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Welcome to another edition of the weekly Virginia Athletics Podcast. I'm Jeff White from Virginia Sports dot-com, and my guest is a regular on this show, Ron Sanchez, the associate head coach of the men's basketball team. For the Hoos, the season starts Friday night with a game against UNC Greensboro at John Paul Jones Arena. Ron, I know you have a million things to do before then, so I appreciate you're making time to swing over to U Hall. How you doing?

Great, man-- always nice to be here and excited to start the season and get the ship moving.

For you and Tony Bennett, Jason Williford, Mike Curtis, Ethan Saliba, and Ronnie Wideman-- who runs everything behind the scenes-- this will be your ninth season working together at UVA, which is a long run in modern college hoops. What does that familiarity that you all have with each other mean for the day-to-day operation?

It's easy because now we're not-- we hit the ground running. There isn't any hesitation with things. We would communicate well. We're ahead of the curve with some of those things. But there's also a negative, because we've been working together for so long that it's kind of like that brother relationship where you just got to get away from each other for a few minutes. But we do have a great working relationship.

Your wife will appreciate that you said a brother relationship and not a marriage.

[LAUGHTER]

As a coach, you have a unique perspective, having also worked with Tony at Washington State. How have you seen him change from his first year as a head coach to this will be his 12th, I think?

Well, the beauty about Tony is he never-- never thought he knew everything. Tony's always in the pursuit of knowledge and learning. And the beauty about him is in the last 12 years is the one thing that has not changed. He's always seeking ways to be better, personally, professionally, and with his team. Now, in watching him from his first year till now, I can say he's a lot calmer now. He has a bigger-- once you get a few of those games under your belt, and you get a few years under your belt, knowledge is a beautiful thing. And experience is amazing because you learn a lot from your failures. And as a head coach he's had a lot of success, but he's also hit some valleys and has always used those as learning opportunities.

You also worked with and for his father, Dick Bennett. As Tony gets older and more experienced, is he more like Dick than it was.

Yeah, he has all of his dad's great qualities. Tony's dad is an amazing human being. I cannot even express how much I enjoyed working for him. He's just an encyclopedia, not only from a basketball standpoint, but also how he helped young men grow. And that's the quality that Tony has. I'm sure that his father has allowed him and taught him to value all the big things. And Tony is-- he is a lot like his dad when it comes to those.

The team played, had two close scrimmages in the pre-season. We're allowed to talk about them now that they're in the past. The first was at home against Richmond. The second was this past weekend, or last weekend, in Philadelphia against Villanova. You do this every year. How much do the scrimmages give you a sense of what the season is going to be like? Have you found a strong correlation between the two, or--

What those scrimmages provide is great feedback for-- not where you are but also the things that you have to work on. And we always try to add two teams that are either completely different, where Richmond is kind of a Princeton offense, its own match-ups. And Villanova is supposed to be one of the best teams in the country this year. So those experiences do allow us to get a gauge as to where we are currently and what are the things that we need to improve on.

Seems to be a lot of mutual respect between the Villanova and Virginia programs and coaching staffs. And obviously there have been two great regular season games, and then the scrimmage. Do the programs do things in similar ways, do you think?

Yeah, definitely. We've at times even have recruited some of the same players. And Jay Wright is, in my opinion, one of the bright stars in college basketball. Obviously, he's had a lot of success. And I've followed him from-- even his days at Hofstra in New York. And he just-- his teams are well coached. They challenge you. We really have enjoyed the relationship with that program.

Unless a team wins the NCAA championship or the NIT, its season almost always ends with a defeat. Not all losses feel the same. Did losing to Florida by that margin in the NCAA tournament lead to any more off-season review of the program than if you'd lost by two points?

Yes, you have to really look at yourself and try to identify areas of improvement. And I know that we battled some illnesses, and we had issues that lead or contributed to that type of play. And the youth of Mamadi and Ty and Kyle and that big setting of course is another element that contributed. But we did look at ourselves. We always analyze our offense, our defense, areas that we can improve, how teams try to attack us, and so on, and try to grow from that. So, yeah, losing by that margin-- I think, honestly, still keeps me up at night. It's going to bother me forever. Had we lost by two, it would have--

That bothers you in a different way, because then you think about one play had it gone differently.

Exactly. Exactly. Losing doesn't feel good. Doesn't matter if it's like, 20 or 30. There's always something there.

There is always an intense fascination among fans with young players, the guys who haven't seen a lot of time. But let's talk first about your veterans. I think while it's fair to say Devon Hall, Isaiah Wilkins, Jack Zaal have played the most minutes-- they're upper classmen-- all have been steady contributors. Is it realistic to think any or all of those guys can make another significant jump this season?

Yes, definitely. The one thing I will say about those three-- Jack, Isaiah, and--

And they're your captains too.

They are our captains. Their leadership is undeniable. They lead by example. They are verbal leaders. They do things well on the floor, off the court. There is another step for them to take, and Devon Hall has worked really hard from his first year to now his fifth year. And his work ethic has just continually improved. Isaiah and Jack are committed to being the best athletes that they can. And I do believe that they will show improvement on the floor this season.

Then you've got kind of your next tier of-- well, you got Nigel Johnson, who's a graduate transfer from Rutgers, who has four seasons of college basketball in a program. How has he looked? I know joining this program midstream is not necessarily the easiest thing to do.

Right. Nigel shows that he has physical gifts. He's fast. He can create plays off the dribble. His biggest challenge is coming in understanding all the things that we require, particularly on the defensive side of the floor. He's growing in that area. I think he's a guy that because of his physical gifts will probably get it a little bit quicker than most and also his past experiences playing with different coaches and different programs. He's a really good addition to this group that we have.

Three players gained a tremendous amount of experience as freshmen last year. Mohamed Diakite, who was a red-shirt freshman, then Cal Guy and Ty Jerome. I know they've all worked hard in the off-season. Have you seen improvement from each of those?

Yes. Again, I go back to just having a game experience, that there is no bigger teaching tool than that. And those three guys got a lot of minutes last season. And I do believe that just having been on the floor against high-level competition as the games were on, the games will slow down for them a bit. Cal had flashes, as had Ty. And Mamadi obviously showed a lot of bright spots as well.

If I had \$1 for every time somebody asked me about your two red-shirt freshmen, DeAndre Hunter and Jay Huff, I

could buy a house in your neighborhood. Do expectations for those two need to be tempered a little bit? Obviously, they're both talented kids, but they have not played college basketball before.

Right. And I go back to the same, as I stated previously-- is they don't have any game experiences. So there is going to be a level of nerves in a hectic environment. How are they going to handle that? When you watch them in an individual workout, you can be wowed.

Wowed, yeah.

But again, now they've got to do that with nine other guys on the floor or eight other guys on the floor and be able to do that in a hostile environment, a competitive environment, with time and score and understanding all of those things. And so I would say, yes, because they haven't had that yet.

You have two true freshmen, Marco Anthony and Frankie Badokey. Frankie is recovering from knee surgery and will redshirt this season. Marco has been out there playing in the scrimmages and at every practice full go. Do you have a sense of what he might be able to contribute this season?

Yeah, as far as the young guys, including Jay and DeAndre, our expectation for them is the same as the first years. It's not about numbers or statistical things. We want just more qualitative-type of things. We want effort. We want quality in their defensive positions and their taking care of the ball and those type of things, playing the game the right way. As far as numerical things, how many points or how many rebounds or-- those things will take care of itself. But what I will say about all four of those young men is that everyday they do show up, and they work really hard. And I think their success is going to be a byproduct of the things that they do on a daily basis.

It's been good to see Frankie back at practice. It seems like his workload increases a little bit every week. He's out there doing some drills. Virginia got in real late with him. You had a connection, right? Through a friend? He was not a guy at this time last year who was on the radar, was he? In November?

No, he was not. We didn't have a scholarship. We were done. And there wasn't-- there wasn't a true connection. It was just more of someone who had seen him play, one of the scouting services that we purchased from the Midwest that help us identify-- we were looking for specifics in physical makeup and athleticism and so on. So that's how his name came across the board. And we speed raced through the recruitment.

You got it done. The early signing period for basketball and some other sports started on Wednesday. Going to have two signees, Kihei Clark and Cody Statman. Cody is from Australia. You have made that trip, haven't you?

I have made that trip multiple times. It's a long trip.

What can-- what can you tell us about those two guys?

Again, both are not five-star prospects, but both possess a level of skill, and I think a level of mental toughness. Both are young. Cody-- I think he just turned 17 this summer. And so their best basketball is still ahead of them. They need some physical development and so on. But the basketball IQ and the character component and all the things that this institution, this program, values are definitely there.

The UVA's presence in the NBA has steadily grown in recent years. Malcolm Brogdon is with the Bucks. Justin Anderson is with the Sixers. Mike Scott is with the Wizards. London Perrantes is a two-way player with the Cavs, who's spending most of his time in the G League so far. I know we've-- I've probably talked to you about this on previous podcasts, but that's an important thing for a program, isn't it? To have representation in the NBA?

Nah, definitely. Especially when those guys were not McDonald's, All-American, or guys that were predicted to be--

And there's Joe Harris with the Nets.

Guys that were--

Sorry, Joe.

They were not predicted to be long, steady NBA guys. I'm excited. I think that some of the things that we do are great for these young men to-- as far as their development. And I think that helps us tremendously. Justin being in there, Malcolm being the NBA Rookie of the Year. Joe continuously improving. Mike Scott having this long tenure, I think, is wonderful. And it does. It helps. It helps from a recruiting standpoint, for sure.

I think a lot of people, most fans-- UVA fans-- know that Klay Thompson spent one year with Coach Bennett at Washington State. There is another WASU graduate, a guy I have a particular interest in, Aaron Baynes. Four years for you guys there, right?

He played four years for us at Washington State.

Are you surprised to see him having the impact? Had 21 points Wednesday night against the Lakers.

Honestly-- and just for the record, Cody and Aaron played for the same club in Australia. So we got that connect through that. And they have similarities. And one thing is-- and I took this as came from Aaron's coach back then-- and we both agree-- is his work ethic was tremendous. It never ceased.

Who, Aaron's?

Aaron Baynes. He was one of those guys that was not going to be denied. He improved from his first year to his second year and has continued to improve. He's one of those guys that at times, we clashed when we were coaching him. But it was because he was so passionate about being a good player. And there's no replacement for that.

At the ACC Media Day in Charlotte last month, Coach Bennett talked at length about some of the tactics other schools use to try to plant doubts in the minds of prospects who were considering UVA. Does the extent of the negative recruiting against UVA surprise you at all, or is that just par for the course in the game?

I think it's just par for the course in the game. I don't know what's being said. I hear certain things. And I can't control that. We can't control that. The only thing that we can do is continue to sell this institution, this program, this community. This is an amazing place. We have an amazing athletic department. That this institution as a whole, the faculty, the education here-- it speaks for itself. If someone has something negative to say about the success that we've had on the basketball court or the education at this institution, then that's on them. I don't-- honestly, I don't spend a single day wasting time or energy thinking about those things. I control the things that we can control.

One of the real success stories of this basketball program is Mamadi Diane, who did not play for Coach Bennett, but who has been welcomed into the family by you and the rest of the staff. Thanks to you, I did not realize he was back here at Darden. And you gave me a heads-up, and I wrote a story about him. And what's it mean to have an alumnus like Mamadi back here for graduate school and also around the program as a positive influence for the current players?

Oh, it's wonderful because when we sit down, and we talk to these young men about the relationship that we're going to have is going to go far beyond your playing years or your four years here-- even though he did not have an opportunity to play for us. We did have an opportunity to spend a lot of time with him when we first got the job. And I'll be honest with you, I had a level of respect for him immediately, just from the things that came out of his mouth, and some of the things he shared about his own experience, and how much he valued this institution as a whole. To have him around our guys and be able to say hey, I played here. I went and played professionally. And now this is what I'm doing next.

Because we always talk about having an exit plan. What are you going to do? How do you-- how are you going to use this institution, from an academic standpoint, to really benefit you once that ball stops bouncing? And I think he's a perfect example of a person who has really embraced this institution, this community, the relationships that come along with a coaching staff and an institution.

All right, final question, then I'll let you go. You guys have been out of your locker rooms for a number of months,

then dressing down the hall. I think fans in some form will see the work that's been done at JPJ, whether it be in videos or photos, but you have essentially brand new locker room, meeting rooms, video rooms. What's the project look like to you? And what do you think it means for the program and for the players?

First of all, I'm so happy that we got kicked out of the locker room, because it gave me an excuse not to work out. I think Jason and I share that same theory there. It is a beautiful place. We're so thankful to the athletic department and Craig Littlepage for following through with some of the things that he said that he was going to do. And so thankful to the people who donated into the project and having them come by and see it and cut the ribbon as we entered for the first time. I think it's-- it's a beautiful place. I think our players that have come through are the ones that laid the work on the court for these young guys to really appreciate it. And I'm hoping that they at some point can come by and see it.

What it is-- it's a nice place. It's functional. It's not just for looks. It really does provide an environment for them to use their time wisely, rest well, eat well, and prepare for practices. And also to be honest-- I think will help them get some academic work done in a better place.

Will you be able to slip off and take a nap in there occasionally?

If I do that, I think that Tony might remove my title.

[LAUGHTER]

Well, listen, it seems like it wasn't that long ago that you were playing at JPJ. You're back there Friday night. We'll see you then.

Thank you so much. Oh, it was nice to be with you.

All right, in addition to the men's basketball game, there will be an abundance of UVA athletic events in Charlottesville this weekend. Swimming and diving and NCAA cross-country regional, NCAA field hockey, NCAA women's soccer, rowing, and women's basketball. For information on all these events, check Virginia Sports dot-com. As always, thanks for listening, and we'll be back next week with another podcast.

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