

Welcome to another installment of the Virginia Athletics Podcast, which we record every week here in our University Hall studio. I'm Jeff White from virginiasports.com, I'm fortunate to be joined today by one of my favorite guests, UVA's head wrestling coach, Steve Garland. Steve, welcome back, what's new?

Thanks, buddy. Thanks for having me. Well, what's new? We've been competing I feel like every other day.

We've had a lot of stuff going on in terms of training and competitions. Clarion open, journeyman duels, two home duels, and today we leave for Vegas, so we're five competitions deep. Pretty busy.

Your team is coming off a terrific duel meet with fourth-ranked Missouri at Mem Gym on Sunday. You have a terrific weekly video that I would recommend anybody who's interested in UVA wrestling check out. It's tweeted out on the UVA wrestling account.

You kind of go through, bout by bout on that. We don't need to do that here, but in general, I know you were disappointed to not win that. It came down to heavyweight. But what do you take away from going against an elite opponent like that and doing so well?

Yeah, thanks for the positive feedback on the videos. We definitely do those for a reason, so that people can be up to speed. And as far as the duel meet goes, I think the first thing that hits you right away is wow, this team's gotten a lot better just in two or three weeks. We're a completely different team already than we were at the Clarion open, so that's good.

The second thing as coach you see is-- and this didn't show at the journeymen. At journeyman, I was very frustrated. There was specific technical aspects of our wrestling that we were working on in the room for hours, and then not executing in the match. And so obviously, as a coach, you're upset with that.

I actually saw the opposite of that against Missouri. I saw guys trying the things we've been working on and executing things we've been working on, so that's good. And the third thing was is it's just a lot of fun. It's exciting to see your team not only did they not back down, but they came out firing, guns blazing right out of the gate against a top five team.

I know the Missouri staff well, and they were very complimentary of our guys' effort and our guys' wrestling, and they were just really impressed with us. I think it's good for our kids, especially as young a team as we are, to say hey, that's what's so great about the sport of wrestling. It doesn't matter what the ranking is, it doesn't matter what you did in high school, what you didn't do, doesn't matter what that guy's record is right now, you got a chance to go out there and beat him. And I think we showed the faithful-- the people that come every week. I think they were

really excited about these young guys, because they see where we could be.

Let me ask you about a couple of guys, in particular guys who are ranked. Two of them are at the bottom of the line up. 125 pounds, Louie Hayes, is a red shirt freshman.

Correct.

I guess he was in the wrestling room with Jack Mueller, who was at 25 last year, all of last season. Louie is off to a great start. Did you think, based on what you saw in the wrestling room last year, that he would come out of the gates this well?

Well, we knew Louie was special when we recruited him, and we felt like we got a steal. We felt like a lot of people missed on him at high school. And so then what happened was last year, during the year, we started seeing him get better and better and better and better. And by the spring, we brought him to the university club duels and he went undefeated. And just his level of wrestling was so awesome.

That's when I think we knew we had something really, really special. And then this year, right out of the gates at the Clarion open, he beats two nationally ranked guys, returning national qualifier, and we thought, wow, this is the guy we thought he could be. So yeah, we knew he was a great kid. Now as a red shirt freshman, doing what he's doing, I think it's still pretty darn impressive.

At 33, you got Jack Mueller. He was an All-American as a true freshman last year at 125. Which is hard to do. Hard to be an All-American--

It's ridiculously hard.

--in any class, but particularly as a true freshman. He's at 133 this year. How has he changed since we saw him last at nationals?

First of all, just to reiterate your point, it is ridiculously hard to place as a true freshman. As a matter of fact, it's the first true freshmen ever to place here in the history of the program. So phenomenal accomplishment.

Also what's he done to be different? Well, the first thing is he went up a weight class, and he got bigger and he got stronger. Not only did he physically mature just naturally, his body physically matured, he definitely put on muscle over the summer, and we made a commitment as a staff and also, most importantly, the athlete to not worry about cutting weight. Last year that really got to him at the end of the year and we wanted to just worry about getting better at wrestling.

Jack's a student of the sport. His biggest gift is that he's a wrestling savant, almost. I mean, he studies it he, loves it. It's all he does, is watch videos and try to create new moves. So I think what we've seen is he's actually gotten better at wrestling. He's just gotten better.

You know, obviously there's an adjustment period there that he went through with going up still, because guys are a little bit bigger and stronger and stuff, but he showed us this weekend with the Missouri athlete, who I think is one of the biggest, strongest kids in the weight class or the biggest, strongest kids I've ever seen at the weight, and he was able to wrestle just fine. So that's been good to see him build on his wrestling, also see him build on his body. And I don't think he's done. I actually think that there's a whole other jump he's going to make here shortly.

At 174, Will Schany, who has wrestled at 84 and also at 97, I think, occasionally, a couple of years ago. I mean, he's off to a really good start, isn't he?

Yeah, so Will started the season I believe eight and 0, and he beat two or three national qualifiers, nationally ranked guys. He's had a great season thus far, and his RPI has got to be through the roof out there just wrestling number four ranked guy in the country. So he's been doing great.

And I've told his before, I think he's the most improved guy in our team, especially the last two years in particular. He had a great offseason with us, and he made the commitment to go down in weight, and I would say that it's one of the harder things I've had an athlete do a long time. And he's been able to do it, but God willing, he'll be able to sustain that, because it's not easy for him.

UVA is your alma mater, this is your 12th season as head coach here. Relatively speaking, you were just a pup when you got the head job here.

Sure.

Have you changed-- I'm guessing you've changed and grown as a coach, and you would consider yourself a better coach today than when you took the job.

Oh, sure. I mean, gosh, I was 29-years-old when I got the job. I joke with Craig a lot. I was so stupid, I don't even know what I didn't know, and I was so arrogant. I just come off, winning what I thought was a big deal, the National Coach of the Year Award, and so I just thought I knew everything. I thought we were going to come in here and win nationals in three years.

At the dumbest part of my life, though, was right where God wanted me. I needed to be humbled, and I got humbled, and in that part of my life is when I made the biggest-- the biggest transformation in my life happened,

both personally, professionally, spiritually, everything changed in my life. And so yeah, I would say I'm a completely different person at 40, 12 years in, than I was then. And I could go all day on telling you a whole testimony there, but the biggest thing I'll say is this.

One of the biggest comments I've gotten this year is from parents of current guys on the team saying, Steve, we've never seen you so relaxed. We've never seen you smile this much, we've never seen you so happy, and I have to give all the credit in the world to Shelton Mack, Travis Paulson, and Trent Paulson. They have completely changed my joy level at work. And I know how it might sound corny to some people, but gosh, I really want I want I enjoy the people I'm working with and I want them to build me up and encourage me, and I want the same for them. And it's been really awesome this year to have that.

There are outstanding coaches across the board here, in other sports. Obviously, wrestling is different than football and rowing and track, but do you pick the brains of your peers in the department, as far as coaching?

Well, a guy who was my guy a lot was Brian Bowlen. So it was really hard for me when he left. Me and him were really tight. I know Coach McMullin in baseball's been a guy that I've leaned on a ton, specifically.

Brian Fetzer is a guy I really look up to and that I'm always bouncing ideas off of. I think all the coaches here amazing, but I think those are the guys, specifically. Tony Bennett's a guy that, although I don't see him a whole lot, when I am down, I can tell you what, that guy will be there for you. And that's pretty amazing with all the things he has on his plate.

You mentioned your assistant coaches. You've had great assistance over the years. You've got two new ones this year in Travis and Trent Paulson. They're twin brothers, I think it's fair to describe them as characters.

Yeah, yeah.

Both of them. I mean, they have a real joy for life. What impact have they had? I guess you've mentioned the impact they've had on you personally, what about in the wrestling room? Have they brought some new technical ideas? I mean, both of those guys had tremendous competitive careers themselves.

Yeah, all world team members. Trent was NCAA champion. Gosh, they've brought a whole-- I've had great coaches technically, too, in the past, but their gift is they're able to make connections. And what I mean by that is you can preach all you want, or move, or teach all the moves in the world, but if the guy is not picking up where you're putting down, it's not going to be effective. And so what they've been able to do, at least in my opinion, I've seen them be able to take what's in their mind and in their heart and then get it to the athlete and get him to buy in, and get him to then apply it to his own wrestling.

And as far as the wrestling office is concerned, too, I think the biggest thing they bring to the table is every single day, they're going to take ownership and authority over what their tasks are and they're going to do them to the absolute best of their ability. And there's no job too small. I walked in the weight room one day, and Travis is in there picking up the weight room. You go down to the locker room, he's organizing the locker room. Trent's in there working with guys extra.

Trust me when I tell you that there's not a lot of people I've worked with who roll like that, and that, to me, that's men after my own heart. That's exactly the way I want it to be. They don't ask me, hey coach, do I need to get this work order put in to get this light fixed? They just do it, that's how they operate. I think that's a great example for the athletes on the team, personally.

You are a twin yourself, so you know something about that dynamic, but is it fun to kind of watch them go back and forth and take little shots at each other?

It's hilarious. Shelton and I, if we just had a video camera all day, we could be making a lot of money on reality TV show. It's just constant, they're just constantly going at it, both of them. And what's funny, though, in the most in the most loving way, too. I mean, there's no vulgarities, there's no-- but they constantly bust each others chops, there's no question about it.

The other member of your coaching staff, you've mentioned him a couple of times today. He's kind of the unsung hero, Shelton Mack, your volunteer assistant.

Right.

For people who don't know, what is the volunteer assistant's job description in a division one wrestling program, and what does Shelton add to the whole operation?

I'm going to bust chops with my buddies over at basketball, because I love those guys, but I feel like they have like an army of humans helping out. They have the assistant to the traveling secretary, the assistant video guy, the head video guy, the recruiting coordinator, the second assistant, the third assistant, the associate coach, George Steinbrenner, pilot of the private jet. In wrestling, you get two coaches, two full time guys that the school will actually pay for. That's insane. We have 30 guys on the team, some years, 35 we've had, as big as our roster's gotten.

And in our world, we wrestle with our athletes. It's not like other sports where you're drawing things up on a chalkboard. Part of our job description is getting in there and showing moves. My wife's always like, your back, your neck, you gotta be careful. I don't have a choice, I have to get out there and show wrestling moves. That's what I do for a living.

Right.

And now, granted, I don't need to be wrestling as much as I do, but you know. So you need guys in there, wrestling. So the first job description of Shelton's in there-- he's Jack Miller's best workout partner.

Yeah.

And that's no offense to anybody else on team, but Shelton Mack, who's training for the Olympics and world team, is phenomenal for Mueller. And there's no question that there's a direct correlation between George de Camille almost winning a national championship and Shelton being his primary work our partner last year. That's the first thing.

Second thing is he's in the office every day just like the rest of us, doing everything he can to help. And the third thing is-- he's also, oh by the way, back at the ranch trying to train to make his own dreams come true. So he's got a full slate every single day.

In terms of athletic eligibility, you have only one senior in your line up, Andrew Atkinson, who's at 65 this year. I mean, in terms of the potential of this program going forward not only this season but the year after and the year after-- I mean, you're in a really good place, aren't you, as a program?

I think so. The biggest thing I keep trying to get, and I would say my staff's completely invested in this, is that every single day is an investment for the future. We're not focused on outcomes currently, because it's all a development process. We've implemented a lot of new things, and with our young kids we feel like two or three years from now, God willing-- there's a health factor there-- He keeps us healthy, I think it's going to be the most amazing group of kids.

Stylistically, character wise, the brand we want to put out there, the way we're going to be competing, and yes, and then ultimately, God willing, we're going to have those results we want. We think it's going to be really special. Especially with the recruiting class we just brought in, and the way things are going in our room in terms of the connectivity of our guys and how tight they are.

I wrote a story earlier this fall on Fred Green who transferred here over the summer from Boise State after that school shut down its wrestling program. Last weekend he did not participate in the duel meet against Missouri. You had him up at Lockhaven, where he got an opportunity to wrestle multiple matches. He missed a lot of time coming off shoulder surgery. Where is Fred right now, and what do you expect him to add to the program?

You hit the nail on the head. We were just talking about this offline, about just how tough injuries are and surgeries

are. Because it's not just about getting healthy, it's you just missed six months of training. And so I think we all, including him, maybe underestimated how much of a how much of a loss that was.

Because when we saw him in that first duel of the year, he was only cleared three days earlier. So the kid only had a couple of live matches, and obviously it showed on the mat, the rust was there. And so wrestling is a martial art, it takes time to develop. So I think he's getting there. He's definitely way better.

That Mat-Town tournament was huge for him, he won the tournament and looked really good. But I think as we move forward, the more matches he can get, the better.

You're taking 10 guys, leaving this afternoon for the Cliff Keen Invitational in Las Vegas. What is that event like, and what do you hope to get out of that other than the obvious of guys winning titles and winning matches.

So this tournament is, I would argue, the toughest tournament in the country. And so even just walking in the gym, as soon as you walk in there-- tomorrow when we go in for our workout, it's palpable. There's nerves, there's a oh man, this is real, this is big. You can feel it. And that is huge, because you can't measure that. [INTERPOSING VOICES] And they can't do it any other way.

So what that does is help for ACCs and nationals, just handling that part of it. Then, oh by the way, they're wrestling against the best guys. And then the travel is tough, and so it's get tough weekend.

The whole thing is nuts. We take the red eye back, we get back, we got finals as soon as they get back. So for me, there's a mental toughness component that you can't mimic any other way.

You come back to town, the wrestlers have finals, then you get back to competition on December 17 with a dual meet at Bloomsburg. Then you have a short break for Christmas, and then you're back in it till the end of the season, right?

Right, yeah. Right after Vegas every year is when the guys kind of can take a deep breath and really lock in to finals-- and oh, by the way, Virginia's a pretty tough place, academically. So that's critical, but as soon as that's over, we go right to a big duel up in Pennsylvania.

We end that, and then we have a nice-- we do give them seven days off before we come back, start training for the Scuffle. The Scuffle is, I would say, the second toughest tournament in the country. So that's always a huge tournament for us, then Virginia duels, and the ACC schedule. For us, the cool part about the season is that last section, where it's just duels, one duel a week, and you can just focus on one guy, and your team starts to take shape and it starts to become a pretty cool thing towards the end.

At last season's NCAA championships, UVA had two semifinalists for the first time in program history, two in the same season, finished 15th overall. How do you balance wanting your wrestlers and your team to do well in the regular season while preparing them for the post season, which is ultimately probably the most important thing?

It's hard. You have to constantly talk about perspective, you have to constantly reiterate the principles of the process, and how it's not where you start, it's where you finish, this is all means to an end. And you just hope that they're listening.

We just talked about teenagers and young men, how hard is to keep perspective, so that's our job as a staff, is to constantly just be broken records with that stuff. Because here's the thing. I've had teams that were ranked ninth in the country, then went to nationals and we had a terrible tournament.

Right.

I've had other teams that were completely underrated, that didn't have a lot of stats on paper, that went out to Nationals and did great. So The end of the year is the end of the year. That's a whole other monster in and of itself. The NCAA tournament, that's what makes wrestling national tournament so special and why it's doing so great on ESPN, and why there's so many fans, 17,000 people, who come to the finals. Because you honestly don't know what's going to happen.

You have a compelling personal story that you've been sharing with people in public events. I know the Paulsons heard you speak at the NCAA at a FCA breakfast, and that interested them in working with you. Are you more comfortable sharing that story now than maybe you were five years ago?

Yeah. I think that's come more so just through-- I believe God's put on my heart, he's been opening doors for me from a ministry perspective, to share that in different ministry environments. And so the more I've done in that capacity, it's then made it easier to share it in a professional capacity.

Well, good. I know you've got a lot to get ready for, including this trip. Thanks for making time for this. Good luck, we'll see you as the season goes on.

Thank you, buddy.

All right. Men's basketball and women's basketball are in town this weekend at John Paul Jones Arena. For information on all our teams and upcoming events, check viriniasports.com. I'll be back next week with another podcast. Until then, thanks for listening.