

Welcome to another edition of the Wahoo Central Podcast. We're coming to you today, as always, from our spacious studio here in the University Hall. I'm Jeff White from VirginiaSports.com and my guest today is a UVA legend, Marques Hagans, who played football here years ago and is now an assistant coach on the football team. Welcome back Marques.

Thank you for having me. I kind of like this view man. It's nice up here. Yeah, this is sweet. This is sweet. The penthouse. Training camp for the football team starts next Friday. Can you remember a summer in your life when you were not getting ready for the first day of football practice in one way or another? It's been a long time haven't it?

It's been a long time. I don't think it has been. Probably my ninth grade year in high school I didn't play football. So going into that summer would probably be the only time that I didn't. So that's a long time, yeah.

So what's the anticipation like for a player heading into training camp, you know, compared to-- how is it different when for a coach? Do you get as excited about it? I know the perspective is different.

I think you get excited as a coach because it's a new year, it's a new opportunity. Guys are growing and developing and you hope that you're able to continue that and continue to coach them to develop to become better and better and better, and keep climbing. So there was a period where only the strength coaches get a chance to work with them and get them ready for, you know, the fall camp. And then it's almost like Christmas, like you're going wrap the gifts, and you come back, and then it's time to get ready to go to camp and you actually get to work with them hands on. So as a coach it's exciting because every year you're trying to raise the level of your players to get them to perform better. So there's always that expectation.

As a player it's a lot different because there's a world that you have no idea as a first year-- So you're more nervous as a player?

I believe so, because you don't know what to expect. And as you get older you kind of learn the ropes and you know how to prepare and mentally get focused for camp. So it's a difference.

So coaches are now allowed to have limited contact with players during summer school, right--

Mhm.

--without a football on the field or any kind of ball? What do you try to accomplish? What are you able to accomplish in the summer now with a player? Do you have them in the meeting room going over, like, a position

group in the meeting room, talking about X's and O's, or is it strictly out on the field doing drills?

It's mostly out on the field. And you just try to orchestrate times for the players for themselves to get together, so they can learn and teach each other. And, you know, through teaching each other they get a chance to learn more about themselves and learn more in depth about the schemes and X's and O's. But out on the field, the time that we're allowed, no footballs, no tennis balls or anything like that. So what you try to focus on is making the drills as close to game situations as possible. And then really focus in on small details. So a lot of detail work and just situations that are close to the game without actually having football and formations.

Is that tougher? Because the receiver is obviously out there. One of the primary duties is to catch the football and there's no football out there.

Well I think the thing with receivers, we focus so much on footwork, and then they're responsible for getting a 100 or 150 catches a day.

On their own, yeah.

They can take care of that part that's not being able to be supplemented or not being able to be provided during the workouts, they can take care of that on their own. But the footwork, the details, the game type situations, we can simulate those things in the workouts.

You coach the outside receivers, tell me about this group you have now, heading into camp.

I would say they are very eager. They are working hard. And there's a lot of undiscovered ability, and we'll have to see how consistent they can be. And if our group becomes consistent this year, we'll have a really good offense.

You had last year Keeon Johnson was a senior, he had his breakout season in his final college season, had 49 catches, gave you a long ball threat. Do you see a guy who could kind of have that breakout year this year, who's shown flashes along the way?

I'm a big guy, like, I kind of keep my cards to my chest. But there are some guys that develop well throughout the spring and there are some guys who really took a step forward. So now from spring to fall training camp is, will they be able to raise their game to the next level and will they be able to remain consistent? And so I think as those things unfold throughout the fall we'll have a better idea of what the game plan will be going into week one against William and Mary.

This is the last go around for Andre Levrone, right? And he's one of those guys who's had flashes. What does he have to do to kind of put it all together? What has eluded him? And I know durability has been an issue for him, as

much as anything it's just getting out on the field.

I think, in all honesty, he has he had the best spring of his career. And I'm very proud of the way he's worked, he has battled a lot, he's been through a lot, but he's starting to emerge and he's starting to see himself as one of the front runners of the group. If he can continue to live in that world and continue to develop and focus in the hone in on all the little things, he could be a really good player for us. And if he has a year we're expecting, that he's expecting, it'll be exciting to watch and fun to be a part of. I'm really excited for him I'm hoping everything goes well for him.

Another guy who's back who's played a lot Doni Dowling. Donnie is a physical player who often likes to initiate contact with the defenders, sometimes resulting in injuries to Doni. Do you talk to him at all about trying to curtail that aggression, or use it in a better way sometimes, a smarter way?

Just controlled physicality. Controlled physicality. He is exactly what you want as far as toughness, but sometimes he's too tough. And, you know, the thing that you love about Doni is that doesn't back down. And he sets the tone for our group and, partially, our offense. Because he's the guy who wants to be on the front line and take on whoever. So now it's just a matter of understanding how to control that physicality. And you don't have to, you know, run 20 people over every play, or challenge everybody on one on one play. You just have to be smart. And him knocking himself out of the game to prove how tough he is doesn't help us. You know, so, we just got to have some controlled physicality, that's the one thing I've been talking to him about.

Cole Blackman was a true freshmen last year, he got thrown in a little bit toward the end of the year. Did you see strides from him in the spring?

I think early off he struggled, and as the spring progress towards the end he started to settle in on his own and tone it in, and he got better. So I'm expecting big things from him, and one of the biggest things with him will be consistency as well. So he works hard, he does what you ask, now he has to be consistent in understanding his role and making the most of the opportunities that he gets. But I'm excited to see what he'll do this fall.

Two other guys in your group, Warren Kraft, who missed most of last season with an injury, and then Ben Hogg, who came here as a walk-on and really seems to have improved over the course of his career. What are you hoping to get from those guys?

Benny, Benny boom. And boss Hogg, that's what we call them. You won't outwork that guy. And for what our program is and what we want what we want it to become, Ben Hogg symbolizes all that. Hard work, dedication, sacrifice, came in as a walk-on, earned the scholarship, one of the hardest workers, not just in context, but every single day shows up to work, does exactly what you ask, has become a really good leader for our group. Had a

really good spring. He's becoming consistent and dependable. And I mean, you just love that guy. He makes your group better. And he competes, he raises the level expectation of the guys around him. I'm so fortunate to have him and I hope he has a great year.

Warren, man, you're talking about a kid who has a lot of talent but missed a lot of last year. So for this upcoming season you just hope that he can stay healthy and continue to build off the flashes that he had from last year. But he's a very talented hard worker. Very quiet, quiet young man. But he's tough as nails too. He shows up to work every day, just does-- sometimes you forget he's out there because he won't say anything. But man he loves the game, loves playing for his teammates, and I'm hopeful that this year he can stay healthy and really help with--

One of the most intriguing players on the roster is the De'Vante Cross, who came here as a quarterback, has played some there, has also worked with you at wide receiver. When you were here, you played quarterback and wide receiver over the course of your career. What's it like working with the De'Vante, do you have any stronger bond with him because of that? Because of your personal experience? I think there's a bond there. And I think that he appreciates the fact that what he's about to embark on, I've already done. And just speaking from past experiences, things that went well for me, and things that didn't. And so his gift is also his curse, like, his ability has allowed his role to grow to different positions. And so sometimes there's double training. And so I think that right now he's really working hard to become the best receiver that he can be, and still working at quarterback. So he's kind of been put in a tough place, but he has the ability for it, the capacity to learn and want to do it, and he works hard at it. So I think he'll be fine. And I'm excited for what he can bring to the offense. And he hasn't complained, not once, he just shows up and goes to work every day. So he's got to find ways to continue to encourage them and develop them, and I think he's going to be fine. He's an exciting player, and I'm looking for big things from him.

You will have at least two and maybe three true freshmen in your group. Do you need one or more of those guys to contribute in a significant way this year? Or would that just be a bonus if that happened?

I think it's always a bonus if those guys contribute. I think if we're counting on those guys to carry team, then that's probably some unnecessary pressure. We're expecting them to show up, work hard, learn what to do and how to do it. But the guys that we have now here-- there's no disrespect to the first years-- but the guys that we have here now are capable of carrying the load and helping us win. So if those guys come in and compete, and they're better, then we've got to get them on the field. But I'm hopeful that the guys that we have here feel confident enough in their ability and their opportunities to make the most of it to help us win every Saturday.

You're a former quarterback. I know you keep, at least, a casual eye on that position here, because they work with the receivers. But, you know, from all accounts, Kurt Benkert is in a much better place physically and in terms of

his grasp of the system and all that this year than he was this time last year when he had really just arrived in town from East Carolina. you Did you notice a difference in Kurt during the spring, and have you seen it just kind of in the way he interacts with his teammates and leads the offense?

I think the thing that I have been saying about Kurt is people don't realize he was a graduate transfer. But last year was his first really playing football. And so that's huge. And, you know, he was coming off an injury. As he would tell you now, he was probably a little overweight. But now he's healthy, he's had a year in the system, and my personal opinion, with all respect to, Lamar Jackson who won the Heisman, I think we have the second best quarterback in ACC. And I'm not saying that he can't be the first, but going into the season I've got to respect Lamar because he won the Heisman, you've got to get him-- right. But our quarterback is damn good, and I'm telling you he's good. And he's more comfortable, he's more confident, he's in better shape, he's healthy, and as a former quarterback, all quarterbacks will tell you from year one to year two, the growth and development is unbelievable. And how much the game slows down, and how much you understand where everybody is. And now that confidence, he exudes that. So now he's just got to continue to carry that throughout the fall into the season. And he's got to stay healthy.

We've got to protect him up and we've got to keep him clean. We've got to get them clean pockets and keep him healthy, because there's a lot riding on his shoulders, literally. And he's going to be the reason we go. And that's the kind of the responsibility that comes with the position, but I think he's primed for it, he's ready for it, and it's his moment and his time. I'm excited to see what he does this year.

You mentioned Lamar Jackson, he's the reigning Heisman Trophy winner. Clemson is the defending national champion. Florida State is a preseason top five team, I think. You play in the ACC and you've been an assistant in the league for the better part of a decade now, the league is in a good place, isn't it? I mean that doesn't even take into account the coastal division, which has a really impressive roster of head coaches. How does this compare to what you've seen over the years, this ACC?

I think that the ACC has become the powerhouse of college football. And, you know, people can say what they want to say. I know that SCC fans and people will argue that, but if I'm not mistaken, the last two out of three years, the last national champs have been from the ACC. So that's not just my opinion, those are just facts. And so I think that there's a lot of talent within the ACC, a lot of really good coaches. I think we have one of the best coaches in ACC as well, and he will get the program to where it needs to be. We're just in the early foundational stages of it. But I like our chances. You know? And like you say, Clemson is the reigning national champion, but it's a new year. And so everybody's got to come out and everybody has the same goal, win, win, win. But if we continue to work hard and get better, you know, we should see some progress this year.

At the ACC football kickoff in Charlotte last week, coach Mendenhall was asked about in-state recruiting and he acknowledged that it's been a challenge for Virginia. You're from the 7-5-7, you recruit the state. Is it just a matter, you think, of the program winning more and when that happens things will go better in state? I know a lot of players in-state, I noticed a couple other commitments, or really elite players are just leaving the state altogether.

I think that's part of it. Guys want something different. And you always hope guys stay in-state as much as possible, but I think that winning right now would be the biggest turnover to help us get recruits. Because a lot of kids want to go be a part of a program. They don't want to help build it. And so on a lot of kids don't really see themselves as reason that things can change, and that they can be the reason things change and become better. They want to be a part of something already established, which I get. Everybody is not cut the same. But I just think that winning and commitment to football will help in this state. And I think once, you know, some of the things get put in place that we're moving forward, talking about the football facility and those things. I think those things will help too. And give us a chance to get back in and take over the state.

The players have talked a lot this year about how much more comfortable they are in year two under this coaching staff. You were the holdover from the previous coaching staff. Most of these guys work together at BYU. Does it feel different for you too in year two now that you've been around your fellow coaches for a solid year? I probably wouldn't say different. They all made it so easy to get along with when they first got here and incorporate me and include me as a part of the family. Only thing I would say that's different is that our bond has become stronger. And, you know, we've just grown together. We've been through a lot in one year, you know, only winning two games. That's a tough season. So we kind of experienced a few highs with a few wins and the players started playing better but, you know, we went through 10 losses last year, that was pretty tough. And for all of us to stick together and grow and learn together, and now I come back with a renewed focus for '17, I would just say the only thing that's different is just our bond had grown and, you know, we've just become closer and been through a lot.

The fans are obviously eager for success and impatient at the same time. What do you hear from your fellow football alumni? You're kind of the liaison on the staff, I think.

The former UVA player.

Some phone calls are good, some phone calls aren't. But, you know, one thing I will say is there's a commonality. Everybody just wants the players to play better and win. And no one in particular wants anything selfishly, they just want the players to experience what it's like to win and be a part of--

What a lot of them went through.

Absolutely. And so a lot of guys feel the history or tradition that they played a part in, they just want those guys to

be able to continue that. So guys, not only representing the era now, they represent the past. And so guys can always feel proud about walking around having a UVA football shirt on, or anything affiliated with UVA. And that's the only thing, I think guys are more hurt about people disrespecting our program. And there are so many guys that have fought you know blood, sweat, and tears to make UVA a respectable program football wise. And now to see that over the last five to seven years, however long it's been in our struggling, you know? And that's just hard. And guys really-- they really aren't talking bad about their program, they just want to know how can we help. You know, just what can we do to get it back? And so you see small things like guys starting to come back and work out in the summer and try to develop bonds and relationships with the players that are here now, as it should be to create that family atmosphere. So hopefully the small things, and I think Coach Mendenhall does a really good job with the alumni day. You're talking about 300 or 400 people coming back to touch the players, talk to the players so they can understand the connect history to present so the future can be a lot brighter. So I think we're on the right track, and the thing that will cure everything is playing better football and winning.

Yes.

That's what it boils down to. And that's what we're going to get back to. So on the NFL front, have you come to grips with the fact that your beloved Raiders are going to be in Las Vegas? Will that be weird, cheering for them?

That will be extremely, extremely-- I don't even-- are we going to be the Las Vegas Raiders?

I guess, yeah.

That's crazy. They're not going to change the name, or the logo I'm sure.

That's crazy. I don't know. I'm not a Fairweather fan but I may have to switch up. You can't have the Raiders in Vegas. It just doesn't go. The Rams back to LA, I get it. But the Raiders to Vegas, I don't know.

It will take some getting used to.

I'm going to have to abort that mission. So when I look out my office window I often see two talented young baseball players working on their skills. Are your sons on coach O'Connor's radar yet? I think--

They're a little young.

I think he told me Christopher might get an offer next week. They love baseball and they get it from their mom.

Did you play baseball at Hampton or growing up? I did. Baseball was actually my best sport. What an idiot, I know. I chose football over baseball. I'd still be playing right now.

Well your focus now is football, and I you got to get ready for practice and everything, so I appreciate you coming by.

Oh, my pleasure man.

We'll see you out at practice next week.

Absolutely. Thank you for having me.

Football will be the first UVA team to start practicing for its fall season, but women's soccer and the others will follow closely behind. For schedules and information on all our teams, check VirginiaSports.com. I'll be back next week with another Wahoo Central Podcast, until then, thanks for listening.