

Welcome to the "Wahoo Central Podcast," our weekly look inside UVA of Virginia athletics. I'm Jeff White from Virginiasports.com, and my guest today at University Hall is the winning-est head coach in the 22 year history of the UVA women's rowing program, Kevin Sauer. Kevin thanks for stopping by.

Thanks, Jeff.

I guess you're also the losing-est--

I was going to say, the winning-est? I'm the only.

You're the best and the worst coach in the history of--

It doesn't mean a whole lot, yeah.

There was a late basketball game at JPJ last night. I know you're a Hoos fan. Where you in attendance?

I was not there. My wife was not feeling very well, so we stayed home and watched it on TV. But I got rid of the tickets really quick, let me tell you.

Not bad.

I called up a couple of buddies, and they were gone.

I think we mentioned this on a previous show. You graduated from Lawrence Central High School in Indianapolis, which is also the alma mater of Kyle Guy. Do you have friends still back, family or friends, in Indianapolis? And if so, did they give you a heads up on Kyle when he was coming here?

Well, I have a cousin that still lives in Indianapolis that was a 1970 grad from Lawrence Central. That was in '71, 45 years before Kyle Guy, which is a scary thought. And so I did text him a couple times back and forth once we knew Kyle was coming, but he lives in another part of Indianapolis now.

That's a long time ago, Jeff, so family and friends, some of them are dead. So it's like, yes, so anyway, but it's pretty cool to have a Lawrence Central Bear that came to Virginia as well and that is doing really well.

Absolutely. OK, so back to rowing, on to rowing. How did the Fall go for your program? I think you competed in three regattas, Head of the Charles, the Princeton Chase, and then the Rivanna Romp here in Charlottesville.

Yeah, I thought the Head of the Charles was OK. It was decent. We have one that four out of the last six years,

type of thing, so we go in there hoping to do pretty well at the college level. But we did OK. We got beat by three schools, Brown, Yale, and Michigan.

But the nice thing was, the very next week we raced at the Princeton Chase, and we lost to Brown by less than we lost to the previous week at Head of the Charles. And then, we were able to beat Yale who had beaten us at the Head of the Charles. So that was nice to kind of turn that around a little bit.

And then, at the Rivanna Romp we had some pretty good rows. We set course records for the Romp in the varsity eight and the varsity four. And the second varsity eight had its fastest time ever for the Romp course at that time of year. So we kind of went uphill a little bit, got a little bit better as the Fall went on, so that was encouraging.

How much correlation have you found-- is there between fall performance and spring performance, particularly NCAA performance?

Yeah, you've got to be in the hunt. You can't just be awful in the fall, but you don't have to win everything in the fall to do well at the NCAA. It's a process like any sport is, so you just get better and better as the year goes on. That's how you want to do it.

If you're flying it early, it's kind of hard to hold on.

It's hard to sustain it.

Yeah, it is. So It's like we just kind of get better and better, and that's what we've been doing all year. The kids have done a good job with that.

How good a read do you typically have on your team by this point of the year, mid-February?

Yeah, we have a pretty good read, like, kind of where we're at. We can tell, like how the rowing-- we're very fortunate right now to be on the water.

Good weather?

Yeah, good weather and been on the water, but a lot of people are, like, Michigan's on the water. So it's not a big advantage right now, but at least we are on the water. We can kind of tell what we're doing.

We've got a ways to go technically, which is good because that means we can get faster. But on the rowing machines, which is a big deal for all college programs, all national team programs, there's some good stuff happening. So the kids are doing pretty well with that.

And a really, really challenging work we did a couple of weeks ago, we had an all time best on the ergometer on

the rowing machines. And the kids did a nice job this morning on the tough work out, so we kind of know whether we have the pieces to be able to be fast or not. And I think we do, so we just got to put the pieces together in the right way as coaches and get them rowing better and get them competing harder on the water, and I think we'll be OK.

The team trains in Florida before the spring semester starts every January. I'm sure that helps you from a rowing standpoint, but do you go into that looking at it as a bonding opportunity too for the team?

Yeah, we did something a little bit different this year. We concentrated on basically the top three eights of kids went to Florida and the next three eights stayed here. So essentially head coach, Brett Gorman, stayed here with those guys and had a really good training camp here.

Mainly, it was land-based, because it was pretty cold. But she got them out a couple of three times at the end of the week, so that was good. And it allowed myself, Steve, and Christine O'Brien to be in Florida with the other guys and give them some really good individual attention there.

So we accomplished more in eight days in Florida about equal to a month here, because we were able to go out twice in this unlimited time and good weather and that type of thing. So it really is valuable for water time.

You mentioned Brett, Steve, Christine. Your staff has a new look this year, though. The two quote unquote new members are not really new to the program. Can you just walk us through how the staff is composed? I know there was a rule change that allowed you to have an additional assistant.

Right. NCAA, in its infinite wisdom, said that with this many athletes we ought to have another coaching spot, which we've been pushing for a long time. So that was good. So Brett Gorman is in her fifth year here, so she's been a mainstay and done a great job.

And we were able to bring Steve Pritzer back into the fold, who was here for nine years and then went to be the head coach at Iowa. He came back here as a CFO of athletics, and after three years here found that, hey, we got an opening. Let's go ahead and get Steve back coaching. He's always done a great job.

And then, with the fourth coach, that was to replace Josh, Josh Gautreau who went out to the University of Washington as a first assistant. So we had that fourth coach position, and Christine O'Brien just missed making the Rio Olympic Team, so she was available. And she's a 2013 grad from here, three time, first team All-American, great kid. So she wanted to try her hand at coaching, so it was a no brainer for me to bring her back.

Had she done any coaching before?

Very little. She'd done a little bit of coaching at a prep school in Princeton, where the national team is training. But she knows the program, she knows me, she knows UVA. And so it wasn't a necessity for her to have a lot of coaching experience because of her knowledge base and her national team experience and being on the national team, such that it really helps.

Your veterans on this year's team include Georgia Radcliffe, who's a returning All-American. She's in her fourth year on the varsity eight, which is your top boat. That's a heck of an accomplishment, isn't it, probably in any program, particularly one of this stature? I know you've given me the list over the years, and there are not a lot of women who have been on the varsity eight four years.

No, not many. There's a handful, and it is hard to do and it should be hard to do. If we're doing our job well, if we have a fast program, it should be really difficult for a first year to make the varsity boat. So yes, she's in her fourth year in the varsity eight coming back from a world championship gold medal at the end of 23 worlds this summer. And she had two last summer, so she's got a strong pedigree.

And Erin Briggs is another fourth year that's done really well that won a world championship gold medal this summer with Georgia in the eight. And Collette Lucas Conwell also won another gold as the cox into the eight. And she's in her fourth year here, as well. She's done a great job as a coxain.

And then, we've had a couple of other fourth years that have really, really done well. Ellen Pate is a shout out to her that was in the four and the 2V for her first three years. But this fall, she really turned it on and was in the first eight this fall. And she's one of our captains at Georgia and Ellen are captains.

And then, Grace Tuttle's another captain who walked on here as a second year, and now she is in her fourth year. She's in our grad program. And she decided to ask me, hey, what do you think about me coming back? And I said, well, as much as you're improving, yeah, come on.

And then, she improved even more and she's doing a great job too. So there's some fourth years there that are doing a fantastic job and also as captains.

I was going to ask you about Collette. She's one of the nation's top coxains. For listeners who may not be familiar with the sport, could you explain what role the coxain plays in the boat? And also, how do you recruit them? Because I know I've talked to you about this before. You don't have, naturally, the objective times and measurements that you have for your rowers, do you?

No, you don't. You don't know that quantitative measure like the rowing machine gives you all over the world.

How do you measure leadership and--

Yeah, it's hard.

--Their spirit?

And it's really hard. Collette's story is that she wanted to come to UVA, and I didn't have a spot for her. That spot came to fruition in May of her senior year of high school, and she had already committed to another school and put a deposit down. But she really wanted to come here, and so I was able to get her here.

And you talk to coaches, you talk to athletes that have been coxed by them and try to make an assessment, a personality assessment, a leadership assessment, but it's hard. The coxain, the analogy I use a lot, is like a jockey on a horse.

It's amazingly similar, where you're cajoling, sometimes you get out the whip a little bit, sometimes you're cheerleading, sometimes you're talking in the ear literally and figuratively. But you're a coach, and you're an athlete. It's kind of a funny situation, where you're driving this boat and you're a member of the team.

You're the same age, you're a college student like them, but you kind of have to remove yourself a little bit and say, I have to think like a coach too.

And there's also the dynamic where they're generally physically smaller than the people they're bossing around.

Oh, yeah.

So that's-- you don't always see that.

They're very small. Just think about a jockey on a horse. He's a lot smaller than a horse, and he's telling them what to do. But I think they get into it a little bit, like, bossing around people that are bigger than them. And so it's a funny dynamic.

But the ones that do it really well, have the respect of the rowers. Our coxains work out with the rowers a lot and gain some respect that way. And also, they can find ways to push them and figure out ways for them to really find that next gear. And that's a real art to do that.

Do they have typically big personalities off the water too or do they just kind of turn it on?

Some people have big personalities all the time, and others just flip the switch in the boat. They're that way, so it just depends on the person.

You've won two NCAA team championships in Virginia, the first in 2010 and the second two years later. Last year

after three straight fifth place finishes, UVA took third at the NCAA's. Your Varsity eight was-- excuse me-- your varsity four was third, second varsity eight was fourth and the varsity eight was fifth. Cal won the team title last year, and Ohio State was second in 2016. Has a pecking order been established around the country at this point or is it too early?

It's pretty early. We know that programs like Ohio State and Cal are going to be fairly good. Brown's going to be good this year. Michigan is going to be good. Washington's going to be good and Stanford.

So there's just a lot of programs out there, but it seems to be that the same programs are near the top year-in-year-out. It does change some, but once you kind of establish yourself then people want to come to that program and that type of thing.

But there's always people that are scratching and clawing at the door and that type of thing. And for us to win, and we've got first in 10 and then, fifth in 11 and then one again in 12, and then fifth, fifth, fifth, and then third. So we're in that hunt all the time, but boy it's hard. And as everybody knows in sport, to get all three of your boats in the final is a big deal.

And we were able to do that again last year. We knew that if we could do that, we'd finish in the top echelon at least. And that's the goal is to try to get our boats in the finals of each event and claw a way out and see what we can do. So yeah, we'd love to get to the top rung again, and that's what we're shooting for.

Your first Regatta of the spring is March 11 in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. How do you simulate competition before then? Do you do anything like the equivalent of inner squad scrimmages on the water?

Yeah, pretty much almost every day we do some sort of competitive event. You get that on the rowing machines. You get that where they're competing against themselves against the monitor on the machine that's staring them in the face, but also against each other and with each other each day. But also on the water in different scenarios.

This weekend, Saturday, we're going to try to brush with the guys, the guys team. So I know that like women's basketball uses some males to kind of push the window a little bit, and we'll do the same thing. We'll get together once every couple of weeks once we get on the water full time and try to challenge ourselves against the guys.

Obviously, we're not going to go as fast as them, but they'll start a little bit behind us or they'll go in a four person boat where we're in an eight. Things like that to just mix it up a little bit. And then, we'll do the same in our boats.

Once we get boats formulated, sometimes we'll mix boats up so we have three even boats and go at each other or when it's varsity, second varsity or third varsity, you'll go on the outside of a turn or change the stroke rating a little bit, things like that. That will challenge them.

The ACC Championships are May 14 at Clemson. In the history of ACC rowing, Virginia has won 16 of the 17 team titles. I know when you've been here before, you talked about the conference becoming more invested in and more competitive in rowing. Is that continuing now? Do you see that happening?

It is. When we added Syracuse, Louisville, Notre Dame, that just upped our quality a lot in the conference. Clemson is doing well. Duke just got a new coach last year that did really well, Megan Cooke Cargano. She was ACC coach the year last year. Even though we won, they were second but she deserved that and the program deserved that at Duke. And it was a pretty good turnaround for them.

So Duke's right there as well, so it's way more competitive. It might be the Pac-12 and the Big-10 in the ACC are probably the premier conferences in the country.

This is kind of a loaded question. Would it be good for the sport for someone to knock Virginia off in ACC rowing? It's kind of the Yukon question for women's basketball. Is it bad for the sport or the Conference for one team to dominate that much?

Well, that's a good question. Not on my watch it isn't, but I guess theoretically it's good for the sport but what are we going to do? Do you want me to go and lose it? No, I don't think so.

The NCAA Championships are May 26, 27, and 28. Mercer County Park in New Jersey, which is where you won your second NCAA team title often the championships are on the west coast. Are there logistical advantages to having it in New Jersey?

I mean, that time of year school's out for almost everybody, so it's not that big a deal. I mean, it's nice for us. We can just bus up to New Jersey. We don't have to worry about getting to Dulles and flying out and boats out there and all that kind of stuff.

It's a lot easier to do it on the east coast, but it's nice to go somewhere different, you know, to go to California and that type of thing. But logistically, it's a piece of cake this year because of being only five hours away, 4 1/2 hours away. So in some ways I like that, where it's we just hop on a bus. It's easy. So that way, I like it.

And the fact that we've won there before is nice. Five years later, why not do that again? So that's what we're shooting for, but logistically it's a lot easier.

So the Princeton Chase is held though it's nearby. It's on a different body of water?

Yeah, Lake Carnegie, which is the home body of water for Princeton University. Andrew Carnegie built them a lake, so that's kind of nice. And then, Mercer County Park is about 10 minutes away. It's not very far at all.

And that's where they have a course that they set up there. They have a lot of US trials and high school races and that type of thing. And so the NCAA's will be there this year.

In 2012, your varsity eight won that NCAA Championship, the varsity eight race, which put you over the top in the team standings. With the sport-- with more parity in the sport now and with more points going in the varsity eight race, is that boat even more important? Is the importance of that boat magnified with so many good teams out there? Because obviously, if you could win or a good second in the varsity eight, you're in a really good place.

You pretty much have to finish first or second in the varsity eight to win the team title, because it's triple the points.

Just doing the points.

It's like three points per place for the varsity eight, two points per place for the second varsity eight, and only one point per place for the four. So it's the same amount of points for that one race that it is for the 2V8 and the four together.

Combined.

So you pretty much, you have to do pretty well, but you've got to do well in every event. You have to-- You know, Cal last year was second in the varsity eight, but they won the four and they won the 2V8. So that allowed them to win.

So even if you get second or third in the varsity eight, you pretty much have to win the other events. But if you win the varsity eight, then you have a chance.

You got a little cushion.

You've got a little bit of a cushion, but you still got to get second or third in the other events to make it work.

If I'm reading the schedule right, you have two home events this spring. One is a scrimmage against Duke, and then you tow against Texas on April 29. Both of those are on the Rivanna. In years past, you've gone to Lake Monticello, right?

We have gone to Lake Monticello. Yeah, so last year we couldn't go to Lake Monticello, because they were doing some renovation of the clubhouse there where we use it. And then, this year it's a scrimmage against Duke so we didn't go to Lake Monticello.

And then, Texas, it's just a duel. It's just one race, and then when I get them mobilized to go to Lake--

So they're coming up here for just one race or are they making a circuit of the east coast?

No, we're going to see them at Clemson the week before at the Clemson Invite on the 22nd of April. They're going home. I don't think they're boats are going home, I think the team is going home.

I think the boats are just going to drive up here, and this is a dual race one shot deal. It's the same thing we did down there last year in Austin, so we decided that rather than mobilizing everything out to Lake Monticello for a one shot deal, we have to take the launches out there, we have to put a [INAUDIBLE] out there. It's like a way race for us.

We'd rather just stay on the Rivanna, and Texas was amenable to that. So that's what we're going to do.

Well, good. Well, that sounds good. And thanks as always for stopping by, and best of luck this spring.

Thanks, Jeff. Appreciate it.

OK, there's women's basketball at JPJ on Thursday evening, and in men's tennis, the IPA National Indoor Team Championships start Friday at the Boar's Head. In men's lacrosse, UVA's home opener is Saturday against Drexel at Klockner Stadium.

For information on those events and all 25 UVA teams, check Virginiaspports.com. I'll be back next week with another "Wahoo Central Podcast". Until then, thanks for listening.