

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Welcome to a Thanksgiving edition of the weekly Virginia Athletics Podcast. I'm your host, Jeff White, from [viriniaspports.com](http://viriniaspports.com). It's quiet on grounds today, but the UVA football team is still hard at work. And today's guest, Micah Kiser, is one of the players who is setting the standard in the McCue Center. Micah, sad to say for me at least, this is probably your last appearance on the show as a college player at least. Thanks for stopping by.

Thanks for having me.

There's a game at Scott Stadium on Friday night, and it's not just any game. At 8 o'clock, the 'Hoos meet Virginia Tech in the annual battle for the Commonwealth Cup. This is something of a balancing act for you and your classmates in particular, in that you're trying to end a long losing streak against the program's most bitter rival. It's your final game at Scott Stadium, but you are also trying to avoid getting too hyped, right?

Yeah. It's not just another game. You can't say that. It's not just another game. I think Coach Mendenhall will call this the state championship. And that's what it is. So it'll be fun. Hopefully we have a sellout crowd. I think we've done a good job of turning things around this year, giving the program hope for the future. And what better way to send out the seniors and end a great regular season than with a win over our rival?

No matter what happens Friday night, this season will represent a significant step forward for Coach Mendenhall and the program. And there's still a bowl game to come for the first time in six years. I guess you alluded to this a little bit, but on a personal level and for the program, how much would a win over Tech accelerate that whole process, though?

A lot. You don't want to talk about last year, but when you look at just how far ahead as a team they were than us last year, it was a humbling defeat for us. But just to see the separation between the programs, and them playing in the ACC championship, us going 2 and 10. And then for us to turn it around, get the six wins. And for us to come back and beat them this year, that would be a huge step for the program, and a huge confidence booster really for the program moving forward.

I know that you go into every game believing you can win. But is there a different feeling going in to this game than there was 12 months ago, going into that one? That team was 2 and 9. This team is 6 and 5.

But honestly, I had still believed wholeheartedly that we would win last year. I woke up. I had a good feeling in the morning when I woke up. I can still remember waking up in the hotel, jacked. We played them I think at 12 o'clock, so it was one of those early games. And I was just ready to go. This year, same feeling. No real changes. Always

confident in our team. Always confident in the coaches' plan for us. Yeah. I just feel like this year we execute a lot better as a team, play with a lot more energy, play with a lot more heart. And hopefully the results are what we want on Friday.

As you mentioned, last year's game in Blacksburg quickly turned into a nightmare for Virginia. You had options after last season. You could have pursued an NFL career, you could have come back to UVA, which you ultimately did. You also probably could have transferred to another school, had you wanted to. Did the way that game went at Lane Stadium shake your resolve at all about coming back here?

I'm not gonna lie. A little bit. Just because it was a terrible feeling. And I knew a lot of my guys that I had come in with, they were leaving. But, yeah. Quickly got over it. And just realized this is something I can use to help fire us going into the off season. And I think our strength coaches did a great job with that, just personally. Front seven working with Coach Ronald When you do exercise, a lot of times you do 10 reps, but 10 was kind of a forbidden number for our group. So we would always do 11. We would never do a set of 10. We would do 11 just to get rid of that sick feeling of going 2 and 10.

so just coming back, it's been awesome. I've had more memories in this season than I've had my whole career here at UVA. Whether it was going out to Boise, winning the Boise State game, the crazy, torrential, down pouring rain against Georgia Tech, and coming back and winning that game. A lot of highs. Very few lows. And to go bowling with guys that I've played here for four and five years is the best feeling ever.

Quin Blanding had a similar decision after last season. He also chose to put the NFL on hold and come back here. Now it seems like when people mention one of you, they also mention the other. It's Micah and Quin, Micah and Quin. He came into the program a year after you did. You're obviously particularly tight with your class and Zach Bradshaw. How has your relationship with Quin evolved over the years?

Yeah. So didn't know Quin at all coming up, and didn't play against him in high school. Never knew him in high school or anything like that. But just watching him his first year come in and start every game, and just the impact that he had as a true freshman, you're like, wow this kid's the real deal. I think we had a lot of guys come in with hype and not really live up to it. But to see what he did and how he handled it, and how he stayed humble through it all, and never let any of the success really change him, it's great to see.

And then our relationship just grew. It started out mostly just on the field, just me and him both being pretty good players, understanding what was going on on the defense, being good leaders. And then just that on field success started growing into off the field friendship. And great friend, great person. Love his mom, his dad, his grandma, his sisters. A great family. You always see them at all the games. Their family. My family. They're always close,

taking pictures together. Great player. Great friend. And he has meant so much to this program, and it would be a shame for him not to go out with a win on Friday.

The team is coming off a strong performance against Miami. Is there carry over from week to week? How much does that play into what happens this week or does it? Or do you start fresh every Monday at practice?

I think you got to start fresh. I think if anything, it proved that we can go on the road and play what the experts deem as the number two team in the country and really-- we outgained them in yards. We had that game for the majority of that game. And you just got to be mature enough to say, well, this is what we did to correct the mistakes, and keep moving forward. When you play a rivalry game, you can throw records out the window. You can throw previous years out the window. Whatever. None of that matters in the rivalry game. So you've got to be mature enough to hit the reset button, and just play your best game Friday night.

Of all the traditions Bronco Mendenhall has started at UVA, the most heart warming has to be the Thursday's Hero Program. Players kind of take turns in that introducing the children [? or ?] [? men ?] to the rest of the team. You had a real personal connection to one of them last month, to your cousin. What was it like to-- I know you've been involved on other Thursday Hero days.

That was awesome. My cousin Kaimani, he had honestly got sick out of nowhere. And just him being close to me, being close to my family, I just reached out because I knew sometimes they have trouble finding a lot of young kids for the Thursday's Hero. And I think that it has the most impact when it's a young guy. And just to have him up here was awesome.

He was pretty shy in front of the team. But his mom, and my Uncle Tony, his grandfather-- they were telling me when he got back to their hotel room that day, he couldn't stop talking about it. He was running around in his Hulk outfit that they got him, a Spider-Man outfit that they got him. And they really loved going to the game. And just to see the impact that that program can have on kids for 24 or 48 hours, and just how happy they are in that time, it's awesome. And it's a great program from Coach Mendenhall.

The teammate who has really seemed to take over a big portion that program is Doni Dowling. I don't know how that morphed into that but it's kind of his show every week. Has he always been this big a ham?

Oh, yeah. Doni has always been the team clown, MC kind of guy. Really funny. He can make any situation funny and lighthearted. And y'all understand the pressure of when you're pulling out the different prizes for the kids. It can get redundant because you're giving them the same thing. The team, it's hard to get them jacked up. But Doni is the only one I know that can get them going, and get them riled up every single week, and put a smile on all the kids' faces. Funny, funny guy.

Back in training camp when the coaches were still trying to figure out where to slot the true freshmen, they moved Zane Zandier from outside linebacker to inside linebacker. And at the time, Bronco said they did that in part because they wanted him to work with you. Learn the nuances of the position with the idea that he could move into a bigger role next year. Seems like several times this year in practice, I've looked up and he's picked off a pass and returned it for a touchdown. How has he come along, and what's your relationship as a fifth year guy and a first year guy been?

Yeah. So I'm really close with all inside linebackers. And Zane, he's a converted safety, so he's kind of like Jordan Mack in that he's super athletic.

He can run.

And that's the way this defense is going is turning DBs into linebackers, turning linebackers into D lineman. Just the more you can do, the more you can do, the more athletic you are, the better in the way the game is going. And Zane, for a kid that's never played inside linebacker, he's really good at picking things up. He'll write things down. He'll take notes. So he cares and he plays hard. He plays with a swag that I really like. You've got a Pittsburgh Steelers kind of mentality to him where he's all out there, he loves the game, and he's going to be a really good player for us in the future.

This defense will have to replace you and Quin and Andrew Brown, but there will be a lot of starters and lettermen back next year, and Bronco Mendenhall will be back as defensive coordinator. Do you see that group continuing to make the strides that have made this year from last year?

I think they're going to be better next year. I've said this since early on this season. I was like, besides us three, if you bring every single person back, the D line is going to keep getting more depth, more growth. There's a lot of really good DBs back there. I think Bryce and Juan have done a great job locking down that corner spot. You get Tim Harris back. You add in a guy like Joey Blount, who's-- in my opinion, he's probably one of the best pure just football players that we have on the team is Joey Blount. And he's a freshmen.

You have a ball-hawking safety in Ryan Nelson coming back. I think you see him more playing pure free safety all next year, just really locking down the middle of the field. That's what he does best. And then linebacker wise, Jordan Mack is going to have to step up. Leadership role. I think that's a great opportunity for him to be more vocal, which is kind of hard for him.

And that's kind of the question. Like, a lot of the guys on the defense you named are kind of quiet by nature. Juan and Bryce and Jordan. Guys just have to grow into a bigger role.

Yeah. You It just comes with when guys leave, you got to step up. And I think you'll see that the biggest jump in leadership will be from Chris Peace. He's had a phenomenal year. He's a phenomenal player. His work ethic is unreal. His relentlessness to get to the ball, to get to the quarterback, is second to none on the team. And he's been a guy that when he came in his first year, we roomed together, and in training camp I had my eye on him. And he's going to be a great player. He's going to be a great leader. And I expect him to be the captain of the defense next year.

We don't have enough time this morning to list all the awards that you're in the running for this season, but I would be remiss if I failed to mention the fact that you are one of 13 finalists for the William V. Campbell Trophy, which is commonly known as the academic Heisman. As a finalist, you'll receive an \$18,000 post-graduate scholarship. We'll find out who the one winner is at the National Football Foundation annual awards dinner next month in New York City, and the winner will have his scholarship increase to \$25,000. That's a pretty big deal, isn't it? Where does it rank among the accolades you've received here?

Probably number one just because it encompasses everything that goes into being a student athlete. I think in today's day and age, you see so many guys where it's all about football. It feels like they get taken advantage of in the system that is college athletics. And I always said when I came to UVA, I was going to do the most to take advantage of the system, and me being a student athlete and all the opportunities that it can provide. And I think I did take advantage of it as best I can.

And I had a lot of great professors, a lot of great coaches to help me know on the field and off the field, and made the most out of it. And it's really a testament to the UVA athletic program and its commitment to uncompromised excellence. And that's not just only a sport brand, it's a whole university brand kind of thing. And I got to thank Craig Littlepage, and all that he's done for this program, and for players like me. And if anyone comes here, they have the opportunity to do it as well. So just take advantage of it.

So you got your bachelor's in foreign affairs in May, right? And you're in the Curry School now?

Yes. Working towards a master's in Higher Education.

I did a story this fall on Tom Burns, the former Virginia linebacker who won the Campbell in '94. I don't know if you've had a chance to meet him, but he's an amazing guy with an amazing story.

Got to meet him after the Georgia Tech game. I've read the story. Wow. Super, super smart. He's big time in the engineering world. Just seeing how many degrees that he got from UVA in such a short time. And great impact on the field and off the field. That's a great guy to look up to, and I think his story should be one that more student athletes at UVA know about.

You have a brother at the University of Miami.

Yeah.

You went to Gilman School in Baltimore. You were raised in a family that stressed academics, right?

Yes.

From the get go.

Yeah. I was always afraid of getting bad grades just because they had sacrificed so much for me to go to great schools. I went to private school for seven years. They expected the best out of me. I was a straight A student for a long time. In high school I started slipping up a little bit once I knew I was going to play college ball. I kind of took the foot off the gas, but when I got here, hit the ground running. Have succeeded in the classroom and on the field, and it's all a testament to my parents. Best parents in the world.

You were asked the other day at JPJ at the press conference about if you had an interest in coaching. You said you thought you might, but ultimately you could see yourself in an administrative role. Could you be back here as AD one day?

I would hope so. That would be a dream job. I've always, always known since I was a kid that I wanted to work in athletics. My whole life story is really told through sports, and playing sports, and always being around at different games, whether it was football, or basketball, lacrosse, swimming. I tried to do it all. And to be the leader and at the helm of an entire athletic program, that would be a dream job for me.

UVA fans may have seen that video of Bronco announcing to the team that you were a Campbell trophy finalist. He's beaming like a proud father when he's saying that. You talked on Monday at JPJ about your relationship with Coach Mendenhall. I'm not sure all our listeners heard those comments. You guys have formed a strong bond in a short amount of time, haven't you?

Yes. I texted him yesterday. He said he was happy for me and how I had helped establish building this program. And I said, man coach, I appreciate you for coming here. And I just wish I had four more years with him. He's a great coach. His investment in all the players and this entire program is unreal. Really puts his heart into all of this. He treats us like we're his family members. And he's tough on us like we're his own family. And that's what you love from a coach. And he's a great coach, great man, and the best person to lead this program into the future.

There are no sure things in life. You could have come back for your final season and had it not go well for you or for the team. To know that that hasn't been the case, and to know that you've played an important role in the

revival of this program has to be immensely gratifying for you, isn't it?

Yeah and it's interesting. They always make me talk to a lot of recruits all the time in the incoming class. I guess when they were on their official visit, a lot of their parents were asking me, why are you coming back? Why are you and Quin coming back? And I was honestly, selfishly-- I thought about, what is my legacy here at UVA, athletically? Yeah, I had made a lot of tackles, but we hadn't really won anything. In my four years here before this year, we had won 13 games. We hadn't been to any bowl game. They didn't really have any memorable wins. And so I just felt like I hadn't really left an impactful mark on this program. And I think coming back and doing what we've done this year, 6 and 6. Or excuse me, we're 6 and 5 now. Hopefully it will be 7 and 5.

And then get an eight in the--

And get an eighth. That would just be a small-- just a small step. A small ripple in what we think that the program will do. But that will be an impactful ripple, and hopefully we keep winning, keep winning. And when they think about the success that UVA football has in the future, they will look back to this team and the leaders that are on this team and say, wow, it really started with them. Those were the guys that did it. And that will mean a lot.

So there will be a bowl game in December. Late December. What are your plans for the spring? Do you stay here and train for the NFL draft, or do you go someplace else?

At this point, I'm really leaning towards going somewhere else. So I'm winding down my time here in Charlottesville. It's been great to me. All the people here have been awesome, whether teachers, people that own restaurants, different students, different fans reaching out on Facebook. I try to shoot back to as many fans on Facebook as I can, just because I know you know it's kind of hard to find super loyal fans in these days. So the ones that have always been loyal to me, I always try to respond back to you. And so Charlottesville has been great. Winding down my time.

What's your favorite restaurant here?

My favorite restaurant. It honestly depends on what mood I'm in. This year I've been going to Al Carbon Chicken a lot. Farther down 29 near Kohr Brothers. Really good rotisserie chicken. I think it's Peruvian food there. It's really good. I like Mel's Cafe for a down home meal. Me and Kurt go there many times. But, yeah. I love to eat. I love all the restaurants. I love all the people here. And it's been awesome.

Well, thanks again for your time over the years and this season. And congratulations on a fantastic college career that is not over yet.

Yes. Thank you. Thank you.

The senior day ceremony will precede the game Friday night at Scott Stadium. And we're looking forward to seeing a huge crowd there. Also in town this weekend, is the Cavalier Classic women's basketball tournament at JPJ, as well as an important wrestling dual meet with Missouri at Mem Gym. For schedules and information on all our teams, check [viriniasports.com](http://viriniasports.com). I'll be back next week with another podcast. Until then, thanks for listening. Have a Happy Thanksgiving and go 'Hoos.