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Welcome to another edition of our weekly Virginia Athletics podcast. I'm Jeff White from virginiasports.com. And sitting across from me today is one of the newest members of the UVA athletic department, and that is Mark Allen, the head coach of the men's and women's squash teams, both of which now have varsity status here. Mark, thanks for stopping by. Good to see you again.

Thank you.

You had been coaching Virginia's men's and women's club teams since the McArthur Squash Center opened at the Boar's Head in 2013. The official announcement came in late June that the teams would move to varsity starting this academic year. What did that make the past four months like for you? Has it been crazy?

It's been hectic. From the squash point of view, it hasn't changed a huge amount. The teams were already-- everything on the squash side was largely set up and has continued in the same vein that we've had for the last couple of years. But of course what has changed is now, as we've come into the university athletics department, we now fall under all of the compliance rules and the regulations.

There was a lot of paperwork, didn't they?

So getting our heads around that and getting on top of that, and squash isn't easy in that sense either for the athletic department to manage because we're not an NCAA sport. So navigating that ground has taken some time on my side. But for UV Athletics it's something new as well.

Did the move-- and you may have answered this in your previous [INAUDIBLE], but did the move to varsity status come in time to affect recruiting for this school year? Were you able to add anybody late, or was it--

For the start of September, no, not in time. But we have got a January admit coming in. So we actually recruited-- fingers crossed if it goes according to plan-- we should have the number one female player in Brazil starting with us as a January admit. So it made an immediate difference in that sense. We're obviously still working to finalize that. But we're hoping that will happen. And then next year's class, starting August of next year, we're already finished with that. And we noticed a significant improvement. And also, I think we've been attracting good players, but this time we actually were able to secure it and get it all locked down just that much earlier than we've ever done before.

What has been the reaction among your peers in the college squash world, your coaching peers at Virginia's move?

I think there's a lot of excitement out there, just in squash in general. US squash is extremely excited about the University of Virginia making this commitment and us going to a varsity team because squash has aspirations for the sport to expand at college level. But right now it is mostly schools up in the Northeast, a lot of private schools, NESCACs, the Ivies. So the fact that UVA was coming into this sport and coming in, you know, first public university, first school really in the South, first ACC school-- Virginia was a first for a lot of things in terms of squash. And the hope is now that that could open up the sport potentially to other schools similar to us to actually take a more serious look at squash. And maybe 10, 15 years from now squash can go through an expansion now that sort of lacrosse went through and really grow.

Yeah, for people who don't know, Virginia is the only Power Five school to offer men's squash as a varsity sport. And it's one of only two powerhouse schools, along with Stanford, to sponsor varsity women's squash.

UVA head coaches from all the sports periodically meet at the McCue Center to discuss various issues. What was that first head coaches meeting like for you?

Actually the first one was certainly a tough one because it was the Monday after the events here of August 11, 12. So that was a real baptism of fire if you like, that one being the first one. I think we've had three meetings since there. What I'm enjoying being around is such a wealth of knowledge and coaching experience and just, at this point, is just to sit there and listen to what these coaches have to say. And I'm learning a lot already. And I feel privileged and honored to be in the room with all of them.

Both of your teams open the season this weekend playing Dickinson in Carlisle, Pennsylvania on Saturday and then Franklin & Marshall in Lancaster, PA on Sunday. In the Collegiate Squash Association's preseason polls, the UVA women are 13th and the men are 17th. Where do you start this season in comparison to recent years?

Our teams have got stronger each year for the last four years. And this year, no doubt, our team is stronger than last again. Our goal this year is-- but of course four years ago we were at the back end of the rankings and jumping up six or seven spots in one year was very attainable. Now where we are, jumping one, two positions a year is really our goal. Getting from 13 to 11 is a lot harder than getting from 35 to 33.

So we're pegging away at the teams in front of us now. You F&M will be a good example of that. Our men finished a couple of spots behind. We lost to them 6-3 at their place in a very tight match last year. And so that's the kind of game that, if we've improved from last year, it's a winnable one for us this year.

Dickinson, both teams, men and women, won against them last year. But alongside us they're the sport's newest varsity program. And they're recruiting pretty heavily. And their program's improving at a similar rate to ours. So

that's going to be a tough game too.

You are the head coach of each team here, and Grant White is your assistant coach. How closely do the men and women's teams work together? I know your schedules are similar, but there are instances where one team will be playing an opponent that the men won't be playing as well, right?

Yeah, squash from most programs is actually the head coach often does both programs. So dual matches are actually more common than singular matches. So the vast majority of the matches that we play will be men's and women's matches. So most of our matches we travel together. The men will play first, women second, or vice versa. But most of my peers, most of my coaching peers in squash do coach both teams.

And men's and women's team, we have a joint practice on a Monday night. Other than that we practice separately. And the programs, there's overlap there, but in terms of coaching and what we do on a day-to-day basis, the men's team and women's team are kept largely separate.

Do you practice any more now? Does the squash portion of it feel any different as a varsity team than it did as a club team, or do you practice more often or longer?

We extended practice a little bit. Kind of I think the best way to look at it or to summarize it is the squash is largely the same. But all these peripheral things that come in outside of squash, which are, at the level we're playing at, now they're the things actually that matter and are the difference a lot of the time.

So now we have a strength and conditioning coach. This week we set up with the guys that do nutrition to working out nutrition for the team. From psychology services to academic tutoring, so all these things coming in behind our athletes that we didn't have before. And so the squash is the same, but I think how we're taking care of our athletes now compared to last season is just so different. And of course that just-- you can't do well on the court without having your life taken care of off the court. And that's what we're doing a better job of [INAUDIBLE].

Another huge difference going forward will be the fact that you'll have scholarships for your athletes. What impact will that have? I'm guessing it makes it more attractive in recruiting for really elite players if you can offer scholarship money?

Yeah, absolutely. We are only the third school to actually be able to offer scholarship money. So George Washington and Drexel were the other two. So we're the only third squash-playing school that will come in. That being said, a lot of the schools we compete against do have grant-in-aid. They have money available, financial means to support OK players from overseas should they not be able to meet the school fees, which as a public university we can't provide that. So in that sense the scholarship money helps level the playing field for us.

Already we're seeing the benefit of it. Fingers crossed, we've got the number one male player in South Africa coming for us next season. We just recruited the number one female player in the Caribbean to come and play us for next year. And all these players are coming in on scholarship money. And that was something that we couldn't have dreamed of doing a year ago. In both those cases those players had good other options. And they wanted to come to a great school, but the scholarship money really made the difference there.

Now some of your current players turned down scholarship offers from other schools to attend UVA though, didn't they?

Not sure about that one. You'd have to ask them individually. But I can tell you they did turn down very good offers from schools. I don't know if they were scholarship offers, but there were certainly admissions offers from schools and chose to come here even before we were a varsity program.

Not all of our listeners are familiar with your background. Can you describe the path that took you from your native England to Charlottesville? I know there have been some stops along the way.

Yeah, well I played-- I left high school at 18 and played professionally. I played for about four years on the World Squash Tour and reached a career high of 39 in the world. At that point then I actually decided I wanted to go and get a college degree. So professional squash in most other countries is done a little bit differently to over here where players look to come to college here in the US first and then go professional after that. That's not always the case overseas. So I played professionally first and then went to university as a 22, 23-year-old.

And then when I came out and graduated with an economics degree at 27, I decided I wanted to move back into squash at that point. Went into coaching, coached in England for a bit, and in the Channel Islands. And then from the Channel Islands I came out here to America and I was coaching in Northern Virginia for a while, then went from Northern Virginia to San Francisco, and then from San Francisco moved out to South Africa. My wife's South African. Moved back there for about seven years.

And then about five, six years ago now was looking to come back to the States. And I'd been on the lookout for a good position. I was very interested in college squash. And this position came up. And you know, being someone who was based in Northern Virginia for a while, you know, I knew a lot about UVA. I'd come down here to Charlottesville and loved it. And it was a very attractive job, especially when I came down and they were in the middle of building the center at the time. So I got to look and see the plans of the center and saw the half-built building. And, it was an incredibly-- it was a wonderful opportunity, and here I am.

You miss the traffic in Northern Virginia?

Nor in Cape Town for that matter.

You have had other responsibilities over at the squash center, right? Are you still juggling several things?

Yeah, but over time they're lessening. So when I started here, obviously with the UVA program being small and a club sport and also the work I was doing for Boar's Head and their membership program, on both sides they were smaller positions and it was a job, certainly for the first two years, that was manageable in terms of doing both. But as the UVA program got stronger and that started to become a bigger commitment on that side, and then obviously as we got more and more members playing and juniors playing on the Boar's Head side, it started to become very apparent that it was becoming impossible to do those two jobs well.

So I've been gradually lessening and lessening my commitment on the Boar's Head side. We now have a full time head squash pro over there that really took all the coaching from members, junior players, and everything completely off my hands over a year ago. My only role there now really is I help them with their major events. And in that sense a lot of those overlap for us anyway because when people come and play major events, it's obviously they're coming in, seeing our facility. It's a wonderful recruitment tool. So there's a lot of crossover in that sense. And that's really all I do now on that side.

Your teams practice and play their home matches at McArthur Squash Center at the Boar's Head, as you mentioned. As college facilities go, how does that compare to others?

It's the most beautiful in the country. There are a few bigger ones, although with our expansion that puts us pretty close to being one of the biggest two. I think Harvard has 16 courts. We'll have 14 with the additional five that are being built right now. But certainly in terms of just, obviously we're the newest. But the other thing is typically you find squash centers, whether in college or anywhere else, is they're often sort of 200 foot underground and they're trying to maximize space so they're cramped, they're dark. McArthur Squash Center is beautiful. There's a lot of space. They've got a lot of open space. There's a light coming through. There's a lot of air in there. And really for a squash facility, it's quite unique.

And everyone that comes there loves being in there, always has positive things to say. And we just won the tender, the bid for the World Masters Squash Championships in 2018, the first time that the tournament will ever be held in the US. And when the World Squash Federation sent their representative over to us to actually see the facility as we made this bid, they were blown away by the quality of the facilities. And that just shows you what a gem we have there.

Well as you mentioned, the facility's good now. It's getting better as well. Tell us about the expansion project. It's underway now. You'll end up with five additional singles courts. When will all the work be done?

So we host this World Masters Squash Championship. That kicks off July 31 in 2018. We will need those extra five courts. If we get the kind of entry we're hoping for that, which is close to a thousand participants, then we'll need those 14 courts. We have got a plan B in place that involves Woodberry Forest School should it not come off. But if everything goes the way to plan, the new facility should open up actually the last week of June 1, week of July, open up in time for that tournament, of course in time for the start of next season.

The new facility, the five courts will be there, will actually become the home of the varsity team. So we will actually practice and play predominately out of the new five courts. And the nine courts that are currently there will actually then be kind of more of a Boar's Head members program. But that's not to say, obviously, when we need all 14 for a meet or for a joint practice, we'll use them all.

You open on the road this weekend. The home opener for your women's team I believe is Friday, November 17 against Stanford. The men open at home the next day against Penn, and the women will play the Quakers as well. Those are going to be big days for the program, aren't they?

Yeah, big days, and also very tough days. I think had I known we were going to be a varsity when I put the schedule in place, which was over a year ago, I might not have actually scheduled two such tough matches on the get go, because certainly the Stanford woman's program I think finished five in the country last year. And I think Penn women I think might have finished two or three last year. And the Penn men I think certainly finished top five or six. So in terms of our entire season, I think we play altogether 17, 18 matches this season for the women. And their toughest two are those first two. So the good thing is we get our toughest ones out the way first.

The bad think is you get your toughest ones right off the bat.

Yeah, so we get them right off the gate. I'm hoping that the women will come away with two solid wins this weekend, which will obviously see us moving to those matches on the plus side of the column, which would be nice. But you know, I think the bigger thing about us playing Stanford and us playing Penn, I think it just shows how far we've come. I mean, they're going to be stronger than us this year and for maybe another one or two years yet. But just the fact that those teams are willing to come and play us here shows that they're actually now starting to take us seriously and starting to look at us as proper competition, which is certainly something three years ago they wouldn't have even thought of doing.

When I interviewed you in June right before the announcement came, I think I asked you about your goals for the program or what you thought was realistic. And you think both can be top 10, maybe top 5 programs, right, at the same time?

Yeah, well I think the women's team, at 13 now, our goal is to jump up two places this year. But I think the

women's team can break top 10 within three years. The men's team will take a little longer than that I think. But again, we're on that track. As I said, men's team, again, we were 18 last year. The national championships works in brackets of eight. So we're hoping this year if the men can get up to 16 before season end, then that puts us in the B division, the B bracket, the national championships, which we've never been in before. So yeah, I'm hoping that the men can sneak into the top 16 this year and the women certainly get close on knocking on the door of top 10. And then as I said, we'll keep chipping away over the next four or five years.

I think that jump up into the sort of top five or so, that will largely depend on actually expanding our scholarship endowment and growing that up from where it is so we can bring in more scholared athletes. And just as I said, that will give us the opportunity to move higher and higher and higher.

Before I let you go, I want to ask you about the Nike backpacks. When I talked to a couple of your players in June, they were as excited about anything-- they were excited about the fact that they too would get the Nike backpacks that varsity athletes get here at UVA. What was it like when that day came? Were they excited?

Obviously we've been talking about this for over six months. And we've had a lot of different meetings and we've talked about a lot of different things, all the benefits that being a varsity program would bring and all the wonderful things that Virginia Athletics provides for its athletes and all these things that we would actually be able to improve what we do for them. But the single best thing they kept coming and coming back to, despite all the things we were being able to provide and offer, I think the number one thing that was asked about more-- the number one question I've had over the last six months is, when are we getting the backpacks? So it was a pretty special day when we finally got to actually hand those out to the athletes. And yeah, I think some of them sleep with them on.

Well I'm sure there will be many more special days for your program. Thanks again for stopping by, best of luck this weekend.

Thanks very much.

This is not an especially busy weekend for UVA athletics in Charlottesville, but there's an important football game in Scott Stadium on Saturday, and there's volleyball at Mem Gym on Friday and Saturday nights. For information on squash and football and volleyball and all the other varsity sports at UVA, check [viriniasports.com](http://viriniasports.com). Thanks as always for listening, and I'll be back next week with another podcast.

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