

Welcome to another installment of the Wahoo Central Podcasts, which is coming to you today from our studio in University Hall. I'm Jeff White, from Virginiasports.com. And we're continuing our previews of UVA spring sports. My guest today is Julie Myers, who's in her 22nd year as head women's lacrosse coach at the University, which also happens to be her alma mater. Julie, great to see you again.

How are you doing?

Thanks for having me. Good.

So you lost five seniors from last year's team, but you have a very strong returning group, I think. Eight of your top 10 scores are back, including the top three Kasey Behr, Posey Valis, and Kelly Reese. Is it safe to say this team is starting from a good place offensively?

Yeah, I think we are. I think we have some great strength, great speed. We've got pretty dynamic attackers that can go right and left. We've got the dodgers. So I do think that we picked up where we left off and then maybe took a couple of steps ahead, because we had that year of experience under our belt and with it, some great wins, some close games, but some heartaches as well. So I always think that, when you can combine all of those things, you're in a better spot than where you left off.

You also have one of the nation's best goalkeepers in Rachel Vander Kolk. How much peace of mind does that give you? I know you went into the season two years ago when she was first year.

Right.

You're going into a season with a new goalie. It's pretty good to see her back there.

I mean, Rachel is just a-- I feel like she's been here for five years, and yet she's only a third year. And I say that in a great way. She's just so mature and so settled and solid in what she's doing, but also so eager to get better, to make sure that today is point A and that tomorrow she's going to step up even more in that next game.

She really takes advantage of her opportunities. So I think we've got a really hungry goalkeeper in Rachel in terms of somebody that wants to get better, wants to contribute to the defense, wants to be even more involved in stepping out on interceptions, ground balls, getting some things started for us. But she she's good, and she knows she can be even better. And I think that's a great combination.

Where did graduation hurt you most?

I mean, they were just great kids. They were kids that you had in your program for four years that really did all of their details as well as they could. They were smart kids. They were just really good kids to have on a team. I think they were good lacrosse players, but not great. So I think what they did was they taught us how to be a good team, how to take care of one another, how to make sure that they respect what we're trying to do, and that they know that they're a big piece of something even bigger.

But I think they gave us a healthy starting point in terms of team chemistry and camaraderie. And then, again, I think that our returning players, with all their experience and all that they were able to contribute last year, learning what they learned from the fourth years, I think that's why we're a little bit better. I think it's going to be an exciting team.

You open the season Saturday, February 11, against Elon at Klockner Stadium. Preseason polls typically do not turn out to be particularly accurate. But the ones that are out now have you 13th, I think, in one poll, and 14th in another. Does that sound reasonable--

Yeah.

--to you, starting? Or do you put any stock in it at all?

I mean, I think it's we're ranked. I think that says something. It doesn't tell the whole story. And I think, given how we ended last year and where we ended our season, I think 13, 14 is probably where people expect us to be. What I love is that we do have a great goalkeeper in Rachel Vander Kolk. We have a really dynamic, solid mid in Kasey Behr. We've got a crew of great attackers coming back. And we have Maggie Preas as a fourth year captain on defense, too, who is one of our all ACC preseason picks, picked to be an All-American as well. So I think we have great players all over the field--

Yeah, at every level.

with-- yes, really everywhere. So Kasey's going to be involved in the draw. She's going to be helping our attack and our defense and our transition game. You've got Maggie shutting things down on the defensive end. You've got Rachel, who can make saves. So I think that we are a more complete team this year going into the season than we have been in years past. So we're excited about that.

So three days after your opener, February 14, you have a scrimmage against Wales. And that is the nation Wales.

Yes.

How did that come about, and what level of competition will they provide?

So it's a World Cup summer coming up. So all of these national teams are trying to come to the states, where we have just a much better fabric of competition, where they can come and train a little bit and then get some exposure to a high level of competition. So Wales had reached out in the fall, asking about a scrimmage at that point. We had just booked our season. So we had 17 dates of competition, which is the maximum you can play before any kind of tournament play. Typically, you play 16, and you save one spot for a scrimmage.

But this year, we filled 17 games. So we don't have a true scrimmage, where we can see what we can do. Wales-- any international game does not count against your schedule. So this gave us a chance to scrimmage, to fill a little bit of a void in our schedule. Because we do open on the 11th and then don't play again until the 22nd. So it's going to give us a chance to play, maybe regroup, fine tune some things, try to push forward, and play an unfamiliar opponent, which I think is really important.

Are the international rules the same as the rules you play by in college?

OK, so this is when we're not awesome. We're making them play college rules. So we've started our season, and this is much more about what we're doing and much less about what Wales needs to be doing. So they will get a lacrosse game, but they'll be playing college rules.

How different are the two sets of rules?

I mean, we now have a possession clock coming in this year. And I don't know for sure that that's going to happen on that World Cup stage. I know we have quick starts, international doesn't. So there are a couple of differences that they're going to have to adjust to. And it will take them some time and probably a few games before they really understand it.

But really truly, when we scheduled it, we said, look, this is more about what Virginia needs than us trying to get you ready for a World Cup. I mean, really, we want the US to win the World Cup anyway. So they knew what they were getting into, and they were good sports about it.

You mentioned Kasey Behr. She was a second year last year. She took a big jump from her first year. I did a story on her last spring about the fact that she's in the nursing school and demands that that places on her. Is there still room for her to make another significant jump this year? And how challenging is that with her academic obligations?

I mean, she has a full plate. But the nice part about Kasey is she is a very talented kid. And every athlete can always get better. And I think you add some maturity and some hard work to it, and then you have a whole another level that you can then reach. So I do think that Kasey has gotten more mature every year.

She's worked harder every year. And part of that is because she's in the nursing school. She doesn't have as much time as some other kids do, so she's really found ways to maximize what time she has, whether she's studying or training for our team. But I do think that the maturity piece of Kasey Behr, just growing up as a young adult, that's the thing that's really elevating her game more and more right now.

You have a new assistant coach, Colleen McCaffrey. Did you know her? Or how well did you know before she came down here to work?

Well, she had played at Hopkins when we--

Right, so you knew her from that.

--back when we used to play Hopkins. So she was this midi that would win way too many draws for our liking, and went down our throat, and was really hard to stop. So I always respected her as a player, watched her play on the U-19 team as well, when she was still in high school. And then we played American randomly for a couple of years, and that's where she ended up coaching after Hopkins.

So we've played against Colleen. And we've coached against Colleen. She helped out at the camp as well, but really, just had a great reputation. And when we knew how big a spot we were filling with Colleen Shearer's departure, we knew that it was going to have to be somebody that had been in the fire, had made some hard decisions, and could really coach to any level and to any kid and really get their message across. So I think, given Colleen's playing career and her coaching career, I think she was a good fit for us.

Has she brought a different perspective at all just with her background from the program she's been with?

Yeah, I mean I think you always do.

And what does that do for the program here?

I think you always bring your past experiences with you. So I think, as hard as it was to say goodbye to Colleen Shearer, who was here for 19 years, we did get a whole new influx of a different person. She had been coached by several different people, Janine Tucker, who was at Hopkins. But she's had guys in there coaching her. She's had just other influences in her life that none of us had had.

So I think you always get something when you get somebody new. And I think that Colleen McCaffrey's done a nice job of being true to who she is and what she's learned, and then giving back to the program in her way, where it's been very respectful, and it's been very well received. And we're the beneficiaries of that.

Of your second years, Maggie Jackson had the biggest impact, I think, on the team last year. Are there others in

that class who, for one reason or another, were not in leading roles? Maybe there were upperclassmen ahead of them who you expect to step forward this year?

Yeah, I think our other big second year is Caitlin Lucic, who is Maggie's-- they're the one-two punch. I mean, Caitlin is also, I think, a preseason honorable mention, All-American, or something to that extent, so another just a really super competitive kid that will do anything for her team and anything to put herself in a good spot and to improve. So Maggie and Caitlin have a great friendship. They will run over each other and then demand the other person get up when they're on the turf. But they do it in such a competitive but awesome way, that I think it shows the girls, you know what? You can go for it. You can get knocked, and you can get right back up and still be friends with the person that's taken your breath away.

So you added 10 first years.

Yeah.

That's a big class, right?

It's a big class.

What do you think of the class, first of all, and then what do you need from that class for this team to do what it wants to do?

Well, I think you hit on some of it. So many of our experienced players that did well last year are returning.

Yeah, you have a lot of upper classmen.

There really weren't that many spots to fill. But I do think Lauren Martin, a first year player, also on the defensive end, has really come in and hit the ground running. I think she's solidly a starter for us right now, and not just a starter filling a spot, but really, truly helping to anchor this defense and really helping everyone play at a higher level. So she's been really fun to have.

And 10 first years, recruiting is so early for us in our sport right now. You get six kids that you're really excited about early. Then you find two others later and then other kids. You just, over the years, you grow to 10. So 10 is a lot, but they're all great kids. I couldn't imagine not having any one of them.

Well, last year, five of your final six regular season games were on the road, including the last four, which was brutal. This year, four of your final five regular season games are at Klockner. Who makes the schedule?

Well, it's reciprocal.

Is it our of your control?

It's typically reciprocal. The ACC tells you home or an away. And those ACC games [INAUDIBLE].

And then you figure out the rest?

And we did. A few years ago, we were asked to make an effort to play-- mirror or our men's schedule. So if the men were playing Notre Dame, we were going to try to play Notre Dame, and playing at Syracuse together, and that type of thing. So that when we were home, we were home together, and away, away together. So that moved the order of our games a little bit, just trying to pair up on the Carolinas, the Dukes, really, in particular, the Syracuse and Notre Dame, because it's such great travel.

So I think that played a little bit into it, but for the most part, it's a reciprocal schedule. So if you're away a lot one year, you're home a lot the next year. But that's how it works.

Historically, you have played one of the toughest schedules in the country year in, year out, if not the toughest. Have you ever thought of scaling back a little bit on that? And what is your philosophy, because I'm sure there's a point in some of these seasons where you'll say, why did I subject us to this murderer's row?

Yeah. I mean, I think part of it, you're in the ACC, so there's only so much you can do in terms of ordering your games and weakening your schedule. I think certainly, we did add an Oregon, who is a newer program. But they have a whole new coaching staff that came from Carolina, Florida, and Syracuse. So I mean, this is going to be a team that's not great this year, but they are going to be great pretty soon. Adding an Elon is a newer program.

Northwestern did drop us, which is a great level program that we, I guess, stepped back with. But I think we worked so hard for so many months, that I want to put it on the line. I want it to be important. I want it to help us get somewhere. And even if it's not in the win column, it helps us get better.

And it helps your RPI too, right?

Right.

ACC Tournament is in Richmond this year. How did that come about? Is that related to the controversy in Carolina?

Yeah, absolutely.

And where is it going to be played in Richmond?

So we're at the Sports Backers Stadium in Richmond.

Yep, downtown.

Yep, so we're downtown Richmond.

Near the diamond.

Exactly. And it was. It related to the bathroom issue in Carolina and hosting championships. So we were supposed to be down at Carolina.

So you are with the host school then for that as such?

Not to my knowledge. I think the ACC does so much of the details with that. So as far as I know, I think everyone's a visiting team to this ACC championship this year.

You could have a little home field advantage, though, if things play out just--

Yeah, I mean, it's certainly--

[INAUDIBLE]

--close for us, right. So it's certainly easier to manage travel-wise and people can come down.

Have you named your captains for this season?

We did. So the girls voted on it back in the fall. So we always give, especially 10 first years, we want them to know who they're voting for. So we usually do it in the middle point of the fall. So we have Maggie Preas, who's the fourth year defender that we've talked about a couple of times; Posey Valis, the attacker, that's a fourth year, started for us last year, scores a bunch of goals; and Katherine Rueger is a midfielder for us. So she was also voted as a team captain by her peers.

It's been well-documented how, on the men's side, lacrosse's popularity, it's just booming around the country at the youth level. Is the same true for women's lacrosse? I mean, you mentioned that Oregon is on the schedule this year. I saw Inside Lacrosse the other day. They were talking about Southern California, which is been [INAUDIBLE] power.

Yeah, they're the real deal.

Is it spreading the same way on the women's side as on the men's?

I mean, I think more so. We have 112 Division I programs this year in women's lacrosse, to men's 68, something like that. So we have almost twice as many. And so clearly, there are girls playing, because we wouldn't be able to have all these teams without. We have over 300 in the D II, D III level. So if you want to play lacrosse in college, I think it's a great sport, because there is opportunity to go out and play. So in my eyes, it's booming.

I know our staff, we have started a league for local kids in town, kindergarten through fourth graders, where they practice once, twice a week, depending on how old they are. And then we put them through a clinic on Sunday, and they play small field of games. So we are trying to help our community grow in this opportunity, so that these kids can lock on to a great sport, with lots of action, lots of scoring, and hopefully see if they can't take it on into college with them.

So how much have things changed? And you could probably talk for hours on this. But how much has the sport changed maybe just at the college level since you played here?

Oh, I mean.

How many D-I teams were there?

So that we probably had 68. Back in '91, when Jane Miller was the head coach, it was my fifth year. We won a championship. There were 68 teams, maybe 72. So it's definitely grown by 50 some programs or so since I finished playing. So I mean, it used to just be Maryland, Virginia, Penn State, Princeton, were the four teams that you had to worry about. But now it's really deep, and it's really-- we rank that top 20. And they're all good teams.

A lot of new names in there, yeah. Something new this spring for a lot of sports, but yours specifically, all 10 of your home games as well as two road games will be available to fans on the ACC Network Extra, which is the online channel for ACC Sports.

Which is awesome.

Yeah, how does that-- I mean, obviously, it provides fans, I guess recruits, others, an opportunity to see your program who might not otherwise. So that this is something you're excited about?

Oh, I think it's great. You I think our video sharing platform has grown also. So if we were trying to keep our games where nobody could see it, then I would be saying it's too many games to put out there. But everybody that we play against has access to any game film that we play. And so I'm just excited that we're out there, that people can, if they can't make it to the game, if they're out of the area, they can watch us play, and they can see just the level of athlete that's playing in the college women's game right now.

I mean, it's got to be great for the players who have committed, but also the ones you're still recruiting, because you can say watch us.

Oh yeah, and it's great. And we would love to see them play all the time. But the nature of the beast is we play when the high school kids are playing. So if high school kids want to see what a high level looks like or what their future program's going to look like, that you can't make it to practice and come to our game on the same at the same time. And all these high school programs are playing on weekends now. So really, truly for them to see us do what we do, it's going to happen now on online, and it's going to be a great opportunity for everybody.

Well, good. Well, one final thing I wanted to ask you about, then I know you've got to run, the men's and women's lacrosse programs here are close. And you and Dom Starsia always had a great working relationship. Did you know Lars Tiffany at all? You probably knew Kip from when--

I do remember watching Kip. And honestly, in 1991, I did meet Lars. I don't think he knows this story, but we were all out at the senior all-star game together. So I met him as a young college kid way back. But anyway, I mean, he's been great. I mean, I think I will always miss Dom. I will always respect everything he did and will always-- I always want him to stay involved in lacrosse, because he's too good a person for lacrosse to lose.

But Lars has done a nice job of being who he is and making sure he pops in the office, and that we're beginning that working relationship as well. So I think Lars is off to a good start. And we always wish the best for Dom.

Well, great. Well, good luck this season in the opener against Elon. And we'll see you out at Klockner.

Great. Thank you.

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