shifting outside as soon as we can, even though knowing that we may end up playing more matches indoors for a bit of time. Really, the combination of both is a great opportunity for the players.

I think that you learn certain things indoors that you can then help your game by learning and then applying outdoors and vice versa. Certainly, we tend to get a little bit spoiled by being inside. The conditions are so nice. It helps the serving. It makes it a little bit easier to win points with offense. And so the bottom line is you appreciate

that, and then you make sure you don't take it for granted, and you carry that into the outdoor portion of the season.

You've had a lot of success in the ACC over the years. How does the league look this year? Is it typically strong?

It's probably in one realm stronger than ever, meaning based on depth. And I would say that every team in the conference is very strong. So it's going to be a very challenging, difficult year in that regard. In some ways, when you have that, that's what also gives you the best opportunity. It gives every team in our conference a chance to be playing good teams day in and day out. So from a ranking standpoint, from a developmental standpoint, it's really very valuable. It's going to be very challenging, very difficult. We're going to be one of the younger teams. I don't shy away with young players, but I do know there's a learning process.

Do you expect this to be a, team because of its inexperience, that could have some struggles early, but hopefully gets better as the season goes on, as you gain more experience?

It's very likely. And I wouldn't necessarily say struggles. I would just say we have to have a perspective. And I think last year we had to redefine winning and success. We had to put actually winning aside for some periods of time because of some things we went through. And this year, just from a learning curve, and a process of needing to have that experience, we may have to kind of have a real good perspective and understanding.

I want the team to know that we trust them completely, and we see that-- what we've talked about is, it's not about beating anyone else right now necessarily. We certainly are accountable to winning and losing. But it's much more about being the very best that we can be. That's what we control. And I see that, again, day in and day out. I'm really hoping on Saturday that because of all their hard work and the accountability that they've shown, that they can be very comfortable right away in that first match and feel great out there playing.

After playing BC on Saturday, you will host the ITA kickoff weekend on January 28 and 29 at the Boar's Head. This event will bring together Virginia, LSU, Wake Forest, and Ole Miss. Have you competed in this event at other sites in years past? And what do you hope to get out of an early season deal like that?

Yeah, the answer is yes. We've competed in it at home, and come through it. We've also competed on the road. It's been a few years because we hosted the national tournament for a while, so we didn't have to take part in the kickoff. But it's a great concept. It's a great weekend. Our region, truthfully, is probably one of the most balanced, strongest regions in the country. We have four teams essentially that are right around the top 25.

So is this a qualifier for the--

National team indoors.

The team indoors. One team advances, or two, or--

One team advances. So it's really competitive. It's a great challenge. And win or lose, it's a great experience. It's a good way to really kind of start the early part of your season.

Well then in February, you may or may not have the national team indoors, which is in New Haven, Connecticut, then 16 dual matches, then the ACC tournament, then the NCAA tournament. That's a lot of tennis. I look forward to following your team's progress this spring.

Thank you.

Thanks again for stopping by. Good luck on Saturday.

All right, Jeff. Thank you. Thank you very much to all the fans out there.

For information on women's tennis and our 24 other teams, visit [virginiasports.com](http://virginiasports.com) and [virginiasportstv.com](http://virginiasportstv.com). I'll be back next week with another Wahoo Central Podcast. Until then, thanks for listening, and stay safe.