

Welcome to another edition of the Wahoo Central Podcast, which comes to you each week from our studio in University Hall. I'm Jeff White from virginiasports.com.

Spring football officially started here on Tuesday, and my guest this morning is Shane Hunter, who coaches the Cavaliers' inside linebackers. Shane, thanks for taking a break from your work at the McCue Center. It's always good to have a fellow Crozet resident in the other chair.

Thank you. I'm excited to be here today.

So since the start of the semester, I've had Quin Blanding and Andre Levrone on the podcast, and both of them talked about how different things feel this year compared to last, in terms of familiarity with the system and the installation of a culture and all that.

What's year two like for the coaching staff? Most of you guys were thrown in here last year from Provo. Is there a greater comfort level?

I would say that right now, just the familiarity with the kids. That's the easiest thing. We don't have to focus as much on the culture. That's one of the things that has been nice, is they have that built in, that they understand how we do things. It's not teaching everything from square one. It's OK, we already have the base and the foundation that we've laid. And now we can add to it. We can say, OK, well, we're going to do this, now we're going to do this. And they already have an understanding to go, oh, well, that's kind of like this. Instead of everything being brand new to them, eyes wide open, just big old eyes like trying to drink through a fire hose, all those great expressions.

That's how it was last year. They're just trying to figure things out. But now they understand how we work. They understand us as coaches and how we coach. We understand them as players and how they learn. And so the speed of things, I think, is going a lot faster, and it's helping players out a lot.

Did you assume it would be like that last year coming in new, or did the scope of that surprise you? That there was as much of that as it turned out to be?

Well, I think that anytime you come into a new place, there's obviously going to be that learning curve and trying to explain the whole new system. And the thing that happened here was, it was a complete overhaul. Especially defensively, we went from four three to a three four. And so it was a lot of different fundamentals in the different types of schemes.

And so being able to teach that, we knew would take a little while, but I feel like towards the players as they got comfortable in it, they started playing better than they did. They showed some good things.

And now that they're comfortable in that, we can start doing a lot more. And we can just be able to give them a little bit more of what we have.

So let's talk about your group. There are some positions that are really thin this spring because of injuries or just there are players on the way who are not here yet. You actually have close to a full complement of players, don't you? Comparatively speaking.

Yes. Comparatively speaking, I do.

So, Micah Kiser, C.J. Stalker, Dominic Sheppard, Jahvoni Simmons, Rob Snyder, and now Jordan Mack. Am I forgetting anybody?

Reed Kellam, he's working with us in that inside as well.

It's hard to recognize Jordan Mack these days. I saw him. He's actually got some guns, and he looks good. What went into the decision? Is he cross-training at both inside or outside, or is he full time inside now?

So we're cross-training him. We feel like he can do both. He's a really good athlete. He's gotten a lot bigger, like you said.

Coach Wintrich, I would say that's been one of the biggest improvements this off-season is, you look at our guys, all of them, it doesn't matter who they are. They're big, they're fast, and they're stronger. The strength stuff, they've done an amazing job with the guys. We've said, hey, this is where we need to be, and they've gotten us there.

And so it allows us to do different things with the guys, like cross-train and put them in different positions. To say, hey, wherever we can put our best eleven on the field, that's what we're going to do.

A guy who came here, was a well-regarded recruit, but then he redshirted his first year, and then last year got hurt was Dominic Sheppard. Is he finally healthy? And he's a big kid. What have you seen from him so far?

Dom has great instincts. It's fun to watch him because he picks up on little things, and sometimes he sees it really well and he gets it right. And every once in a while, he doesn't see it as well, and he gets it wrong.

But the thing that I really like about Dom is he's very positive, and he's worked really hard to get back from his knee injury. And I feel like he's going to do some good things for us.

There was some attrition in the off-season, unforeseen, with the loss of Landan Word. What does that mean for the unit? Obviously, he showed some promise last year.

Yeah, Landan showed some promise, and he was able to do some things for us, some pretty good things for us on the field. With him deciding that this wasn't the place for him, it's just the next guy up.

And that's what I love about our room and the guys that we have in there. It's not a me room, it's a we room. That we're focused on us, and all of us, and being able to step up and to get better.

I know the feeling at the end of last season inside the McCue Center was that Micah Kiser was leaning toward coming back. But until he finally makes that decision, there's always a chance of a last second change of heart. What was your reaction to his decision to come back, and what does that mean for your group to have a returning All-American back to anchor the linebackers?

It makes my job a lot easier. I know what Micah's going to do. He's going to be a great leader for us. He's going to lead by example. He knows the defense really well. The amazing thing with him is, you just tell him to do something one time, and he does it. It's not, OK, he messes up the next time, and the next time, and then he gets it the third time. It's, you tell him to do something, and he does it exactly right.

And so that leadership and that example that he provides to the room, that's going to help a lot of the young guys, and just get a feel for it, to better understand how you play Division I football.

What can he do to get better as a player? Clearly he was very, very productive last year in terms of tackles and interception and things like that.

I think it's just continuing to hone in his skills and his fundamentals. Micah's a great player, just like you said, he's all over the field, he's making plays, and he does a great job for us. And that's the thing that I really enjoy having him in the room, because he does those things. He's a great example to lead the guys and show them, hey, if you do it this way, the right way, then you're going to be successful.

And so just continuing to build on his leadership role and leading by example, I think that's going to help him in the long run.

Kelly Poppinga coaches the outside linebackers. How closely do you work with Kelly, and how closely do the two groups of linebackers? Because obviously on the field, they're out there together.

Oh, yeah so, shoot, our meeting rooms are separated by a wall which is probably four inches. So that's about it. And obviously, any time we have questions or we need to go back and forth, all I have to do is holler at him, or he

hollers at me and just pop your head in each other's room.

And I think it breeds that familiarity with the outside linebackers and the inside linebackers so that we know each other. We do things together. We do some drill work together this off-season, and it's been great for us, just building that core of great linebacking play. Not just inside or outside, but just being able to say, hey, Virginia's linebackers are really good.

Do your guys typically know the responsibilities of the out-- obviously Jordan is learning that, but is it ideal for the inside guys to know the outside assignments and vice versa?

Yeah, I think it's going to make whoever person is-- it's going to make them a better player. Because the more you know going on around you, it gives you an understanding of, OK, this is where my help, this is how I can play this, and it just gives them that freedom to be able to, maybe, take a chance every once in a while because they know, OK, well, he's there so I can shoot this gap.

Or vice versa, them understanding and trusting that we're going to be where we need to be. And just play in your responsibility. I think that's huge in making our defense a great defense.

So you grew up in Idaho Falls, Idaho.

Yes, sir.

For those of us who have not had the pleasure of visiting, what's your hometown like?

Idaho Falls is a great place to raise a family. Being born there and raised there, I loved it. Grew up, and it's just a good town. Just great people--

Small town, or--

Yeah, it's similar. A little bit bigger than Charlottesville, but it doesn't have the big university, and so it's got more of just that hometown feel. Heck, we got we had two super Walmarts, so you know we're big time.

So I googled you, and it turns out in addition to being a good football player, you were quite the baseball player, it sounds like, as a catcher and a hitter. I know the guys over at JPJ tell me you're a pretty good basketball player too and [? noon ?] ball. Now, did you have options to play baseball in college, had you wanted to go that route?

So I signed on signing day for football to go play at a junior college in Utah.

Right, Snow College.

And at that time, baseball season hadn't started yet. And I had had an OK junior year, not really-- well, let's be honest, not a good year. But my senior year, I had a really good year, and so my high school baseball coach, he talked to me and said, hey, I've had different schools talk to me. Because he knew I was a football guy. I love football, that's my passion. He said, OK, if football doesn't work out for you, let me know. There are some schools that would be interested in you.

So was your dad a coach?

My dad coached me growing up. He coached, so me and my older brother, we played together for a few years. And then he got too old and too big for me, and so that's when my dad-- he's just coached both of us. And so we spread out, and he coached me all the way up until I was in high school.

Ultimately you ended up at BYU and played there. Did BYU recruit you out of college? Did you go to Snow with the understanding that after one year you would then transfer to BYU or was it a roll of the dice?

It was a roll of the dice. I went to Snow for a year, and then I went and served a two-year mission for my church. And then I came back. And when I came back, I had no idea where I was going to end up. And so it was kind of just, let's see what happens.

BYU did not actively recruit me. I spoke to Coach Tidwell at the time, was the inside linebackers coach, because I played with his son my first year at Snow, and so I knew him. But there was nothing ever really, hey, we want you here, anything like that.

So for me it just got down to the choice. I met my wife down at Snow, and she's from that area. So we talked about it and we felt that it would be a good place for us to be close to her family, to be close to my family, and so I reached out to them about possibly walking on, and it worked out.

So you were, and are, 5' 10", which is not tall for a linebacker. Did you have to convince the coaching staff at BYU that you could be a productive player at 5' 10"?

Yeah, you could say I had to convince them. No, being smaller and being able to understand the game, I knew that it wasn't going to be me beating people physically, most of the time. It was going to be me being quicker. And the sad thing about being 5'10" is that I'm not real fast either. So that's one of the issues. You're not big, you're not fast, what can you do?

And so I had to separate myself by knowing the defense really well, being smart, and seeing things before they happen, getting everyone lined up so that they could trust me in there. And then it came down to just being able to make a play, and I was able to do that.

I think I've heard that your players here have seen film of you. Do they dig it up themselves, or do you show it to them?

No, I like to give them a hard time. But guys, come on. That's me doing that. I'm 5' 10" and I'm slow. If I can do it, you can do it. And so I like to joke with them about it and just have fun with it.

Were you always going to get into coaching, or once you got into college did you see that as the career path?

No. So actually I went to school, I got my exercise science degree, and I was plan on going to PA school. But after I got done playing my senior year, that spring, not having football in my life, I was like, oh, no. I don't want to go to PA school. I want to be a part of football. I want to help out people. Because I thought about a lot of the people that had influenced me in my life. And I just thought, that's what I want to do. I want to help young men out, and I want to be around football.

So you went back to Snow to begin your coaching career?

So I went down there and I coached the D-line and special teams for two years. And then I had the opportunity to come back to BYU as a graduate assistant for Coach Mendenhall, and I jumped at that. And here we are now.

When he took the job here, that final season at BYU, you'd been a GA. Were you going to come here no matter what position was available for you? Like would you have come here as a GA, as a couple other guys did from BYU, or--

Well, I had reached the end of my GA time--

So it had to be--

--and so I was looking for a job, whether it was as an analyst or something off the field. I would have wanted to come either way. I talked to Coach Mendenhall about that and he said, well, we'll wait and see what happens. And so it ended up working out really well for me being able to come here and be a part of the coaching staff.

Now you did your mission in Charlotte, North Carolina?

I did, yes.

Had you had any familiarity with this part of the country, the Southeast, before your mission?

No, I'd never been to the South. Well, I'd been to Washington, DC once in high school. So other than that, it was completely new to me.

And then being on my mission in North Carolina, I went down to South Carolina, and just a little bit into Virginia. And so I had been around it, and I loved it here. The people are amazing. It's beautiful. Shoot, you can't get a better place.

From a recruiting standpoint, just having a year under your belt, does that make-- knowing where high schools are, knowing where this city is in relation to that city--

Oh, yeah it's huge, is you go out and you can be so much more effective, understanding where things are and how to get there and when you can go see a coach, when he's free. Those type of things, that just helps you, and building those relationships with the coaches, so that they're comfortable with you. They know, hey, OK, this is what's going on in Virginia. They're doing good things. They feel comfortable with bringing their kids here.

Do you have a specific recruiting territory in Virginia or in the Southeast?

So when we first got here in Virginia, I was-- we call it the 29 south area. The Lynchburg, to Danville, that type of area. But recently I was moved to Richmond, so I'll be in northern Richmond. And so that's my Virginia area. But I also work the Raleigh-Durham area in North Carolina, and then have a few other areas, like southern Georgia and Jacksonville, Florida. Those are my main areas.

So what's it been like to go from playing for Coach Mendenhall to working alongside him?

For me, it's been a neat experience, to be able to experience Coach as a player, where you trust him, and you know what he's doing, and you know that he knows what he's doing. But then as a coach, you see just how much time and effort goes into, just even the littlest detail. That Coach is so specific about what he wants. And he agonizes over every single decision, because he wants to make it just right for the players.

Was he your defensive coordinator?

So my first year, it Jaime Hill. And then halfway through-- well, not halfway through, about four or five games into my senior season-- is when he decided that he needed to make a change, and Coach took over the defense. And so he was my defensive coordinator for the rest of my senior year.

So has he changed as a coach since you've played for him?

No. He has, but he hasn't. Because he still is demanding as ever. He expects excellence out of the guys. He wants us to make sure that we're playing as hard as we can, that we're doing everything we can, that we know exactly where to fit as linebackers. We know our coverage. That we're just very precise in what we do, and then we play as hard as we can.

Seems like it's important to him for his coaches, and his players too, but to strike a balance between football and family, so that you're not necessarily here from 4:00 AM to midnight. You get to see your kids. Is that an attractive part of working for him?

It's awesome. Because Coach, he gives us Sundays off. And so to me, that's huge, because I get to be with my family one day a week. Now during the season, obviously, you have to put in that extra work. You can't just say, OK I'm good at 5 o'clock, I'm out of here. No, it's not that, it's being able to put in that extra work. But understanding that Coach, he does want us to spend time with our family.

Shoot, all the coaches here, for the most we all have young kids. Except for Coach [INAUDIBLE] and Coach Anae, we all have kids. So it's important for him and for us to be able to be a part of their lives, to make sure they know who we are, and to make sure that we're there to help be a parent to them.

Did you grow up watching any of your fellow coaches-- do you remember them when they played at BYU? I know some of them played, probably, when you were real young, but Kelly played-- you would have been in high school then, right?

Kelly, let's see. I think he played while I was at Snow and then while I was on my mission. If I remember right. Because when I came back, he was on the scout team with the Cardinals.

And so I don't remember really seeing him play. I went to games and I'm sure I saw him play, but specifically being like, oh, that's Kelly Poppinga or anything like that. I don't recall that, no.

So do you have any special teams responsibilities as well?

I help Kelly with the kickoff and the punting. I'm just kind of an assistant coach. I work with--

Return or both?

Just kickoff and punt. Not the return teams.

Well good, well listen, I know you're busy and you've got to get back over there. I appreciate you coming by and spending a few minutes.

Thank you. I enjoyed being here.

All right, we're headed into another busy weekend for Virginia athletics. And there's baseball, women's tennis, and men's tennis this weekend in Charlottesville.

For information on those events and all our teams, check virginiasports.com. I'll be back next week with another Wahoo Central Podcast. Until then, thanks for listening.