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Welcome to another edition of our weekly Virginia Athletics podcast. I'm your host, Jeff White from viriniasports.com, and joining me today in our U-Haul Studio is one of the mainstays of the UVA men's soccer team, goalkeeper Jeff Caldwell. Jeff, thanks for stopping by. How's your final semester at the university going?

Well, Jeff, thanks for having me. It's going really well. I can't believe it's almost over.

I got here in the spring of '14, and to fill a full four years here is pretty incredible. And it's been a fun ride in terms of soccer all the way throughout, and that's continued and probably even been a little more fun this season with the success of the team and the way we're playing. But yeah, I love the university. I love the school. So it's a little bittersweet to have--

To know it's coming to an end?

Yeah, to be winding down.

So before we go any further, perhaps you can settle a dispute. Fans of the team may have seen the video that was posted last week, in which players on the team were asked who is the best FIFA player on the team. There's a range of opinion.

Basically, everyone interviewed voted for himself. What-- you were not one of that group? What's your professional opinion?

Well, outside of myself-- no, I am a little out of touch. I would have definitely been the best FIFA player if this were FIFA '15.

I think someone did mention you, actually.

Yeah, Robin mentioned me. I've played Robin-- so I think, in my opinion, Rahim's the best FIFA player. But again, I'm not I'm not at the forefront of this debate. But in my experience, Rahim's quite good. Robin's quite good, and I have a 100% winning percentage against Robin. So--

Yeah, I think he claimed that he was just trying to make friends, and--

Uh-huh, I'm sure. I'm sure that was-- Germans are known for just making friends and letting other people win, so I'm sure that's what was going on. No, but Rahim is quite good. I mean, there's a bunch of guys who are quite

good.

It's finally starting to feel like fall outside. College soccer is an interesting sport because it's blazing hot when the season starts, and if you're fortunate enough to get to the college cup, it can be freezing cold. Does anything change for you in terms of your preparation, or what you do during a game when it starts getting cold?

Of course. Yeah, I mean, during August games, September games-- I mean, you're always hydrating, even when it's freezing. I mean, it's still vital to success, and make sure you're hydrated. But certainly during the colder games, for a goalkeeper, there is a bit of--

You're just standing there, too.

Well, you say that. No.

But when the play's at the other end--

Yeah.

You're not moving as much as when it's in your half.

And I'm from the mountains of North Carolina, so when I was coming up, these fall games and early spring games would be brutally cold. And so I would like-- I just do jumping jacks. I keep moving basically, all throughout the game, especially when it's cold.

I keep-- the really important one is the hands because, especially if it's a little wet, the gloves are wet and freezing, and so really important for a goalkeeper to make sure you can feel your fingers. It really helps to catch the ball. So keep trying to keep the hands warm and moving in and the blood flowing is really crucial. Unless it's just probably under 20 degrees Fahrenheit, I'm not going to wear-- you can wear really thin gloves underneath the gloves, but that kind of limits your movement, so that's a tradeoff.

What-- if you're in a stadium on the road where the fans, and they tend to be students, are near the goal, and the play's at the other end, particularly, do you engage with them? Are they-- do you get heckled a lot? Do you just try to tune that out?

Yeah, I absolutely don't engage.

Because if you start engaging, you can't--

I absolutely don't engage. Actually, I kind of like-- I kind of enjoy it. It helps focus you because it adds another thing to really-- it allows you to really build that tunnel into the game.

So at home, I like to think I'm a player with focus, and I can-- concentration's one of my strengths. But at home, when you're comfortable, you don't have to build those walls up as high. You don't have to build that tunnel of focus.

So I actually think having-- and in almost every place we play, especially in the ACC-- Maryland, when they were in the ACC, so we'd play them. The tournament is notorious for it. They have great fans, and they have fans who like to try to get personal and dig a little below--

Look into your bio?

Yeah, thank you to the Virginia Sports Bio for putting my family's names up on that. No, they do. I mean, generally, it's good fun. Some, I think, try to really push the line a bit, but for the most part, it adds a dynamic to the game that I actually think helps me perform because it really does. It helps build that wall, build that intensity a bit, and really laser in onto what's happening on the field.

You guys play your final regular season game tomorrow night in Durham against Duke. Then comes the ACC tournament followed by the NCAA tournament. Virginia's ranked at or around number 10 in the national polls.

You were a freshman on the team that won the program's seventh NCAA title. This is obviously a talented team. What are your thoughts on the potential of this group and how, maybe in terms of chemistry and talent, does it compare to the other three you've played on?

I mean, the potential for this group is a national championship, and an ACC championship. We came in the season aiming for an ACC regular season championship, and I think we're slightly disappointed that we didn't necessarily achieve that. But that being said, we're in probably the best position we're-- I've ever been in--

Yeah, in four years.

--going to last game. Yeah. To be a top four seed, to be a top eight seed, to be playing NCAA tournament games at home. We're in a good position to be playing ACC tournament games at home.

So in my four years, we have everything to play for going to the last game, and in my time here, that's-- there have been different dynamics. I mean, last year, we really hit a-- we had a huge valley going into the end of September in Louisville, and then we hit a huge hot streak with Notre Dame Carolina. And so this year, we obviously had a setback last week against Radford, but I think we haven't burned too hot too early. We haven't necessarily hit a-- had bad results that kind of derail us in the RPI.

And I think, honestly, the Radford game, while it was extraordinarily frustrating on a personal and, I think,

collective level, you need a little bit of that. Certainly, our run in '14 was kicked off by kind of a shellacking at Notre Dame in the ACC tournament. I like to think-- I mean, after that was a point to kind of regroup around.

You mentioned the Radford game. That was the last of the team's midweek games during the regular season. When you start playing those games early into the year, you're not in conference play, so you don't really have anything to compare it against. Is it-- it seems like it's not unusual for a team to come out flat in a midweek game. Are they harder to get up to as-- get up for as the season goes on, and you know that three days later, you're playing a big ACC game?

Yes and no. I wouldn't say one midweek game or even one game is harder or easier to get up for another. I mean, obviously, a game in front of a big crowd in the ACC, the outside energy is there. I think, to be honest with you, we-- I don't want to say got fortunate, but we enabled ourselves a bit with poor performances or below average performances in midweek games and still getting results.

And still managed-- yeah, managed to win,

Unfortunately, that wasn't the case against Radford. They were-- they're a good team, too, so it's not like we played a bad team and got a bad result. We came out flat against a good team, and if you do that any time in college soccer, it's going to be hard for you. And circumstantially, that point of the year is a difficult point of the year. Fatigue is an issue for every college soccer team in the country, and that is just a very difficult period of time, where soccer, school-- a lot comes together, and you really have to be tuned in an extra notch, and we just didn't have it.

As you mentioned, there's an opportunity in-- starting tomorrow night, but also in the ACC tournament, to really position-- for the team to position itself well for the NCAA tournament in terms of playing at Klockner. Is that something George Gelnovatch brings up with the players, or are you just kind of aware of that yourselves?

I think a little more so than usual this year. I think everybody is always aware of it. I mean, everybody's tuned into the rankings. But when you have a team of this potential, I think it is important to understand the stakes, and I think that's a testament to our group of guys being mature and being able to handle, not necessarily extra pressure, but just handle the reality of the situations and knowing that and using that as fuel to perform. And I think that's also a testament to coach for trusting us with that and acknowledging that, yeah, we're a talented group who can handle to hear it straight up and understand what the stakes are going into matches.

And I think it's been really helpful. I think it gives weight. It gives weight to games like the Radford game and the Lehigh game, and maybe we weren't at our best and didn't show up with enough energy for the Radford game, but we all knew it was very important. And not that any game isn't, but it's been good to have that understanding

throughout.

UVA has not played since last Friday night, when you beat Pitt 2-1 in overtime on a spectacular golden goal by Jean-Christophe Koffi. You're at the other end of the field. What was it like watching that unfold, and where does that goal rank among the, at least, the regular season goals you've seen?

First of all, I saw him, I think, beat the second guy, and I was like, we're going to score. And to be honest with you, I thought he was going to slip, and I think it was Rahim who had a little space. But I saw him wind up, and I'd seen-- I've seen him do this countless times in training, and then of course, he had the goal against Davidson. But really, the way [INAUDIBLE] last year was just a blast. And I saw him wind up, and I already-- I started running.

No, I mean, in terms of excitement for a regular season goal, I think that's the most exciting I've seen. For us, it meant a lot. This Pitt team was phenomenal this year, which is a huge change. It's great for the conference, great for our division, especially. So that goal meant an immense amount for our trajectory for the season.

So in that sense, it's certainly most exciting as of late. I think the-- Ryan Zinke, in my first year, my debut opening game, scored a game winner in overtime against ODU, 1-0. And for me, that was a-- it was kind of interesting that it went down that way because both my first game and my last regular season game at home were full of emotion. And so in terms of emotional wins, and the alumni in town Friday night, it's got to be right up there in the top two.

Yeah, I was going to say, what was it like to have the 1992 national championship team and coach arena in town for that? I think the crowd was fantastic at Klockner. Seemed like, just a tremendous atmosphere and a wonderful way to end the night.

Yeah, as Senior Nights go, as these later seasons go, that was certainly one of the better crowds I've seen at Klockner, and obviously, [INAUDIBLE] coach arena and a number of those players from the '92 team. I was fortunate enough to have Richie Williams as a coach when I was in high school.

But there's just so many of those players, so many other UVA players, who are foundational members of US soccer's legacy, both with the national team and the Major League Soccer. And so any time you can meet and interact with those guys, it's-- I mean, I don't want to make them feel too old here, but it is a bit like stepping into the history books, and they were trailblazers. And it's just-- it's one of the wonderful parts of being in this program, is to share in that legacy, and that legacy goes from '92 guys who were here to several dozen other alums of different generations, who is always wonderful to see.

You enrolled here in January 2014. You'll graduate in December with a bachelor's degree in history. You've represented the United States at the U-17, U-18, and U-20 levels. You have professional aspirations. Did you think you'd play all four college seasons here?

No. I always thought I would graduate. I always thought I would play a year, two years, three years, leave, come back. Even up to last December, I was looking into-- hoping for the possibility of maybe a generation Adidas offer for Major League Soccer.

It really wasn't until after my second year, I met a group of people that helped me really fall in love with the university and become involved in a little more than the athletic side, which really I think, holistically, helped me broaden and enjoy my time here. And there were opportunities in here or there that had potential to maybe, I could step out early, and at each venture, I sat down with my family and talked about it and later on with my close friends here as well. And I'm overwhelmingly pleased that I stayed here. I think these have been-- not just a great four years for development from a soccer standpoint and a just personal development standpoint. I've been truly happy here.

Your given name is not Jeffrey, but Jefferson. In light of that, was it inevitable that you'd end up at the University of Virginia?

That-- yeah, that joke has found its way to me a couple of times. No, I don't think it was in light of that. I had a cousin who played volleyball here. She graduated in 2008. She was a phenomenal volleyball player, Melissa Caldwell, and I think that was kind of it.

I came and watched a game in Mem Gym. I remember walking around grounds. I also remember being surrounded by these very, very intelligent and amazing volleyball players and being, like, wow, this is-- I think I was in the sixth grade, but it was kind of right then. I was like, this is one of the places I want to go, so in my mind there, Virginia became my number one spot.

You are from a small town in North Carolina. As a native born American, you're in the minority among the starters on this team. Virginia's roster includes players who were born or have ties to Australia, Denmark, Nigeria, Ghana, Germany, New Zealand, Spain, England, Ivory Coast, Trinidad, and Tobago, and I may have missed somebody.

What's it been like playing on what is kind of the United Nations team here? You're a history major. I'm guessing you have a curiosity about the world.

Oh, absolutely, and yeah, I think it's one of the most beautiful things about soccer or football. Depending on where you're from on this team, you call it something different. But it's been something that I've valued throughout my whole career-- not just here, but before. You get-- you have an opportunity to interact and come to understand and know and love so many different people from so many different places. You have an opportunity to go to these places.

And now, 10 years from now, I may be traveling, and I get to hang out with Robin in Germany or come across these guys or these families. And it really-- it's special, and it's certainly something that's, I think, changed a little bit my time here. We've become more diverse, and we-- you see the influences, not just on the field, but in the locker room, and it is a really special group.

You spent three summers playing for the Seattle Sounders U-23 team in the premier development league. What did you do this past summer? You weren't a full time PDL player. Right?

Right. I was very fortunate that Coach Boss, using I think most of his contacts, was able to set me up with several different teams throughout MLS to get a feel for what, hopefully, will be my environment moving forward. And it allowed them to, I think, get a feel for me as well. Those were Columbus Crew, Toronto FC, New York Red Bulls, Colorado Rapids. I also spent a week in Kaiserslautern, Germany, with SC Kaiserslautern in the Second Division. Wonderful experience that was certainly illuminating for what I need to do moving forward and very, very useful to come into the season.

When you're in training with an MLS team such as that, in the summer, are you there for a week? Where-- do they put you up in a hotel? What are the logistics of that?

I mean, per simply rules is difficult with the logistics, so for the most part, I was couch surfing with people who I knew in the cities, which was great. If I got in a pinch, I just get a hotel. So it was really wonderful to have my parents' backing on that. Certainly helped provide this opportunity as well.

But the time varied based on their schedules. Obviously July-- June and July are kind of smack in the middle of the MLS season, so we were kind of working around when they would be at home or when there was a little bit of a break. And from there, it was just wonderful on their part to have flexibility and be willing to bring me in.

You have also had trials with clubs in England. What is that like, particularly as an American going over there?

Yeah, it's-- so that was back in high school. And it's always-- it's just always an exciting experience because you don't exactly know what you're going to get yourself into. I had some wonderful experiences. I had some not so wonderful experiences. I loved Fulham Football Club.

I wish there had been maybe a way to find a solution to the work visa issue there, when-- so that was when I was 16 or 17. I think it had been wonderful to maybe try to develop it in those leagues. But when you go into those trials, you have to just go in with a really open mind and also not-- just not hold back. You have very little to lose and everything to gain.

You were named to the All ACC third team as a sophomore to the second team last year. I'm sure more honors

will be forthcoming this fall. How have you improved as a keeper over the course of your college career? And how much has Terry Boss, whom you mentioned, who's one of the associate head coaches-- he's a former MLS keeper. How much has he helped you?

I'd like to think I've improved, hopefully, in every way. And I think looking back-- sometimes, it's hard to look back because you're like, oh, my gosh, I was so bad, and that's not always true. And certainly, Coach Boss has been, I mean, just the central figure in my development. I think more so than any individual over the course of my career, and I've had-- that's not a knock. I've had wonderful coaches.

But the fact that he's so invested and has been able to invest four years into my development here, and the fact that he's, in my opinion, the best at what he does in college soccer, I've just been unbelievably fortunate to have him. The level of-- the level that he operates at is one that is very meticulous, very high, and honestly, a level that's usually reserved for professional ranks and higher. He's just-- he's so dedicated, not just to my development, but the team's development and doing the little things. I think the biggest transformation for me has been playing out of the back with my feet, and that's a shift in our style as a team. That's an emphasis on technical improvement, but Coach Boss has helped me develop across the board and really become, hopefully, a much more mature, better goalkeeper.

Fans have not really had an opportunity to see the young goalkeepers in the program this season. You see them every day in training. What is your read on Connor Jones and Colin Shutler?

Well, they're both phenomenal goalkeepers, and obviously Colin's been in the program an extra year. Connor's kind of getting, in a sense, that first semester-- any time you transition to a new place, it's almost like a firehose stream. You're just getting hit in the face with information, and it just-- it's a lot, and he's done really, really well with it. He shows an unbelievable knack for big time saves.

They're both great shot stoppers. They both know how to train, which I think is a really important skill that goes overlooked, is they know how to come in every day with an attitude to get something out of the session and to have high energy and play at speed and just make the most of everything. So the program has a lot to look forward to with both those guys.

Well, good. Well, once again, I appreciate your time and thanks for stopping by. Best of luck against Duke tomorrow night, and in your final ACC and NCAA tournaments. Hope you bring some more hardware back to Charlottesville.

Big women's soccer game tonight at Klockner Stadium. Former UVA great, Becky Sauerbrun, who is now a key member of the US Women's National team, will sign autographs before the match. For information on that game

and all of UVA's other teams, check viriniasports.com. I'll be back next week with another podcast. Until then, thanks for listening.

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