

Happy New Year, and welcome to the first Wahoo Central Podcast of 2017. I'm Jeff White from virginiasports.com. My guest today is the most decorated swimmer in UVA history. And that, of course, is Leah Smith. Leah thanks for stopping by. Are you ready for your final semester of your fourth year?

Thank you! Happy New Year! Yes, I am very ready. We've had a lot of good training. We just came back from our training trip in Florida. So even though I'm a little bit sad that it's my last home meet this Friday and Saturday, I'm very, very excited to see what our team can do.

To say that you had an eventful 2016 would be a colossal understatement. Among other accomplishments, you won an Olympic gold medal, an Olympic bronze, two more NCAA titles bringing your total to four, and two short course world championships all while being a full-time student at the University of Virginia. Now that you look back on it, what was that year like for you? Did it pass in a blur? Did you enjoy each landmark along the way?

Yeah. I have had a bit of time to reflect, and I think that I don't think I would have experienced the success that I did without stopping to enjoy each part. I never wanted to look too far ahead into the future and get nervous about what was going to happen or what could have happened. And I think that's something that my coach, Cory Chitwood, always talks to me about is preparing for the future, but not thinking too far ahead, just whatever's in front of you at the moment. So I think each thing that I did from NAAs to Trials to the Olympics to Worlds, I was really soaking up the moment in each of those.

Turning to the present for a moment, the first duel meet of 2017 for the UVA men's and women's swimming and diving teams is this weekend against Virginia Tech at the aquatic and fitness center. How is the rivalry between Tech and UVA? How does it compare in swimming and diving to other sports?

I think it might be stronger in other sports just because in swimming we have a really big rivalry with University of North Carolina. But we still definitely uphold the rivalry between Virginia Tech and UVA. But I think that swimming, we just have some other rivalries. But for sure we're going to give it our best effort. And I think it'll be just a fun meet, and I know that, historically, it's always just a little bit of tensions no matter what sport you're in.

So during the fall on your victory tour-- we'll call it that-- you made an appearance at Martinsville Speedway with former Virginia Tech football coach Frank Beamer. I saw a bunch of pictures of the two of you together. Has that softened your attitude toward the Hokies at all, spending time with Coach Beamer?

Yeah. I mean it was really fun. I think that one of the coolest things about coming home and being welcomed back by so many people is just the kindness that everybody has shown me. And I was excited to seize all the

opportunities that were given to me.

And so the race at Martinsville was so much fun. And we were introduced before the drivers meeting and I sat next to Coach Beamer. And he said that I was one of the few people from UVA that he liked, but he didn't know that I was from UVA at first.

And we sat in the pit with him. We watched the start of the race together. And he was a really nice guy. So yeah, I think it has softened my attitude towards them. But yeah.

Let's talk about your big year in the pool. You repeated as NCAA champion in the 500-yard freestyle and the 1650 free. Was there any less pressure this year at the NAAs or was there more because you had one two the year before?

I would say there's definitely a lot more pressure. My second year when I won those two titles for the first time, I had never done it before and there was another girl who was the defending champ, Brittany McClain. And so I think there was probably more pressure on her to repeat than there was for me. And so I was sort of the underdog. And I was trying to redeem myself from the year before that I wasn't happy with.

But my third year, I definitely had a lot of pressure on me and most of that I placed on myself. So I think that I've just had a multitude of experiences at my various NCAA championships. And this year, I think that I'm going to go into it without any pressure because it's my last one.

So then came the Olympic Trials in Omaha. And the Olympic trials are really a do or die experience, aren't they? It doesn't matter what you've done in the past, how fast you've swum, any of that. You have to do it in those races to advance to the Olympics. Is that even more pressure than the Olympics themselves-- the trial, because you put so much into it? And to have not advanced to Rio I'm sure would have been an incredible disappointment.

Yeah. Trials can be really brutal for that reason. And I think that I knew that going in. And I had prepared with my coach. Cory wanted me to think about each individual outcome that could have happened after each race and prepare for all of them. And he said that no matter what that he was still proud of me. And so I had accepted that before the meet started.

And I would say that trials, even though there was a lot of pressure because I knew that was the only moment that I could make it, I think I had had such a good year leading up to it, I had built my confidence to a point where I was so confident that I was going to make it. And not in like a cocky way, I was just very excited. So I think that helped me a lot.

And I had so much fun at trials. I was definitely way less nervous at trials than I was in Rio. They're just two very

different meets that you can't really compare, I guess.

Once you get in the water, do the nerves go away to some degree once you actually start your event and you're competing?

In a good race, yes. If the race is going well, your nerves will just-- the minute you dive in there, gone. But I've noticed that if I've had a bad race, that is usually because the nerves stayed with me the whole time and I doubted myself. So that's just something that I've learned over time. And I've been swimming for a very, very long time, and it can even take you 15 years to figure that out.

Here's a question I've had when I've watched you and others swim the long distances. When you're doing the mile, what are you thinking about? I mean it's not a sprint at all.

I mean what do you focus on during that? Does your mind go blank? Are you just thinking about the race or what?

I've talked to my teammates who also swim the mile about this. We always like to compare what goes through our minds. And we always have a conversation like, what do you think is the worst lap of the mile because there are 66 laps. And so we always talk about what point you experience the most pain or at what point do you start to build it. And I think it's fun to compare with your teammates like that.

But I would say that mostly what you think about is-- I gave a piece of advice to one of my teammates the other day when she asked me how I swam the mile. And I said that just because you might be experiencing a lot of pain in the mile, that doesn't mean that you're doing bad. So it's just a lot of compartmentalizing. You have to realize that it's going to hurt, and it's probably going to take over 15 minutes. And you just have to keep putting that away and keep your head down and just deal with the pain.

So it's 15 minutes of pain you know going into it for the mile. Yes.

And honestly, the way I swim it, I get a little too excited on the first portion of the race, so I might even put more pain on myself than other people would. But that's just something that I've been trying to work on.

Yeah. Hasn't Cory-- I think he told me that he'd been working with you on-- you did not have to go out so quickly.

Yes. And I've had a lot of races where I went out too quickly, and I still had a great race, but the end was much more painful than it needed to be. And so I've worked with him on building-- so the mile is 1650, so people sometimes divide that up into three 500s and then a little 150 sprint at the end. So we talk about making each 500 feel stronger, but sometimes it doesn't work out that way. You get in there, and you just want to try really hard right away.

So at the Olympics, you were on the winning team in the 4 by 200 free relay. You finished third in the 400 free and placed sixth in the 800 free. Sounds like you were able to enjoy the experience while you were in Rio.

Yes.

What was it like? Was it what you had dreamed it would be?

I don't think I could have even imagined what it would be like, but I knew going in when we departed for Rio that I wanted to make sure that I was taking in the entire experience. I didn't want to be one of those people that opted out of certain activities or like wanted to take naps instead of go sightsee or go to different things. And I never wanted to be too cool for anything. So I think that's something that my roommate in Rio, Olivia Smoliga, and I really tried to do was just we kept reminding each other how cool the experience was. And so I never really forgot that.

But my races did-- that threw off my plan a little bit of trying to soak up everything because I got so nervous for them, more nervous for those races than any race in my life. And I think that was mostly just because of how many people I started to realize were watching me and how many people were behind me from different areas. There were a lot of people in Charlottesville rooting me on, a lot of people in Pittsburgh, people on my club team back home, people on different sports teams. And I think once I started to realize how much they were invested in my swimming, I got a little bit more nervous that I knew a lot of people were watching. But it ended up helping me.

You were not the only UVA undergraduate in Rio. One of our track and field stars, Filip Mihaljevic competed for Croatia in the shotput. Did you two run into each other at the Olympic village?

Yeah. We literally did run into each other. So Croatia's building in the village, I don't know if it was right next to USA's, but it was in the same area. And one day I was just going back to our USA building in the village, and I saw it Filip. And it was funny because I had never really talked to him before, but I mean we both recognized each other and we talked for a bit. But now we're really good friends.

He's hard to miss. He's a big dude.

Yeah, he's a big guy. And now we actually took a class together last semester. And so that was I guess the only class on grounds that had the two undergrad Olympians, which was cool.

That was your first Olympics. The next summer games are in Tokyo in 2020. Is that goal for you?

Yes, for sure. Right now, I don't really have my sights only focused on 2020. I think that, again, I like to take my time and enjoy things as they're coming. And so right now all that's really on my mind is our senior meet and our

weekend of dual meets that we're about to have. And so I'll soak that up and then get to ACCs and NAAs. But right now I'm excited about my future and that it's going to continue for the next three, four years.

So you came back to school in August as an Olympic gold medal winner. Do you attract any more attention around grounds or around town than you used to? Do people recognize you any more than they did before?

Yes. And it's weird to me because I feel like the same person. So I feel like I've always been pretty talented in swimming and nothing really changed, except for my resume I guess, the medals that I have. But yeah, people do recognize me. But it's just nice to see that they had such strong support for me in Rio and that a lot of people told me that they watched me or that their families watched me. And so it's really great to see that kind of support.

Is it tough at all to return to collegiate swimming after competing at the international level?

Yeah, I think I'd be lying if I didn't say, yes, it's pretty tough. And I've talked to some of my Olympic teammates about that. It's just very different that when you're training with the best in the world, it's sort of like this utopia that you couldn't really ever get anywhere. And it was just so cool to train with those kind of people.

And coming back it's not bad, but it's just different. And so I think everybody on the Olympic team had to experience sort of an adjustment period of just coming back. And also a ton of people probably had to deal with the same things I did, which is coming back to classes after that. It might be hard to get up and go for that.

And also you spend essentially four years shooting after this one goal. And then when it's over, you kind of have trouble looking forward into the future. So I took a good amount of time off. I took off a month. And I really just wanted to spend that month thinking about what it was I wanted to do in what time left I have at UVA. And once I realized that I still had a lot of things left that I wanted to do, I was so much more excited to get back.

You reposted a photo on your Twitter account today of you at the White House with President Obama and the first lady. What was that like? Who went? The whole US Olympic team--

Yes. So the whole US Olympic team and the US paralympic team were-- everyone was invited to the White House. And so it was kind of chaotic because that's a lot of people. Yeah. And that's a lot of organization and a lot of time it takes to put people on buses, get the security check into the White House.

And then we all had to line up and get in line to meet the president, team by team. So it was a lot of waiting and a lot of just big groups, but so worth it. I mean I can't really put into words how it feels to shake the hand of the President of the United States and Michelle and Joe Biden. That was just really, really cool. And to be able to do it with some of your teammates from the Olympics, it was awesome.

What's been the response to your success back in your hometown of Pittsburgh. I saw another great photo of you and Antonio Brown of the Steelers. That sounds like he was in your corner the whole way. Yeah, and I think that was so exciting for me this summer because I get a lot of swimming at UVA. I get a lot of support from the athletic department and all the fans of UVA sports. But I think that since I'm not swimming in Pittsburgh or I hadn't been in Pittsburgh, I wasn't really there. And so to have the support of my hometown was so cool.

And the USA swimming media staff knew that I was a big fan of Antonio Brown, so they sent him a swim cap with his name on it and the American flag this summer. And so I think he was so appreciative of that and really wanted to get behind Team USA at the Olympics. And I know he was following our whole team, which was really great support for USA swimming.

You came out my way in Crozet and spoke to the students at Brownsville Elementary School. When you talk to a group of young people like that, what's your message to them?

Yeah. So I talked to I think it was about 100 fifth graders. And it was interesting to talk to them because when I'm talking to my peers or people that are older than me, I can sort of say anything I want really. But when you talk to 10-year-olds, it's kind of interesting because their attention spans are not as long as an adult. And you really have to pick and choose what you want them to get from what you're trying to say.

So I tried to make it very simple and tried to say things that would stick with them or that they could relate to. I didn't want them to see me as this person that achieved something that's unattainable. I wanted to relate my experience back to them and say, this is where I was when I was your age. These are the goals that you can start to make. I didn't just make the Olympics in one day. It was my whole life of preparing for moments like that. But some of them were really funny and I really enjoyed talking to them.

You're somewhere near the midpoint of your final college season. You've won four NCAA individual titles, but there's a young woman named Katie Ledecky at Stanford who happens to compete in your signature events, the 500 free and 1650 free. In Rio or at the trials or elsewhere, have you two talked at all about that-- the possibility of your meeting at the NCAA's?

I don't think we've talked about what NAAs will be like. I think that mostly this summer we were just focused on what we wanted to accomplish in Rio. But people have talked to me about it.

I'm sure I'm not the first one to ask you about it.

A lot of people ask me what I think is going to happen or if I'm afraid or what I think about potentially losing my titles. And I think I've had a lot of time to reflect. Katie deferred a year, and so she was actually supposed to come in last year. And so I had those questions even before now.

But my response mainly is just that I've been swimming against Katie for so long and nothing will really change. It's just we're going to continue to race the same way we always have. And I think it would be wrong for me to go into a race accepting that I'm going to lose. So I would never ever say to anyone that I will for sure lose my titles this year. I just think that there's not really a point in racing or swimming if you are already accepting the place that you're going to get.

So I am going to put everything I have left on the line. And it's my last chance to do that for Virginia. So I'm going to give everything I have and see where that gets me. But I'm not going to predict what I think will happen. I know that other people might predict, but yeah.

On the team front, the UVA women have finished fifth at the NCAA championships in each of the past two years, which that's the best finish in program history. Collectively, have you talked about goals? I know going in the last season, Augie, Busch, and the swimmers made that a goal, a top-five finish.

Yeah.

You have anything similar this year?

Top five-- a fifth place specifically stings a little bit because there's trophies for the top four teams. And maybe if there were only trophies for the top three teams, fifth would feel a little bit better. But when you miss out just on one place, it doesn't feel great. And so the past two years have left a bit of a bad taste in our mouth just because of that and just because I know that each year there's all these places that we felt like we could improve.

I've had relay performances that I thought could be better. My 200 freestyle specifically, my place could be better in that. And so every year, each person kind of figures out-- it's wrong, but we all are blaming ourselves for what could have gone wrong.

So last year, I think we had a lot of girls score for the first time or even make the meet for the first time. And once you have that experience under your belt, it's a lot easier to do better the next year. So hopefully this year, we can learn a little bit more from the past two years.

You even struggled your first year, right?

Yes.

And I know Courtney had talked about that it's just a totally different animal, isn't it, the NCAA meet, your first time?

Yes. No matter who you are honestly, the first-year NCAAs can be really tough. I had never really swum for a team for points like that. And when you're in such a big team race, it's kind of crazy. You're putting all this pressure on yourself. It really doesn't feel individual when you're at NCAAs.

When you're swimming trials, that feels individual. The Olympics feels more team. And so NCAAs is sort of like that, kind of like how you're swimming for your country or swimming for your team. So I think that with all that learning experience,

I know that we are going to miss Courtney and her events might struggle. But we're hoping that for how many points Courtney scored, that other people are going to be willing to step up. And maybe two girls can make up her points. I just think that we're always looking to get better.

One final question, and I'll let you get off to practice. The UVA men after a couple of down seasons are trending upward again. I know the two programs are close. Has it been gratifying and cool for the women to see the men start to have some success again?

Yeah. And we train together every day. We do everything together. So they're some of our best friends. And I think that we always are rooting them on. And I'm very, very excited to see what they can do this year.

I think last year we got a little taste of that where it was exciting to see a lot of younger guys step up. And on a very young team with not a lot of people on the roster, I think that it's really exciting this year.

Great. Well, Leah, congratulations again on your many achievements. Best of luck this year.

Thank you so much.

As I mentioned earlier, the men's and women's swimming and diving teams will be in action Friday and Saturday against Virginia Tech at the AFC, which is on grounds next to Scott Stadium. The action starts at 5 o'clock on Friday afternoon and at noon on Saturday. For information on that duel meet and much more, visit viriniasports.com. I'll be back next week with another Wahoo Central Podcast. Until then, thanks for listening.