

Welcome to the Wahoo Central Podcast, which is coming to you today from University Hall. I'm Jeff White from virginiasports.com, the official website of UVA athletics. My guest today is Lars Tiffany, whose first season as head men's lacrosse coach here is about to start. Lars, great to have you back.

Jeff, it's wonderful to be with you. I love talking lacrosse and love talking about the University of Virginia.

Your opener is on Saturday, February 11, at Loyola. Chances are, given that it'll be early February in Baltimore, it will be cold. There's been a lot of talk in the college lacrosse world about the calendar for the sport and potentially pushing things back. What are your thoughts on that? Are you wed to the idea of wrapping everything up on Memorial Day weekend or would you like to start a little later?

Oh, it's a great question. I love talking about this. I wish more people were talking about this issue. I wish us college coaches were talking about this issue.

We may be the only team sport that does not have a start date for practice nor a start date for the regular season play. And we need it. We've allowed this to evolve into where college coaches have all the freedom to do what they want. College coaches love control. They love being able to maneuver. Unfortunately, what has that meant is maneuvering it to games into early February. There's no restrictions. Somebody could play a game in January if they really wanted to.

And so I really wish we'd have like a March 1 start date. The competition for attention for our fans going head to head with basketball is a contest we're going to lose every time as the sport of men's lacrosse. And so we have to get away from the February games. Who's at lacrosse games in February? It's the moms--

--diehards.

The girlfriends. The diehards. And that's it. And we're freezing them. And we're not being very hospitable. And the back end, as you mentioned, we should just plow through Memorial Day. There's already been a template. There's a road map here. Softball and baseball have done it. They figured out the issues with final exams and with housing. So there's a template there that we should be following. I would love to have a March 1 start date and maybe a mid to late June national championship.

So your players came back to school for the spring semester early this month, or middle of this month. You started practice. You had two scrimmages last weekend on Sunday. Scrimmaged Bucknell and UMBC here in Charlottesville. This Saturday, you scrimmaged Maryland in College Park, right?

Yes.

First of all, how did the first two go? And what were you hoping to see and what did you take away from them?

Going into the Bucknell and UMBC scrimmages, I assumed that we would be behind schematically because we spent most of the fall trying to make better lacrosse players-- individually better decision makers, better shooters, better feeders-- as opposed to putting in sort of these grand big schemes and then fitting the components in there. No. Let's make better components. Let's make better individual athletes and lacrosse players.

Came out of it recognizing that it's hard to change humans when they've been doing something a certain way, especially if they've been told that they're really good at doing it a certain way. So for example, we're trying to play this ferocious, uptempo, fast-pace style. And yet on Sunday, there was a hesitation offensively and even more so defensively. And I think it's just natural to revert back to what you've done for years successfully.

And so I know this is a process. It's a growing process for all of our men. But I'm just a little surprised because I feel like if I unleash you, if I'm taking the handcuffs off, I'm assuming-- bam-- we're going to go fly around, double team the ball, create havoc. And there's still a little bit of hesitation there.

So the plus side is-- the first scrimmage, Bucknell-- there was the hesitation. And then we had time to talk about it in between. And then we did see a bit more of that intensity and aggressiveness, pressing out defensively, pushing the tempo offensively.

And so we've got obviously a great challenge here Saturday against one of the premier programs in the country. And we're going to employ our systems. And Maryland's really good, so they're going to be able to show us where we're weak. We can employ our system properly and Maryland could still score goals. And that's great. But for us, at practice, watching a ton of film, just continuing to show where they're being hesitant instead of being competitive and confrontational.

Obviously, your last game at Brown was against Maryland in the NCAA semifinals last spring. Terps ended up winning 15-14 in overtime. Will it be strange at all to see them again so quickly?

Maybe it's a good thing. Maybe it would be therapeutic to put the last one behind me. I look back to that national semifinal game with pride and a smile. In the post-game conference, I told the crowd immediately that, boy, that was fun.

I know all of us coaches, we wear our emotions on our sleeves. And it's all, in the end, about building difference makers and leaders. But we want to win every game. But I just felt like I can't focus on the negative coming out of that game. It was a great game. It was an overtime game and it was there for the taking for us.

It'll be maybe a little bit stepping on the field and seeing John Tillman and the Terrapins on the other side of the field. What I'm really excited about is Maryland has arrived. Their program is where it needs to be. It's a great beacon for us, a guiding light to where we're going and where we need to get to. The question is, how long is it going to take? But I am really, really impressed with John Tillman and what he's done with the Maryland program.

Because of time constraints today, we can't realistically talk about every player on the roster or talk in detail about every position. But I do want to ask you about some guys, starting with the first year class. These are players who were recruited by your predecessor, Dom Starsia. Were you familiar with any of these guys before they arrived on grounds in August, or maybe in July in some cases?

Yes, some I was familiar with. But others, I didn't know much about.

That's got to be an interesting dynamic, isn't it?

Well, it's a really interesting dynamic, Jeff, when you think that Kip, Sean, and I inherited 26 commitments between the '17, '18, and '19 classes. So not only are these freshmen who are here now who graduated in 2016 from high school, but coming forward, there's a lot of people I have to meet.

We had the 2017s here this past weekend for the official visits and some of them the very first time I had my chance to meet them. It's an interesting dynamic. You're coming to school here, you've committed, you've signed your national letter of intent, and you and I've never met. Maybe we've talked on the phone.

Some of these freshmen-- Wade Maloney, we'd recruited at Brown. His dad's a Brown alum and I'd known him well. And I've seen him up at Lake Placid with his dad playing old man lacrosse up there a lot. So I knew him pretty well. But the majority of these men, I probably didn't really know a whole lot about. I knew how talented certainly some of them were.

But, yeah, it's an interesting dynamic that they've got to-- you commit to one coaching staff and then you've got a different one there waiting for you. And fortunately, I've got great people in terms of Sean and Kip. They're wonderful human beings. They're really positive and upbeat and you want to play for those guys.

What are your impressions of the first year class? And which of those guys do you need to contribute this spring and do you expect to contribute?

Yeah. First of all, [INAUDIBLE] attack, Michael Kraus is ready to make an impact.

Who has, obviously, his uncle and his father played here and played well. So he's a legacy.

We're really fortunate. That probably helped Dom, not that Dom needed much help in the recruiting process. He's the best recruiter ever in this game. But we're really fortunate to have him. We need him to score goals. Again, you hear a lot about this coming out of the football program-- Bronco's team-- that the will was there. The skill may not have been there.

We've got talent. We've got athleticism. We've got heart. But in terms of the lacrosse-specific skills, we may not be quite where we need to be. Michael Kraus does have those skills. He can put the ball away. So we'll be probably leaning on him more than maybe feeling comfortable normally leaning on a freshman or a first year.

Jared Conners has already demonstrated to us that he can play this game at a high level as a long stick middle. And he fits this system that we need. We want to play fast and uptempo. We need long stick middies who can create that tempo, can go from the defensive end to the offensive and be a threat offensively, pick up the ball. And he's already proving that he's very comfortable on the offensive end of the field. So watch for number 28, Jared Conners, doing quite a bit in his first year with us.

There's two other midfielders who are really athletic-- Milan Murray and Dox Aitken. They're going to grow with us. There will be some growing pains, obviously, the first years. And both of them have to improve, whether Dox-- we're going to put into a two-way midfielder position. And his defense, he has to work on. Milan's-- his game IQ has to improve. But boy, when those guys get rolling and they're running up and down the field, it's impressive athletically. And so look for those two as well.

There's a couple of other freshmen as well that we think could help us early on. In general, I think it's a better class than what we assume when we first got here. And I think it's one of the better classes that we have now. We really like the senior class, the final year class, the fourth and fifth years. And I really like this freshman class.

One of those fifth-year guys is a guy that I think you've referred to as one of your key recruits. That's Michael Howard. Persuading him to return for a fifth year here-- he has played long stick. He can also play close defense. How are you going to use him?

We're still trying to figure that out. He did not play at all this fall and the rust is still there. Surprising for a fifth year. He's not quite at the level that he knows he can play at yet. The speed of the game, he's not caught up yet to. But we know what he can do. We know what he's capable of-- having played Virginia last year. And he scored a goal against the Brown team last year-- and what he was able to do.

Is he close? Is he a long stick middle? He'll probably end up being in the middle of the field. We're still waiting for the 2016 Michael Howard to emerge. And we know it's coming out. We just hope it's sooner than later.

Mike D'Amario started 14 games on attack here last season, was fourth on the team with 15 goals. What did you

see from him in the fall and so far? He scored a ton of goals in high school. Came here, did not have a big impact as a freshman. Obviously, he had a bigger role last year but was still kind of inconsistent.

What we're excited about with Mike is how he finished the fall. His fall-- September and October-- were decent, just OK.

We put up a depth chart. We're transparent with our depth chart. You walk in my office, you can see if you're the number one attackman or number nine. And there it was. He came in the office November 1 and he saw himself much further down that depth chart than he was anticipating. And the reaction he made was perfect. We had a scrimmage that following weekend with the alumni. And he actually told one of the alums, hey, sorry. I gotta work out some things here today. He ripped it up.

He put in a lot of goals, right?

He scored four goals, had a couple of assists. And he was a man possessed. And so we're seeing that now here this spring. So Mike is a goal scorer. Again, we need all the goal scorers we can have because we don't have a team filled with that type of skill. Kraus is showing that he can do it. Zed Williams is showing that good. And Mikey is certainly somebody who can stretch a defense, too. He's got the inside game but also, kind of like a fast wide receiver who can give you a bomb threat in football, he can stretch a defense because he can score from 14, 15 yards.

When you were on this podcast in the fall, I think we ran out of time. I meant to ask you about Zed Williams. We never got around to it. Take away his lacrosse talent, he's a special young man, isn't he?

He's wonderful. He's probably the shyest person I've ever met, especially considering most athletes, there's this bravado.

He doesn't have that swagger off the field at least.

He really doesn't. I don't know if he has it on the field. Yesterday's practice, it was fun because Joe French was getting him fired up. And he and Joe were playing well. They scored a bunch of goals in practice. And they were not just faking the enthusiasm, but manufacturing it a bit.

And so Zed had a really good scrimmage against Bucknell. I think we had six goals or seven goals at half. And he was a part of five of those. And he's starting to really flourish at the attack.

You moved him from middle to attack, right?

Exactly.

What was your thinking with that?

Just put the best goal scorers and the best scorers near the goal. It's a really simple mindset there. But it's just like, wait a minute. Here's a guy who could score goals. He's got great vision. He can make feeds. Let's put him in the goal, and as simple as that. Also, we're trying to unleash him. Don't worry about turnovers. Don't worry about mistakes.

In box lacrosse, obviously the ball doesn't go out of bounds unless it goes over the boards into the crowd. So we want him to play like that. Just imagine if that guy doesn't catch that ball, it may bounce back. Well, the bounce back for us is we ride it back. But don't worry about the turnovers. Just play. And he's really flourishing with that freedom.

I don't know if you've recruited him at Brown, but were you aware of his high school exploits and all the goals and assists he put up over his five years, maybe six years on the varsity?

I was only aware probably just reading from your own stories and your own reports. He was not somebody we had known about at Brown during the recruiting process. Reading the Virginia news reports, that's how I found out how much of a special player he's been.

He started in the midfield last year. He's on attack now. I don't know if you want to divulge your depth chart or give away anything, but what's your midfield, your first and second groups? Who do you think will be in there? There are some familiar names, I know, from last year.

It's probably the strength of the team is our midfield. The question is, do we play two-way midfielders or are we specializing? We really want to play two-way midfielders. Ryan Conrad fits that mold. He can run up and down the field and play all day. Will McNamara fits that mold. He's probably a little bit better defensively, but his offensive game is developing. We want Dox Aitken to develop into a two-way midfielder.

If you see our system and you watch it, the men quickly realize if you're a second line offensive middie, you never play because we're running so fast that we pick up the ball defensively and we're pushing forward with poles playing offense, something happens. We score a goal, then we line up for a faceoff. You don't put offensive middies out there during a face-off.

We don't score, we get saved, our defense runs back in a hole. You sort of catch into this cycle of, when do you slow the game down and put your offensive middies in the game? So our offensive middies are starting to realize-

Gotta play defense.

If I learn how to play defense, I get to play more. And so that's what we're trying to do with Dox right now.

And AJ Fish-- he's starting to adapt to a little bit more defense. So it's my responsibility to make sure they get enough defensive reps so they're comfortable. So there's a give-and-take, whereas if you specialize-- for example, Matt Dziama, Jack Falk, David Smith, who only know the defense and probably know it better, 6v6-- do you sacrifice if you have a freshman like Dox down there with a Ryan Conrad? They may not know the 6v6 defensive slide schemes as intricately. But boy, they give us so much more in that transition up and down phase.

You actually picked up a couple of transfers, didn't you this year? Or they tried out for the team and made it. Two that I know of-- Cameron Stafford, who played at Vermont, and then Lawson--

Pasani.

--Pasani. Good Italian boy. And he was on the Boston College club team. What have you seen from them so far? And is the jump from club to the University of Virginia as great as some people might think?

It is a great jump. It's a big chasm. They did some nice things in the fall and they certainly earned a spot with this program. So far in January, we're probably not seeing enough out of them to consider them to be playing meaningful minutes yet. But it's all part of the growth.

Lawson actually broke a collarbone after-- made the team, maybe had one more week. Then he broke his collarbone. So he missed the entire fall after that. And so that really stunted his potential growth. And he needs reps against the bigger, stronger defensemen at the Division I level.

Cam's really-- he is a nifty goal scorer. He could sneak in on our man up. He is really nifty and he knows how to find the back of a net. Those two still have the potential.

Your top returning scorer from last season-- Ryan Lukacovic, fourth year attackman-- how big an adjustment to your system has it been for him? Are you asking him to do different things?

We are. We are asking him to do different things.

Is he behind the cage still or have you moved him?

He's behind the cage but he's more of a midfielder. And so what he is finding is he's got to accept a different role. And fortunately, Ryan's great. He's a captain for a reason. The men know that he'll do whatever he needs to do for the program. He's one of the hardest working men. Obviously, if you ride a bicycle 3,000 miles across the

country, you're not afraid of any challenge that we can throw at you in the weight room or on the field. And wonderful personality, wonderful young man.

I know he would probably love to be starting at attack. Everyone wants to start at attack. All of us former defensemen want to be attackmen.

The role that we think is going to best suit us to attack our opponents is bringing Ryan out of the box as a midfielder and then putting him back behind the goal and take advantage of his vision, of his experience, but now maybe against some short stick defenders. The opponent, obviously, could put a long stick middle on him, but now that frees up some of these big strong middies-- like the Milan Murrays, Dox Aitkens, AJ Fishes-- with some short sticks.

And so it's a role that he's accepting. I know in his heart, it's probably not his primary wish. But if he accepts it, boy, it really gives our offense a big punch. The player last year we had at Brown who played that role is Bailey Tills, number 13, who had the four goals against Maryland in the semifinals. And so it can be a really, really dangerous role because you often now become sort of the quarterback.

It's interesting in lacrosse where the three attackmen have maybe the three best defenders guarding him. And maybe the long stick middle is guarding their best midfielder. And so now, in a sense, maybe your fourth or fifth guy now is your quarterback because he's the one dodging and initiating. I love that if that's Ryan Lukacovic.

You have talked about the importance in your system-- it's important in every system, but particularly so-- of faceoffs and goalie play. Say if your goalie can be left out, hung out, he's going to have to make some saves, going to face a lot of shots. Faceoff has kind of been done by committee here in recent years. You've got some options there. What are your thoughts on the development of that group? And with Matt Barrett out of the mix, how do things look at goalie?

You're right that the faceoff x and the goalie play-- every college coach is going to say how critical that is. But we certainly have even more reason to emphasize that because if we're going to play games where there's upwards of 30 to 40 faceoffs, then there's a lot more shots being taken. So our goalie is going to see 45 to 55 shots instead of 25 to 35 shots.

Our faceoff men are going to be a part of 30 to 35 faceoffs instead of 20. And so now, if you're not very good at either of those areas, it's really being exposed even greater, just the analytics of the thing. So it's really an emphasis as improvement there. Kip Turner's got a lot on his plate. He's doing a phenomenal job.

In the goal, I'll start there. Right now, Will Railey is probably the frontrunner, but there's still competition there. The guys behind him are pushing him. Griffin Thompson, the freshmen-- he's only a freshman and there's a lot of

emotional growth that he needs to do to be a starting goalie. But he's got a skill set. He can make saves. Ryan Montgomery's been great in practice.

And then, we actually just picked up another transfer, just showed up here-- William Hudson. He was at Holy Cross for a year and a half. He's already demonstrated he's got some nice skills. And he can throw probably the best outlets of all our goalies. And outlets are important to us.

The faceoff x-- probably similar. We have a lot of competition there. Jason Murphy is back and he's doing a nice job. But there's a first year there, Luke Brugel. He's kind of a natural with this. He's really built like a faceoff guy. He's got the wrestling background. His father was a wrestler. It's just in the gene pool to grind it out and fight for tough things in life, such as a ground ball in the faceoff x. But David Smith has done a nice job countering.

Murphy, actually-- his percentage was really good last year, I think. He can just get banged up a little bit. He didn't play against you when Virginia played Brown, right? He missed that game?

He missed that game. And you could really feel that because Brown had two very talented faceoff men last year between Gural and Ottens. And Virginia just couldn't respond without Murphy as well as they normally could. And even Ryan Conrad took a few faceoffs against us in that game on April 30.

And again, when you play at a fast pace like we did at Brown and we're going to do at Virginia and you can win faceoffs, you can just keep pounding and pounding and almost emotionally demoralize a team because you score a goal and you get the ball back. And you just go keep hunting the defense and pushing the defense.

So those are two areas that this system we have depends on those even more than most systems. And so those are areas that are going to be really, really critical as we jump into the 2017 season.

So you're seven, eight months on the job here now, I think-- something in that range. You starting to feel at home, not only in Charlottesville, but at UVA and around the McCue Center? Or have you felt that way for a long time?

I am starting to feel comfortable around here. It's still going to be different getting on a bus-- getting on a bus tomorrow-- going overnight and driving north to Maryland for a game or a scrimmage.

Instead of south.

Instead of South. And I'm still getting used to the fact that we're a travel party of 56 people. At Brown, it was about 40, between the team and the trainer came. Now, the equipment people might be on the bus, the video people. We're an army. We're moving like an army. We've got two vehicles. We've got two buses. This is all different.

I'm still not settled there, how we do our business that way. But in terms of this community opening their arms and

embracing us, it's been really wonderful. It's a wonderful community to be a part of.

Well, thanks again for your time. We're looking forward to the season. Again, Virginia's opener in men's lacrosse is Saturday, February 11, against Loyola in Baltimore. The home opener is a week later against Drexel at Klockner Stadium.

For the entire lacrosse schedule and information on all our teams, visit virginiasports.com. In the meantime, thanks for listening. I'll be back next week with another Wahoo Central Podcast.