

Welcome to another edition of the Wahoo Central Podcast, our weekly look inside UVA athletics. I'm Jeff White from virginiasports.com. And as the end of spring practice approaches, we're keeping the focus on football. My guest today is Kelly Poppinga who coaches the Cavaliers' outside linebackers, and also serves as special teams coordinator. Kelly, thanks for stopping by. Welcome to our humble U-Haul studio.

Yeah, no, it's great to be here. Thanks for having me.

So, I hear you and Mark Atuaia stole the show last night at the VAF social in DC. What's it been like for you to get to know some of the UVA fan base that way?

Yeah, no, it's been good. Really kind of getting an intimate setting like that and open up. We open up and they have pretty open, frank questions to ask us, and I think we pride ourselves as a program to be transparent to our fan base, to our players, to the community. And we want to make sure everybody knows what we're trying to do, how we're trying to do it, and we want everybody to be along for the ride as long as they're bought into how we're going to do it.

And really that's the message that we were preaching last night is we want to do it the UVA way, and do it with high character kids, high academics, and ACC football players that can help us win an ACC championship. And so that was the message that we were sharing with those guys last night.

I think Coach Bennett was at that social too right?

Yes, he was.

That's kind of been his formula too. The high character kids who fit in well at the school.

Just hearing Craig Littlepage talk beforehand, and just talking about, he wants to be the number one athletic department in the country. And you know I think we're not far off. Football-- we have to pull our weight in that. I think all the other sports are doing an exceptional job. And you know obviously, basketball is probably the highest profile sport that's done it, but all the other sports I think are right up there as well. Obviously won the national championships in all those other sports and so we've got a ways to go football wise to make sure we're up with standards to what the athletic department wants here.

From a coaches perspective, how does this spring and this spring practice feel different from the first one?

So much farther along. The may notice for me, besides even how far along we are with our scheme, has just been

man, the energy. The guys have brought great energy to practice. Not that they didn't do that last year. I think there was a little bit of uncertainty. They were a little scared. They didn't know exactly how we coach, and we didn't really know them, and there was just that kind of uncertainty of how to react in certain situations. And in certain coaching points and things like that.

And so now, we're comfortable with them. We know how to coach them. They're comfortable with us, and they know how we work things in practice. I just think the energy in practice is so much better. They feel more comfortable. They're more confident. They are competing at a way higher level than what we were a year ago.

And then when you just throw in schematically where we were last year at this time compared to now, I would say last year, even throughout the whole entire season, we maybe put in defensively 30 35% of our defense than what we were running at our previous place. And now, in into spring ball practice 10, I'd say we're probably at the 75% mark. We're really close to getting everything installed that we want to run, that we feel like that works and that will work for these guys here.

And I just think man, we're on the right track. I think the next step is becoming a physical football team. I think that's still a ways behind where we want to be as a program. And just to establish that physical mindset. That nasty, tough, mindset. That's kind of been the trademarks of you know Coach Mendenhall's teams. And we need to establish that here as well.

There's been a lot of full contact work this spring with live tackling. I know the players like that because they're actually playing football. Does that make it easier for you to evaluate your players when you see them?

Oh definitely.

Instead of just a drill or a THUD?

Exactly. Yeah, because like you said, you're actually playing the game of football. You're taking the guy down to the ground. You're going to be able to see a guy finish. Sometimes when you're playing THUD, what THUD is is typically at contact, you hold the guy up, right? For people who don't know what that word means. But now, we have not gone THUD more than three times. We've been tackled to the ground every single time, but I think three practices.

And for the most part, not in every drill, obviously. It's not like that the whole entire practice. Man, I just think we've gotten a lot more out of just playing the game of football. Our guys need that. We're a young team. We're an inexperienced team, and the guys need to play the game how it's supposed to be played, and not just wrap up and let the guy run. No, we've got to take those guys to the ground. We've got to see who can really make plays.

And guys are rising and they're earning the role for Fall 2017 by the way they've practiced so far. And some guys have stuck out and I think there's been some guys that have been surprises that we didn't think maybe would be in that situation, but playing live football to help them show what they can do.

Shane Hunter is your counterpart with the inside linebackers. When I had him on the show a couple weeks ago, I asked him about growing up in Idaho Falls, Idaho. You're from Evanston, Wyoming.

Yeah.

What's Evanston like? For those of us who haven't been there.

Oh man, Evanston, Wyoming is people out here probably don't even know what sage-brush is. Sage-brush, open plains, really windy, really cold. Man, we'll be lucky if it gets to 85 degrees during the summertime. But man, during the winter it's really, really cold. But for me, I didn't know any better. I love to hunt. I love to fish. I love to ski. I love to snowmobile. I love to do everything outside. There's snow from probably early November. A lot of it. All the way until April. We've got snow on the ground, and a lot of it, and so we grew up to learn how to cope with the snow.

Coming out here, you really don't see much snow and so when there's like a little skiff of snow on the ground and school gets canceled, it's a little surprise to me. Because we wouldn't cancel school if there was three or four feet on the ground. So you know this is kind of how it goes. Loved it. Loved it where I grew up. Just the things that it taught me. A lot of similarities, in a way, to here. It's kind of a smaller town. I mean a lot smaller than here, but you're out in the country. And very similar type of things that you do outdoors here, you can do in Wyoming. I like the small town feel that Charlottesville has. It kind of reminds me back where I'm from.

You are the youngest of three brothers. You all played in the NFL. How much older are Brady and Casey than you? You guys must have had some epic backyard brawls and football games and everything.

Yeah, no, so u-- my dad played at BYU so we all grew up, obviously, BYU fans. And that was all of our goal. And our dream was kind of following--

And how far is Evanston from Provo? It's about two hours. So we're kind of right on the Wyoming/Utah border. But man, we went to as many home games as we could. And so, that was kind of our dream to follow in the footsteps. My oldest brother, he played at Utah State and then played in the NFL. Casey, he was a tight end, and he's four years older than me. And then Brady played at BYU, was an all conference player there. Fourth round pick to the Packers. Played eight years in the NFL.

When people hear our name, they hear the Poppinga name, they think of him. Green Bay Packer linebacker. Two

years older than me, and a really successful career. And then I'm two years younger than him. And then played at BYU, linebacker as well. Growing up I was the guy-- really competitive with Casey and Brady. They're really competitive with each other, and I was kind of the guy that was always left out as the little brother. But any chance they had to beat up on me they were going after me.

I think I'm the tougher one of the bunch. I had to go through a little more adversity and then just obviously gowning up, I was the guy that had to fill in the shoes of the bigger brothers. It was a great challenge for me. They set a great standard for me that I had to live up to. And obviously, pave my own trail as well, but great, great examples. It's been fun to be able to follow my brothers careers, and build my own as well.

And your dad was director of parks and recreation?

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Oh, yeah. So there' always the story of my dad would bring back the old football equipment back to house. We'd put them on. We'd go down in the basement and we'd just have a royal rumble down there. And the next thing you know, we're putting holes in the wall. And my mom would come downstairs and flip out on my dad. My dad's over there plastering the walls to make sure she didn't know that we were busting holes in the wall, and all that. It was a great job to have as a kid for my dad.

We were running sports all the time. We had a rec center in Evanston there that we were always going to. We had basically free access too to go play basketball and swim and do whatever. Really, the development of us as athletes, a lot is contributed to my dad. He wasn't one of those pushy dads, but we were always at the rec center doing something. We all just grew up with a passion for sports. My parents just did a great job of kind of putting this in the right direction, and we found out what our passions were. And then they helped us follow those dreams that we had to play college football.

One of your brothers, as you mentioned, played at Utah State, the other at BYU. You actually went to both schools. You started at Utah State before finishing up at BYU. Did BYU not recruit you?

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

How'd you end up there?

I was ticked, man. BYU asked me to walk on, picked a couple other players over me. I had a couple scholarship offers and I chose to go to Utah State. Two years into my career there, the head coach had gotten fired at Utah State, and the coach BYU had gotten fired. Brady, the second brother, was just finishing up his career at BYU and Bronco was the D coordinator. And he just told me you got to play for Bronco Mendenhall. Wherever he goes, if

he becomes the head coach here at BYU, if he becomes a D coordinator you've got to follow him and play for him. He's going to help you out in your career to become the best player that you can be. He's going to help you reach your potential.

Everything kind of just worked out to where Bronco became the head coach there. I was one of the first guys that he brought into the program from the outside. I had to sit out a year, which was really hard. I went from a starter, being one of the leading tacklers on Utah State's defense, and now being a redshirt guy. Being on the practice squad, the scout team defense. And kind of earning my stripes there at BYU. But then you know by my junior and then senior year, I had a great career there. Lived what these players are going through. Kind of the same process.

I got there right as Coach Mendenhall was taking over the program. And that first year was my redshirt year. We went six and six and that was the first time that BYU had gone to a bowl game in three years. And so I have gone through what these players are going through. And just the building of a culture, the building program. And I know that this works, and I've lived it firsthand. As long as they believe and trust in the process, I know great things are going to happen here.

Let's talk about your position group. I believe, if I have them right, the outside linebackers Malcolm Cook, Chris Peace, Eric Gallon, Gladimir Paul, Reed Kellum, and Dre Bryant. Am I forgetting anybody?

I believe that's everybody.

I've written a couple of stories about the medical hurdles that Malcolm has had to clear. It's got to be cool for you and gratifying to see him back on the field, isn't it?

Yeah, he's done a great job. He started slow. I think he was a little hesitant, a little worried about some things that he had done in the past, and so I kind of pulled him aside and just said, listen you need to let it rip. You can't worry about getting hurt. If you're going to, you can't play. If you're always in the back of your mind thinking that you're going to hurt or something bad is going to happen, it's always going to be holding you back you're never going to be able to become the best player that you can be.

So man, really since we had that conversation, I think Coach Hunter had pulled him aside and Coach Mendenhall pulled him aside. All of us independently of each other really not knowing that we were all doing that, and I think he got the same message. And he found out really quick that he just needed to let it go and forget about everything. And ever since then, it's been-- we're about two weeks into it-- he's played really well. Had another great practice on Tuesday. And man, has really been a guy I'd say over the last four or five practices that has really stood out. And we need that guy on the field. We need him to stay healthy. When him to get bigger, We

need him to get stronger. We need him to stay fast.

And he you can do that, he will be a guy that man, we did not see a type of guy like Malcolm on our defense last year. He's very versatile. He can do a lot of stuff. He reminds me a lot of the guys that I coached at BYU that were really successful on this defense. And so hopefully we can continue to help him improve and help him stay healthy, and then get him on the field in '17 to help this defense and this team be successful.

In one sense, he's a veteran because he's a fourth year in college, on the other hand, he's played very little football. He did shadow Coach Mendenhall last season, and the rest of the coaches. So I think he got a perspective on the defense that not every player has. How much do you think that will help him once he gets back up to speed?

It's been a major help for him and he's even stated to me how-- he knows how Coach Mendenhall calls games. He was the first guy to hear the words out of Coach Mendenhall's mouth of what we wanted in the game. Malcolm was the first guy to hear it. He was the guy that signaled in into the defense, and so to be able to have that experience, I think just helps him now kind of understand how Coach Mendenhall calls things. And man, he might be thinking ahead of time what the call's going to be. Maybe for Coach Mendenhall even calls them. He has 12 games of experience of that, which I think is invaluable and pretty unbelievable that he was able to do that. I've never even heard of that before. I think it's an advantage for him even though he hasn't played in the game in a long time. I think it's going to help him have a step forward in a lot of ways when we get into that first game.

Then as the season goes, I think he's just going to get better and better. And that's what I saw from my guys last year with Chris Peace and Jordan Mack. As the season went on, they just got better and better and better. And by the end of the year, I thought Chris Peace was probably playing some of the best football on our team. He got that injury in the Virginia Tech game. Just real anxious for Malcolm to continue to progress and get him healthy on the field for the William and Mary game and continue throughout the season.

Behind Malcolm and Chris Peace you do not have a lot of experience, maybe no experience really. With Eric and Gladimir, those guys. What have you seen from them so far and how do you get those guys up to speed so if you need to use them they're ready?

I think Eric got in the game a couple of times early last year in the season. Glad as well. And they just weren't ready last year, physically, mentally. But man, what I've seen from Eric is he makes plays. He's made a lot of plays. And with Malcolm, sorry, with Glad, he really plays with a high motor and high effort. And probably more than anybody else on our defense consistently with that motor and effort and finish to the ball. So, really pleased with the way that they've come along and just been really surprised with Eric. He's made a lot more plays than I thought he'd make. Needs to work on some pad level and physicality at the point of contact. But man, just the

play-making that he's had, I've been really impressed with.

I just say the competition in that room is always open. Everybody's had a chance to be a starter during spring ball because of what they've earned, maybe from a practice or previous practices. And so that's going to continue to rotate until somebody really can step up and say that they're the guy. Which I think Malcolm is kind of taking a step forward in the last four or five practices and separated himself from those two guys. But Chris was out with a hamstring and Glad and Eric kind of went back and forth. And Glad had some really good days and Eric had some really good days. The only guy that I think has really proved himself to have a starting spot, is Chris. And that just based off of last season. I'm not saying I'm going to give it to him. He's going to have to continue to earn it each and every day, which he has. He was back at practice yesterday and practiced great.

I'm really excited about the group I have. And then I'm really excited about the guys that are coming in and Zane Zandier, and Charles Snowden, and Elliott Brown. I think they're three really, really good players that bring a dynamic to our team, especially at outside backer, that we don't have, and that's length. And that was something that I really wanted to recruit was length. We're bringing in a guy that's 6'7", a guy that's 6'6", and a guy that's almost 6'4". We got really good length. They're all really good athletes. They're going to fit our scheme really well. It's going to be great competition.

Now I don't know if any of them are going to be able to come in and play right away. That's going to be up to them and how fast they can learn and buy into the culture and buy into the system. But I know instantly they're going to bring athleticism into that room in length that we've lacked. Anxious to see them compete for a spot and some playing time.

How much did Shane Hunter have to pay you to get Jordan Mack away from you and into the inside linebacking [? group? ?] I see a promising, promising [? plan? ?]

Man, he made a lot of plays for us at [? Sam ?] last year. But really when it came down to it, we just looked at our defense and we thought, how can we get our best 11 guys? Best 11 guys on the field. Best four linebackers on the field. And when we looked at it, up to this point, those are the four best guys. Now, there are some guys in there that I think are in the mix of potentially fighting into that role of maybe being the top four linebackers, but as of right now, those four guys between Micah, Jordan and Chris, and Malcom, those are the four guys that have established themselves at the best four now. I think Eric this is there, and Glad's there. I think Dom Sheppard, and Rob Snyder is coming on strong. And so there's some good depth there.

And then you add in Matt Gamm who's an inside backer that's coming in. Man, I'm really excited about the linebacker corps that we're going to have in here. They're big, tall, athlete-- Matt Gamm, he's 6'3", athletic, can run, and physical. I think we're bringing in guys that are going to fit this culture. And then the guys that are here

have bought into the culture and so I just think we're going to continue to improve at the linebacker position. In a 3 4 defense, you have the linebackers. You have that great inside guys that can plug. And you have great outside guys that can set the edge and that can rush the passer. I think we're recruiting those guys, and I think we're developing guys that are in the program right now that can help us be successful in this defense.

Outside Linebackers Coach is not your only title. How much of your work day is devoted to special teams?

Oh, man. Defense takes up a lot of time. But as soon as I have free time, my free time is all devoted to special teams. An hour and a half of it was devoted to it this morning. As soon as our defensive meetings are done at 5, I'll typically stay here until I have practice planned for tomorrow, which is probably an hour or two of that. I wouldn't say it's half. I wish it was. I wish I had about half and half. But it just doesn't work that way. But I have some help with one of our interns, Adam Shaker, that does a lot for us. And then a lot of the coaches-- Coach Hunter was brought in. Coach Howell has been a special teams coordinator before. Marcus has been helping out a ton with the returners, and Coach Atuaia. And so I said those five guys-- between myself, Coach Atuaia, Coach Hagans, Coach Hunter, and Coach Howell-- we're all kinda the guys that are really involved in the special teams and those guys help me out a lot.

This is an unusual spring just because of the numbers. The kicking positions is you have. One wrong place kicker on the spring roster, Nash Griffin. And two punters Nash and Lester Coleman. Which means I guess if nothing else, those guys are getting a ton of reps this spring. How do you see those positions shaking up? I know you have a recruit coming in, Brian Delaney, who is very well regarded as a punter and a kicker. Have you been able to accomplish a lot on that front this spring, or will you have to kind of wait summer camp? Man we've had a lot of reps with the punters. I think yesterday was their best day. Which is good, obviously. You always want the last day to be your best day. And they were really kicking the ball well yesterday.

Especially Lester. I think Lester's distanced himself from Nash just in his consistency with hang-time, and with the net of the punt, and the direction of the punt. He's done a great job. He's worked really hard. And Nash, who really was thrown in to be the place kicker, he did an exceptional job yesterday, kicked the ball really well. So I'm excited about that because that's kind of a surprise. I wasn't really expecting that. I was expecting Nash to just compete for punting. But now, I think we'll have a couple walk ons. We'll bring two walk ons that are not in the program right now. I can't mention their names because they haven't gone through applications. But those two guys, which I think are really good options. With Bryant being the scholarship, he's a dual guy. He can do it all. He can do the kicking, the punting, the kick offs. And so I think we'll have four options at place kicking and then three options when it comes to punting with Brian, Lester, Nash.

I'm really anxious to get these guys here in the fall to start competing for those spots, and then I think we're really

good at long snapper as well. We got Spaziani, who's done a great job in the spring and finished the season for us. And then Bernie, once he gets his wrist better, I think he'll be ready to roll. And then Bush, I think he'll be fine by the summer. And then Tommy Christ, who is a really good [? DN ?] that's coming in for us. But he can long snap, really good long snapper as well. So we've got three options there. So we're really excited about the guys that we have for special teams and I think we have a really good group of players that are bought into the special teams as well. We want our best guys on special teams as well. We believe that's how we will be the most successful on special teams in when the best players on offense and defense are our starters on those teams.

There were a lot of positive things that come out of the return game last year. Daniel Hamm on punts did well, and Joe Reed was that close a couple of times to breaking one. And I know there are other options at kick off return too. Do you feel pretty good about that group? Going into this year?

I feel really comfortable with Daniel. I think he's really savvy back there. I think he's really disciplined in catching the ball. That was something that we really emphasized last year is we did not want the ball to hit the ground. The one game that that kind of got away from us and hurt us, was the Georgia Tech game. But Daniel's learned from that and he's really good at catching the ball back there. And the thing I love about him, he's not the fastest guy, but he will hit that thing down hill. And he's not going to dance around. He's going to hit it and go in one cut and take off. Man, I thought he was a major weapon for us last year establishing field position.

And then Joe, man what a surprise he was. Very similar type of runner. He's not going to dance around. He's going to hit that thing straight downhill and anxious to get him healthy. He's had a little ankle-- he got on the very first day of practice here in spring. But just really, get him back and get him-- man, I think we ended up 19th in the country in kickoff return with Joe and our guys blocking it up for him. But anxious to get him back and I think on our return game-- I just think all around with the options that we have a punter, the options that we have coming up place kicking, all the returners that we have coming back, I think we have the makings for a really good special teams unit. Now we just got to replace an all ACC player in [? Conte, ?] which I think we have great, great options to do that.

Yeah, I thought it was impressive with Joe last year is that he had a really good average, but he didn't have anything outrageously long to kind of pad the average or skew it. He didn't have a hundred yard run. That would have been nice. I mean he was in the mid 20s, or whatever he was, because he was kind of consistently hitting that mark. He was impressive.

Yeah, there was a couple of times where-- Central Michigan he was really close. The game that just kills me the North Carolina game. We were-

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

He stumbled on himself. But man, there was a couple where he was just really, really close to breaking them. He set some great field position last year for us, and just really excited for his improvements. And for him as a true freshman to come in to do that, and now being able to have three more years with him, I think he's gonna be something pretty special.

Well, good. Well I know you've got to get back over to the McCue Center. I appreciate you stopping by for this interview.

Yeah, no problem. Thanks for having me on. I will see you and your linebackers, and kickers, and returners at the spring game Saturday, April 29th at Scott Stadium. Weather permitting, this is shaping up to be a busy weekend for UVA athletics in Charlottesville. For schedules, news, and features, visit virginiasports.com. I'll be back next week with another Wahoo. Central podcast. Until then, thanks for listening.