

Welcome to another edition of the Wahoo Central Podcast, our weekly look inside UVA athletics. I'm Jeff White from virginiasports.com My guest today in our University Hall studio is Sean Kirwan, the offensive coordinator for the Cavaliers men's lacrosse team, which host defending NCAA champion North Carolina on Sunday night at Klockner Stadium. Sean, thanks for stopping by.

Yeah, thank you for having me.

So you've been a Charlottesville resident for, what, nine months now?

Yeah.

What's your favorite spot in town outside of UVA and grounds?

Well, I live right-- three miles down the road, right by the downtown mall. So any spot in that area has been awesome. It's a great culture, and nice young adult community, too. So it's been a fun nine months being here.

As I mentioned, Virginia plays Carolina on Sunday night, and that kicks off a stretch of three games in seven days, which is a lot. After UNC, you play Robert Morris on Tuesday night at Klockner, then you play at Duke next Saturday afternoon. That's a grind. As a coach and staff, do you alter the practice schedule? To keep the players fresh, or do anything differently?

Nothing too different, we try to stick by-- having the same day before game practice. So if that means that the practice-- you don't have that many practice leading up to it, you might need to shorten your prep a little bit. But right now, we're really just focused on Sunday and Carolina, and making sure we're fully prepared for that game. And then come Monday morning, trying to flip the script and be ready for a really talented Robert Morris team. So, really just focusing on that ACC tilt this Sunday night, and getting our guys ready to go for that.

You came here from Brown last summer with Lars Tiffany and Kip Turner. Kip obviously had played here, he knew the lay of the land at UVA. How much did you know about the school-- the program? Had you ever been to a game at Klockner before you coached your first game there?

I actually took the job here without ever visiting Charlottesville. I never have been down here. I've seen Klockner on TV multiple times. And I love lacrosse, and have followed it my whole life, so I know the history of this program. And with the impact it had on the sport, and to be here is truly a humbling privilege for me. And it's been a lot of fun getting to know the whole area and the whole campus, something aside of the school that I had never seen or been to.

What did Kip tell you about the lacrosse portion of the deal here? I mean, did he have a lot to say about it?

Yeah, he's a proud alum. He loves taking those trips down memory lane, and it's a really cool perspective. It's something that I had when I got to coach at my Alma mater at Tufts, and to see that through Kip, and to see it through Lars when we were at Brown-- it's different when you're an alum. There's just a little extra sense of pride in everything you're doing, and trying to always keep alums in mind, and keeping that tradition going that you had as a player. So it was really cool to see his insight and to know what was important to him, and what traditions he really wanted to keep, and what was important to the program.

You came from the Ivy League to the ACC. I know you crossed paths with some of the ACC teams, you played Virginia last year. How much did you know about the league, the ACC and the teams in it? And what's been the difference, really, if there has been one, between what you face in the Ivy where there's good lacrosse, and what you face in the ACC?

Yeah, it's not too different. The rivalries still feel the same-- rivalry feeling, whether it's an Ivy League game or an ACC game. I think watching the sport from an outsider's perspective, and watching the ACC play when I was at Brown or at Tufts, is definitely different than being there in person to see those types of athletes, and to be able to coach those types of athletes that you see on TV flying up and down the field. It's definitely different firsthand. But at the same time, the prep's the same, the work that is needed to put in to be successful is the same. So that's really on par to anywhere I've been. To be a successful program, it's the same blueprint to get there.

Your name is becoming synonymous with fast-paced, high-scoring offense. If you had to describe-- if you had to boil down your philosophy to a few sentences, how would you describe what the intent is of what you want to do offensively?

Yeah, I think you and I had a conversation about this over the summer, about constant pressure. I'm always trying to keep a defense on their heels and put our offense players in position to do that as soon as we pick up that ball. Whether it's in our defensive end, or off a face-off, or off a turnover in the ride, we're trying to put pressure on our opponent and not let them get comfortable. Because it's really hard to score a goal when your opponent's defense is comfortable. Especially in those 6 v 6 scenarios, so any chance we can take advantage of, odd number situations, or extra space, whether they're even numbers but just four on four instead of six on six. Those are the kind of things that we practice, and that we believe our opponent doesn't put as much time into. So it's a real strength of ours that we've identified, and are constantly trying to exploit.

The only game of the season Virginia has not scored at least 10 goals was last weekend at Richmond. We ended up winning 8-7. Was that a product, the lower-- when you look back at that game and looked at the film, were

there things offensively that you guys should have done differently? Or was that just a great defensive performance by Richmond and its goalie?

I mean, first and foremost, a ton of credit goes to that Richmond staff. I mean, that defense is as real as it gets. That is something that we saw on film, and it definitely was different being there in person. You see some things on film that you think you could take advantage of and sure enough, they've corrected it already. And they did a great job dictating their tempo, and we had some chances, especially early on, to

Kind of break the game up a little?

Exactly, and credit to them for sticking to their plan. And we missed a couple opportunities, a couple extra one more passes, where we tried to do a little bit too much on our own instead of sharing the ball. And against a good defense, if you're not playing great offense, they're going to take advantage of that. And I think that-- credit to Richmond again, for just being opportunistic with their defense. And thankfully we were opportunistic enough to make enough plays at the end, to come away with one goal win.

Is this offense that you play now-- did you play this throughout your four years at Tufts when you were a player, or did it evolve over that time?

It's definitely evolved. The mindset has stayed the same, the idea of constantly putting pressure on an opponent has stayed the same. But things have definitely-- I've had to-- because of the amount of time that I now have at the Division I level to work with our guys, we were able to get a little bit more complex with our game plans. We're able to work through things a little bit more. So we're able to have a more diverse game plan, whereas Tufts in the NESCAC, without a fall ball with starting your practice February 15th. You really have to rely on the players to coach themselves and make those plays, and ton of credit to coach Daly when he was there to build that culture, and what coach D'Annolfo's doing there now to keep that going. I mean, that thing is player-run. I mean, they're the ones coaching themselves in the fall, so it was--

So there's no in D3? Or is it just that league, there's no fall ball?

It's just that league. The NESCAC has the restrictions, so they're the only D3 conference that--

Players get out and-- [INTERPOSING VOICES]

Yeah, captains practices and three days a week, and lifting on their own. So it's impressive, the culture that I was able to be a part of.

Virginia's averaging 15.4 goals per game. I haven't seen the latest national rankings, but I know that's way up

near the top. Did you expect to be this prolific right off the bat? And how close is the offense to what you'd want it to look like? I mean, when you go back and look at the tape, do you see lots of missed opportunities where the average could be 17, 18 easily?

Yeah, it's something that we talk about as an offense, is that strive to constantly improve and never be satisfied. So we always watch games where there's opportunities left on the table. I'm always talking to our guys, we're aiming for perfect games. But, the odds of getting there are a little unrealistic, to have that perfect game. So for us to continue to strive for that and try to capitalize on the opportunities when they present themselves, especially when we're in situations where those goals could be huge. Whether we have a lead, and getting that extra one more goal, or it's in a close game, a tie game where we need that one to take the lead late. Those are the opportunities that we're really focusing on to make sure we're dialed into and ready to capitalize. So it's a constant process to continue to get better, and we're constantly tweaking our game plan and making adjustments. So we're always learning, and we're always trying to improve.

Lars has talked about how for a team to really thrive playing this way, you need a big-time goalie, you need an excellent face off guy, both of which you had at Brown last year. At the offensive end, what are you looking for from your middies and your attackmen? What do you need for this thing to really work?

IQ is the most important thing to me. By giving our guys the freedom that they have to play in our system, they need to make smart decisions. And it's one of those things where, IQ is definitely something that you can have innately, but it's also something I believe can be taught. So it's something that we've focused on since day one, of just understanding how to boost each individual's lacrosse IQ and how to make reads on an individual basis. And some guys from day one were able to figure it out, and some guys we've had to hold their hand a little bit longer. But we feel like we're getting to a point now where we really do trust everyone that's on that field to make those decisions themselves, and they've done the preparation to understand those reads and take advantage of them.

One of those high IQ players is only a freshman, Michael Kraus. His father was a star here, his uncle was a star here. He's got 28 goals, 20 assists, 48 points. Did you know anything-- I think I've asked Lars this and he knew of Michael, and he remembered playing against his uncle Andy when Lars was at Brown and Andy was here-- but did you know anything about Mike before you took the job? Or when you got here and, just what about his play this year?

So I had never seen Mike play in person. Everyone that I had talked to that knew of him, specifically coach D'Annolfo, who's now the head coach at Tufts, coach Mike at Taft. And the words he would use to describe Mike just seemed-- right from the get go, that we were getting someone special. One of the first things that coach D'Annolfo told me about Mike is that he's going to ride harder than anyone you've ever seen. And we see that with

him. As a freshman, sometimes a little too hard, he's got a couple penalties in the ride. But his hustle and how he plays the game at 100 miles an hour is exactly what we're looking for in an attackman. He understands space, he understands his reads, he works hard. If he doesn't understand something, he works hard to get it and to get it down. And it's just-- someone that you want in your program. You want your better players to be your hardest workers, and Mike's definitely one of those guys.

Zed Williams, one of the fourth years on the team, moved from middie to attack, you guys moved him there. He seems to be flourishing in this new role. He's got 19 goals, 22 assists. Was that a seamless process, or is it-- I mean, some guys are middies, some guys are attackmen, not everyone can do both. What was the biggest challenge for him to--

Going into the year, it made sense to try him there. Coming from Brown and having the attack that we had last year, Zed, he fit a mold that we were used to at that position. And it was-- I mean, he's-- as you know-- he's the nicest, humblest kid you'll meet. And he'll do anything for this team. So to approach him and ask him if he would play attack, it was, of course coach, wherever you need me. From there, he and I have had an awesome-- I've really enjoyed my time getting to know Zed more and more and get to talk to him on a personal level. And just to talk lacrosse and understand how smart he is with the sport. And he's got a great lax IQ that you wouldn't know talking to him, just because he's such a humble kid. So that's been great, just to get to know him as a player and see him develop.

Now, it's been fun too, because there's some things that-- as an attackman, if you've played attack your whole life, that you would know. The things that I would never think I would need to teach to somebody that didn't know the sport, but there are just some little things here or there where I got to remind myself, Zed's never played attack before. And there was a face off where a ground ball was rolling towards the box, and it goes into the alley. And our defenseman, in practice, goes and scoops it up because he knows he can. And Zed's waiting in the box, and I said, you can go out in the alley on a face-off, it's just the restraining line. It's the little things like that-- it's cool to see him learn a new position and embrace it.

The guy who's probably made the biggest jump this year, from last to this year, from a scoring standpoint is Mike DeMario. Who showed some flashes this last year, but was not really consistent. He scored a lot of goals for you this year. Did you go back and watch tape of him from last year? Or did you just kind of start fresh with him, and--

Yeah, Mike and I had a great conversation at the end of the fall right before he went on break. Just about he and I starting to trust each other more and more. In the fall, I did a lot of teaching, but also a lot of observing. And then at the end of the fall, met with each individual offensive player and just kind of told them what I was seeing. And Mike and I, it was just a matter of him understanding that I trusted his decision-making, and I wanted him to play

with confidence and not to worry about mistakes. And he came back after a break and was so dialed in and focused, and just really embraced his role and has been playing free. And I mean, he's probably our purist goal scorer on the team, just from natural ability. He's the kind of guy we want with the ball on the stick in that 12 [INAUDIBLE] range with the shot. And he's just such a hard worker. Like any of our offensive players, these guys are putting in the time to prepare, and it's been fun, like my relationships with all these guys, to get to know Mike on a personal level and understand what makes him tick and what gets him going. So it's been great.

The other guy I wanted to ask you about-- only a first year-- Dox Aitken, has already set the school record for goals by a freshman middie. And historically, at least in Virginia, even the best middies in the program did not have a huge impact, statistically, their first year. What is his ceiling as a player? I mean, this is a guy who, with games to go, already has 26 goals and 10 assists. He's big, strong, it seems can shoot with both hands.

Yeah, it's been fun to watch him develop from when he first stepped on campus, a little wide-eyed, maybe a little unused to the pace of things. At this level, to then come back from break and just right from day one of practice in January, just have the confidence that he felt like he was the best player on the field, and played like it. And he's kind of just run with that. And what I love about Dox is that he's pretty similar to Mike. He's one of our better players, but he's also, you could call him our hardest worker. He's in watching extra O or D film, whatever he's got less of earlier in that week, he's in with myself or coach Tiffany learning the other side of the ball. So he's ready there, he's getting extra shots. He's just doing everything that he needs to do to make sure that come game day he's prepared. And it's been fun to see him play with confidence. It's rare for a freshman to play with that type of confidence. And to see him go up against some of the better teams in the country, and do what he's doing is pretty impressive.

You're only 27 years old, you have a lot of coaching on your resume for a guy that young. As you were coming through Tufts, did you realize then that you wanted to go into coaching, or do you have coaches in your family that you followed in their footsteps, or?

So I've known I wanted to get into coaching for a long time. I can remember third, fourth grade, drawing up plays, showing them to my dad, who was name my youth coach at the time. Asking if we can try them out in practice that night. It's something that growing up, I only knew the high school level. My high school was, I compare it to Texas football, Mountain Lakes lacrosse is something that the whole town rallied around. And those were the games that were important to me growing up. College lacrosse still wasn't really on TV that often, to go to local games and see some fantastic players and fantastic games. So I always thought that high school coaching was my calling, to teach and coach in high school. But then going to Tufts and seeing that I could coach collegiately and make that a full-time job, it just really appealed to me. And I was really fortunate to be asked by Coach Daly to stay on staff after graduation.

It's like I said, it's something that I've always wanted to do. And as soon as I got into college coaching, a place like Virginia was, to me, that was the peak at that time. It was, if I'm going to be-- I'm going to commit to this and put all this effort into it, what goals should I strive for? And to me at that time, it was be a coordinator at an ACC program. And the fact that I was able to get there in five years is truly, it's still kind of shocking and eye-opening. I still pinch myself to make sure this is still real. But I've been really fortunate to have great bosses, and Coach Daly and Coach Tiffany, and I've put in the work and am lucky enough to be here.

You won two NCAA titles at Tufts. I believe one as a player, one as a coach. Virginia's won five NCAA titles. Do you have a sense here of what it would mean to this community if you guys can bring the program? I know for the players, that's always kind of the ultimate goal. And I'm sure for the coaches, it is too.

100%, and it's something that-- getting that feeling once as a player and then once as a coach, you get hooked. And it's something that you're always striving for. It truly was such an incredible feeling, both as a player and a coach. So it's something that I would love to give our guys an opportunity to earn. And as a coach, it's something that you're always striving for. It's why you put in these long hours, it's why you're on the road recruiting. The end goal is to win national championships. And just to see the community rally around us when we first got hired, and the support we've had this year one, you can tell right away how much it would mean to this community and this athletics department. So it's something that we're really looking forward to striving for.

Well, you're about to get your first taste of the UVA-UNC rivalry.

Yeah, can't wait.

Thanks again for making time for this interview. Good luck the rest of the season. We'll see you Sunday night at Klockner.

All right, thank you for having me.

All right, in addition to men's lacrosse, the baseball men's tennis and rowing teams will be competing in Charlottesville this weekend. For schedules and information and news on all of our sports, check virginiaspports.com. I'll be back next week with another Wahoo Central Podcast. As always, thanks for listening.