

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Good afternoon, and welcome to our weekly podcast on Virginia Athletics. I'm Jeff White, from viriniasports.com, and my guest today in our university hall studio is very familiar to UVA football fans and that's All-American safety Quin Blanding. Quin, great to have you on the show.

Thank you for having me.

Seems like an eternity ago, but I recorded a podcast with you and Anthony Harris a few years back. Ant was the seasoned veteran, and you were the new kid. Lots changed since then hadn't it?

Yeah. I'm not the new kid no more. I'm the old vet guy returning.

You're the old guy.

Yep.

There was a great photo of you and Coach Mendenhall taken after the game in Chapel Hill that kind of went viral on social media. It seems like every time I see these days you're smiling which is a great thing to see. You really kind of soaking it in this final season and having fun with it?

Yeah, I think that's the most important thing. Especially coming back, especially we're winning now as well. Just coming back to have fun and go on with a last bang. Nothing like smiling every day because I love this game so much. It has grown on me for many, many years. Just to finally come here and change the program and change the culture around it's just a really good feeling.

This was going to be your last season, no matter what. How confident were you that the breakthrough would come this year? I mean, I know you knew it would come eventually with this coaching staff but there no there are no guarantees.

Yeah, like you said, there's no guarantees, but that's one of the main reasons why me and Micah decided to come back. We knew what we can do and we knew what this team is capable of. We just knew from winter workouts to fall camp. We knew what this team could be. We know how dominant we could be, and how successful we can be now while we have the right people right now to do it, to lead the other people so as years come they can keep leading and leading to have this program at a dominant level. And it's just nothing better to come back and know this is what we're going to do.

Coach Mendenhall entrusts the team's older players with a lot of responsibility, doesn't he? You mentioned the off season. The off-season workouts are for the most part player organized and player driven, right?

Yeah, that's basically what it was in the off season. Well, winter workouts, we had our strengths staff.

With Coach Wintrich.

Yeah, with our strength staff, but you know other stuff we wanted to do was player driven. In off-season he came to me, Micah. He went to Donnie, Ben, Kurt, and all of them. He told us, basically, that you have to get these guys ready. We're out recruiting trying to bring the best guys we can here, and it's on us. If you have any questions you always can reach out, but it was all on us.

I met with my DBs all the time. No matter if we would just watch our film, going over the playbook. And I made sure we went over every little detail, to each call, to why, to when he's thinking about he might call it, and just to get them used to what we're going to do. We had this thing called-- it was like a player ran seven on seven that we ran by ourselves, just to show that we're responsible. To go out there and do what we're supposed to do, with our own call sheets and just certain calls that we would call. We just went from there. It is great to see that the leadership that we have on this team is very strong.

So you're a task unit leader, I'm guessing.

Yes.

And how many of your teammates are in your task group?

It's like 14 of us.

And they're not all-- you don't have all DBs though, do you?

No, I have some of them, though. I have some of them. It's just I got the luck of the draw in the draft that we picked them in. You just you have arranged from everyone. You just worked together as one task unit when we have task unit games, or we have special things for task units so you all work together. It's just something that really make us compete against each other.

Your next game is Saturday at Scott Stadium against Boston College. There's a lot on the line. With a win UVA would remain at the top of the coastal division standings in the ACC, and also, of course, become bowl eligible for the first time since 2011. At his press conference Monday, Coach Mendenhall acknowledged that becoming bowl eligible is a goal for the team, but he also said this team has higher goals than just winning six games. How do you kind of strike the balance between getting excited about this opportunity, but keeping your eye on the big picture

too?

Our big picture and what we preach everyday go 1-0 this week. That's the biggest thing we preach. Like you said, yes it's a great goal to reach, be bowl eligible. It's very exciting to get to that point, and also reach bigger goals than make it to the ACC championship, and play for the championship and win it. We've got to go 1-0 each week. We can take no team lightly because this is the ACC.

We know ACC play is really big and everybody is going to come with their best shot and their best foot forward. So we've got to stay focused on the task at hand this week and the outcome will show. Once the outcome shows, then we can celebrate for that day. Then after that we go get ready for our next opponent.

As you mentioned, you had a decision to make after last season as did Micah, about whether to come back to school this year or two leave early to pursue an NFL career. Micah, he was at JPJ on Monday for the press conferences, and he indicated that the decision was tougher for him or tougher for you than it was for him. He also said the way last season ended with that loss at Virginia Tech, that made it a little harder for him to think about possibly going through that again. In the end what made you decide to come back?

In the end, I just decided it what was best for me. I knew, going into last season, I was hurt the first four games. It kind of set me back a little bit in my game and set a little back to the NFL what the grade I got back. It's all motivation for me. It's just something that I can overcome now and show them who I really am through a full season. That I've been showing, and just progress as a player. Show them that I can do more than just be a tackler or just be someone a body out there. I could be a real stud. The real play maker of the defense that I have been. It's just a blessing that all things happen for a reason. This is my reason. I came back and you see what we're doing.

So at the midpoint of your college career you get a new head coach, and a new defensive coordinator, and Bronco Mendenhall. Change can be difficult. Were you excited about the change? Were you nervous? Did you study up on Coach Mendenhall, and research him on the internet?

No, I knew he came from a program that was very successful. I knew he was a real strong defensive coordinator. I know he's the head coach, but you got to also put in the fact that he was a strong defensive coordinator. He brings a lot of different variety of things as things go on. With me, I just knew I just had to get ready. I knew I was one of the leaders of the defense and leaders of the teams. I know I just had to be ready to lead my team through anything. No matter if we had a new coaching staff, or the same coaching staff I just knew I had to lead my team. I had to be the one who was all the way bought in first before anybody else, so they can trust the process and they can trust me.

You and Bronco obviously have a tight bond. Was that there almost from your first meeting? Did you feel kind of a kinship with him right away?

I think it took a little bit because once he first met us it was just like, OK. We went on a winter break. We had some time to think about things. Then once we got back we got things rolling. Just seeing how he is and just interacting with him on and off the field and having one-on-one meetings with him to see what he was thinking about. How do you see the defense playing? How do you see the schemes will play? Just it built over time. It wasn't right away, but once we sat down and talked to each other we knew we were more alike than anything.

In the win over North Carolina last week and in Chapel Hill, the defensive backs had three interceptions-- one by Brenton Nelson, one by Chris Moore, and one by Bryce Hall. There was a fourth ball that could have been a pick.

Yep.

You and Brenton went up for it. Did you break up his interception, or did he break up yours?

So there's a photo that clearly shows my hands are on the ball, and he knocked it out of my hands. But I give him credit for being there, as well. Like you said, all those three guys that caught interceptions, I'm proud of them. We work really hard in practice with our ball skills. On that play I got to come down with it. That's just the bottom line.

We are very competitive at the DB spot back there. We always say if the ball is in the air, it's ours. No matter who it is. We're not going to let them catch it. I mean I'm glad they didn't catch it, but that's how it goes.

Micah said the other day that Brenton is a magnet for the ball. Seems to find him, or he finds it.

Yeah, that's how it is. I always tell them, when we're in practice, if he catch an interception it's just like Brenton caught another ball. All right guys let's go now. You already know he's going to catch, so let's just start the running. Get him to the end zone. He works really hard at it. He's really bought into the system. He knows his role and he knows the scheme really well. He's very athletic, and he just has a knack for the ball.

Coach Mendenhall is your coordinator. Your position coach is Nick Howell, who has a lower profile. What's it been like working with him and what have you learned from him?

It's been great, actually. It's been really good to work with Coach Howell. Just a bond we have because he puts a lot of trust in me. He puts a lot of responsibility on me, and I really appreciate it because a lot of coaches don't put a lot of trust in a lot of responsibilities on players to make the calls on the defense that I have to do.

I'm essentially the quarterback of the defense. I have to get everyone lined up. He puts a lot on me to make sure the young guys know what they're doing. Sometimes he may be focusing on just one player or just one side of the

ball. I have to focus on the other side and also look at the field side for him as well, just to see what's going on and coach from the field. So where he can just sit back and just coach when we go to the meeting rooms, and I can just coach while we're on the field. So he puts a lot of trust in me, and I really appreciate him.

Jamie Sharper, who is a guy I covered many years ago when he played at Hermitage High School, finished his UVA career with 435 tackles, which is the most in program history. You're currently fourth on the all-time list, but you're only 17 tackles away from becoming the career leader here. I know you put team above individual accomplishments, but how much pride do you take in that and what would it mean to leave here as the all-time leader?

That's one of the reasons why I chose to come here. I chose to come here to make an impact on this game, and make an impact on the school. Why not go out with a bang and finish at the top of the school in tackles in this the school program? It's a lot of tackles, but it's just an honor. It's a real blessing is just on it to show what my game has done for me.

Now, on the flip side, when the defense is forcing three and outs like your this year, your tackle totals go down. I guess that's OK with you too, right?

Well, that's OK, as well. I know it sounds it sounds crazy, but I'm not a selfish guy. I'm all about team and I've always been about team. I'd do my individual thing, but it's all through the team because you need 11 guys out there on each play to do your job and to get things done. So that just means all 11 guys did their job on that play. I can't be more happier for this defense than what we're doing.

You and Micah are generally neck and neck in that race to see who makes the most tackles. Micah entered the program a year before you did. How is your relationship with him evolved over the years? Were you tight right off the bat, or did it kind of grow into that?

We just grew into it. I know coming in first year-- I mean we talked because we played on defense together. We talked, but I was the new guy. So I didn't really say much until we got into the locker room, because that was just the role of who I was. Because I was a first year.

As the years went on, and as we played together, we knew we were going to be together for a long time. We just knew this relationship had to be the strongest on the field at all times. Our communication since day one, since we both played with each other, it's just been amazing, just to see the bond that we have built and the brotherhood that we have together now. It's unbreakable.

Last year when Malcolm Cook was out for medical reasons, he assisted Coach Mendenhall by signaling in the defensive calls during practices and games. This year that responsibility has gone to another player, Kirk Garner.

That's an important role on the team, isn't, that maybe people in the stands don't pick up on?

Yeah, a lot of people don't understand that role. They just think it's just a normal play caller. No, I have the most respect for Kirk. He's one of the-- I came in, he was one of the hardest-working dudes I've met. One of the hardest dudes that will push you no matter what. With him over there calling the call, it's not him just giving hand signals, or is just doing it just to do it.

He really puts his all into doing it. He gives us energy when he gives us the call. He gives us motivation. He pushes us no matter what he's doing. It's a very big role that you have to play, especially being on this coaching staff as well.

Our coaching staff does the same thing with us-- running with us to the ball in practice, making us force turnovers. Now this week, if they get a blade of grass, all the coaches are going crazy just because that's what we do. It just shows that everything is very important to us. No matter if it's from calling a play, call to being on the field, to being on the coaching staff.

Your understudy this year, I guess you could call him that, is a true freshman, Joey Blount. I know the coaching staff is very high on his potential. Hasn't gotten a lot of play in time from scrimmage because you're out there most of the time. For people who aren't familiar with his game, what can they expect from Joey going forward?

Oh, he's going to bring a lot to the table. He's a very smart guy. He's just a first year, right now. He's just learning on the fly, but he understands his schemes. He understands concepts really well. He still has a lot to go, and a lot to improve on, but he's going to be something special here. He's going to make people proud because of who he is, and the character he brings to the game and in just how he plays. It's just going to be something amazing to see.

You're going to graduate in December.

Yes.

How important was that to kind of take care of that in your year back here that will also allow you to focus on preparing for the draft wanted in the spring.

It's just a plus side to coming back as well. I decided why not. If I'm coming back, I might as well get this degree, as well. This degree will last me just last me a very long time in my lifetime. It can never be taken away from me and it's just an honor to get a degree from here, as well. Like you said graduate in December so I can just focus on strictly training and getting my body right and getting my mind right as well for the next level.

You've been one of the stars of the Who Knows videos that are posted throughout the week on the Virginia Football Twitter account. There's a lot of laughing and joking in those clips. How much different is the mood in the locker room when the team is winning? I know everyone tries to keep spirits up and be the same guy every day, but it's easier, isn't it?

Yeah, I think it's a lot easier. We come in with a lot of confidence and swagger that we built. It's just something that we drive on. Something we thrive on, and just something that makes us feel good about ourselves. Where we can walk around with our chests up. Not saying we're going to be cocky about it, but we're very confident in what we're doing and how we're doing it. It just brings a lot of laughter and fun with it.

I don't think this question has been asked yet on one of the videos, so I'll ask it. What's your favorite thing to do in Charlottesville that's not related to football?

I like bowling. I like to go bowling. It's just--

Are you a good bowler?

I'm all right. I'm pretty good. I can do a little bit of bowling, but it's--

Who's the best bowler on the team?

Oh, I have no idea, but I'm going to say me because I'm very competitive. And I won't let no one beat me. It's just something to do to get away from football and school sometimes. just relax yourself and have fun. I see on social media that a lot of other student athletes here kind of support you. Are you particularly close with anybody here from other sports? Do you like to get out and support the other teams when your schedule allows you to?

Oh, yes. I'm very close to like Isaiah Wilkins on the basketball team, Devon Hall. I just got real close with Nigel that just came in. You got Lauren Moses, Aaliyah, I know a lot of people. I try to get out to different events. That's the best part about this community. We all support each other no matter what. Through thick and thin. When my schedule allows me, I try to go to games here and there just to show my face and support because I know they're supporting me and supporting us as well.

You are about to hit or you may be in the homestretch of your college career. You have three games left at Scott Stadium. I know the team focuses on what it can control, and that's what takes place between the white lines. That being said, how much does the fan support help? How much would it mean for these games to have big, loud crowds?

Oh, that's the best part about it. We all we got. I've always said this to my team. We're all we got. The people that

are in that room is all we got. We appreciate our fans, and we appreciate the support no matter where we are. Just to see the turnout especially that what we're doing is something special. It's nothing best to have your fans to be a part of something special that's going on here. To continue that legacy to keep supporting and it keeps showing that. We appreciate them, and all what they're doing with they're supporting. Just coming to the games, and it will just be a blessing to see the stands filled. Just loud cheer going on these last three home games.

After the events of August the 12th, the team took the picture at the Rotunda, as part of the Who's Together Campaign. It talked about how cool it would be to be part of bringing the community together, again. To actually have that taking place some, that's got to be gratifying isn't it?

Yeah, I think it is. A lot of people don't understand that we took that picture just to bring the community together. To be the voice of the community. To show that, yeah we're out here playing football and going to this fine university, but we don't forget about the people in the community. We're always for the people in the community. That was for them. Just to come together as a team, and be that voice is something special. That's why I said something special with this team is really going to happen. That's what we're showing.

Well, good. Well, thanks again for your time. Good luck this weekend. Hope to see a big crowd at Scott Stadium on Saturday.

Yes, thank you.

In addition to football, there's UVA volleyball and men's soccer on grounds this weekend. For information on and schedules for all our teams, check viriniasports.com As always, thanks for listening and I'll be back next week with another podcast.