

UVA Athletics | Thornhill

Welcome to another installment of my weekly podcast on Virginia Athletics. I'm Jeff White from virginiasports.com. And for the first time since 2013, the UVA football team is 1 and 0. My guest today was one of the stars of the Cavaliers season opening victory over William and Mary. And that would be junior defensive back, Juan Thornhill. Juan, I know you started early with practice this morning and followed that up with a long day of classes, so I appreciate you making time for this interview. How's it going?

Pretty good.

Good. At his weekly press conference on Monday, Coach Mendenhall called you the most impressive player on defense and special teams against William and Mary. You finished with a career high 10 tackles, including one for loss, and you broke up a pass. What did you think about your performance, were you happy?

I think I had a few mistakes out there. There's some things that I could work on. But for the most part, I think I played pretty well. But I'm not focusing on what I have to do all by myself. I'm just focused on doing the right things to help us win.

You and your teammates are back at Scott Stadium this weekend for a game against Indiana, which had a 1 point lead on Ohio State late in the third quarter their game last Thursday night. The Buckeyes went crazy after that. The final score was one-sided, but that's what Ohio State can do. It was still an impressive offensive showing by the Hoosiers. Their quarterback threw for 410 yards, and he's got some big targets. One of his receivers is 6' 4", 225, another 6' 4", 220. What do you make of their offense, and how big a challenge is that for the secondary?

We've been watching film on it. We know these guys. They're pretty tough. The receivers are really tall, like you said. The quarterback has put him in the right spot, and I think he's going to be a big challenge for the DVs this week. We're going to have to be focused in knowing what they're going to do before they actually do it and playing the ball well. That's going to be the biggest thing, is just making plays on the ball.

I was talking to Chris Peace last week for a story, and he talked about how he watches so much more film now than he did when he came here. Have you gone through a similar change, or were you always a film guy?

Actually, when I first got here, I wasn't that much of a film guy. I used to be that guy that just go talk to the coach and then look at my playbook. But now, I've got into the groove of looking at film more because I notice that when you look at film, it just increases a game to another level. And it allows you to play a lot better.

Are you to the point now where you can predict what plays come on, or do you recognize plays quicker by the way they line up in formations and all that?

Yeah, I think it started last year. I just started to be able to pick up on things like that, like small keys to help me play a lot better. And I can tell when someone's-- when they're about to run a ball sometimes, and sometimes when they're about to run a certain type of route.

As a true freshman in 2015, you were at safety. Then you moved to cornerback, and you started there last year. And you've been back at safety this year. Are you at the point now where you're comfortable in any role in the secondary, whether it be corner, safety, or nickel?

I can say that I'm pretty comfortable there, but I have some things to work on. I know most of the corner stuff. I know the strongest safety and nickel spot, which is basically the same back-up. But I think right now, I need to focus on learning what the free safety has to do because that would increase my game to another level.

What is-- people always hear about the nickel defense and the nickelback-- what is the nickelback do that's maybe different from a corner or a safety? What do you have to do to be good in that role?

The nickelback is basically the same thing as a corner, honestly. It's basically a bigger cornerback. Bennett would put them inside the box to help on the run and be able to cover inside receivers at the same time.

Coach Mendenhall is also your defensive coordinator. For the veterans on the defense, this is your second season in his system. Does the defense feel different this year for that reason? I know this was all new to everybody last year.

Yeah, he said, last year, I feel like the team wasn't actually super confident. We didn't know exactly what to do in the defense. And that slowed us down on the field, and we didn't play as well. But Coach has been pushing us all summer, all fall, and I feel like the guys actually know what they're doing out there. And we're playing a lot faster, and he's just helping us. It helps us a lot on the field.

The secondary coach is Nick Howell. He does not do a lot of interviews, so fans may not know him as well as they know some of the other assistant coaches. What's it like working with him and playing for him?

Oh, yeah. I love Coach Howard. Coach Howard reminds me of myself because-- I'll be honest-- I don't like the interviews either. I know, sometimes, I have to do it. But playing for Coach Howard is great because he always push you to be your best. If you make a mistake, he's going to tell you straight up what was wrong and what you need to do to fix it. He's a great coach.

Tim Harris is a player who I know is really respected and liked by his teammates. He suffered another season-ending injury last week. This one to his wrist, last year it was his shoulder. What's that like to see one of the members of your brotherhood go down like that? Is that tough for you guys?

Oh yeah, it's definitely, it's hurting, but we would love to have Tim back out there. But we have some young guys that was behind him that, I believe, is ready to step up and take part in that role and do some great things out

there on the field.

I mean, one of those guys is Jermaine Croall. Came in here in January. His father was a great player here. His uncle was a great player here. People really haven't seen him on the field that much because he's a true freshman. What is he like as a player?

Honestly he's just like a freak of nature. You could throw him out there, and he will make plays for you. He's really athletic. He's quick, and he's very fast. So I'm excited to see what he's going to do.

You're from Alta Vista, Virginia. For listeners who aren't familiar with that locale, it's a small town, about 25 miles south of Lynchburg on Route 29, or off Route 29. What was it like growing up there?

Growing up there, it was actually amazing. You know almost everyone in town because it's so small, everyone knows you. When they come to the games, they know who you are. Little kids look up to you. You have a great bond with most of the people that go to the school because honestly, there's maybe less than 500 people in that school. We have a middle school and high school together. I just like it. It is very unique, and honestly, people just look over my school that I went to because we're just so small. And I just feel like we didn't have much respect as an athletic program, but, in my personal opinion, I felt like we were pretty tough in football and basketball.

Jo Reed is from Charlotte Court House, and that's even smaller, even a lot smaller.

I think his school is actually bigger than mine.

His school might be, but I think his town is smaller. You guys gravitate toward each other, being from small towns in Virginia? Country boys on the team.

Oh, yeah. Every time we see each other, just to say we were like 4, 3, 4. Just to remind us where we came from, and just to let everybody know that we're from a small town. And we're here, we made it.

Your home is about 90 miles from Charlottesville, so 90 minute drive, 2 hour drive. Do you have a big touring section at home games, and at the games in Carolina, too?

Oh, yeah. Honestly, a bunch of your boys text me and ask me for tickets. If I had 100 tickets, I honestly feel like I could fill up every single seat because people always ask me. But whenever we have home games, I hear the crowd. They're yelling. I know my family, friends, teachers, principals, I know they're there.

When I interviewed you last year for an article, you told me you became a UVA fan at an early age or pretty young. How did that come about?

When I was younger, my guy, he took me to a University of Virginia football game. And honestly, I used to go to the games all the time. I'm watching Cedric Peerman, [? Vic, Hal, ?] [? Hoy. ?] I used to watch them play, knowing that they're from my area. And I used say, I want to be just like them, I want to make it because I used to look up to them guys. And here I am today.

At Alta Vista high school, you were as accomplished in basketball as you were in football. How many state titles did you win in hoops? Was it two or three?

I think it was three in basketball.

And two in football. Altavista competes in class 1A, which consists of the smallest high schools in the state. I think you alluded to this earlier, but because of that, were there people who doubted you could succeed here? Did you feel like you had something to prove when you got here?

Oh, yeah. I definitely felt like I had something to prove because some of the guys even told me on the team when I first got here. It was like, all right, he's from a 1A school, so I know he's probably not really that good. But then, they said, I earned their respect by the way I was playing. But I honestly feel like guys from my area are overlook big time because the size of the school and the sports level isn't as high as the 757 and things like that.

Virginia has a strong tradition though, with Thomas Jones, Heath Miller, Cedric Peerman, Vic Hall. Now you and Joe Reid, guys from small towns in the states. So it can be done, as you're showing. Did you ever consider playing basketball instead of football in college? Because you got offered by Radford, right?

Yes. I was a big basketball fan when I was in ninth grade. And then I think that changed a little bit once I start playing quarterback, when I became a sophomore in high school. But in ninth grade, I was playing AAU basketball, traveling all around the world. And honestly, I was doing pretty well, and I felt like I could play college basketball.

Did you play with some guys who are playing college ball now?

I played against a bunch of top-notch basketball players, and let me think to see if I know of anyone. I can't really think of anyone on my team, actually went somewhere for basketball. I know Jaylen on the baseball team. He was on my AAU basketball team.

What made you decide, ultimately, to go with football?

Honestly, just because of the opportunity. I had one offer in basketball from Radford. And honestly, one of the coaches that told me from there, and he was like, it's going to be hard to go to division 1 to play football from this

school because you had to put up incredible numbers. And when he said that, it automatically just changed my mentality. And now I'm just thinking, oh, I'm going to show him. So I started playing even harder, taking football more serious.

And I got an offer from the University of Virginia. And then, when I got the call, my dad-- I went and I told him that I got an offer. I honestly think he was very shocked, as well. He asked me, did you take the offer? And I was like, no, I didn't. I was just sitting there. I wanted to wait a little bit. But then my dad, he was in my ear at all times just saying like, I mean, you might as well just commit because you know you're a UVA fan. You know you want a good A, and you're going to end up there, no matter who you get offered by. And probably 2 or 3 days later, I ended up coming here.

The game this Saturday, the game against Indiana, is on ESPN. You had been on ESPN as a football player many times in your career. You've also been on SportsCenter as a basketball player. Tell us about that for people who don't know that story.

It's crazy honestly. OK, we made it to the state championship, and we played against Honaker. That's the school that Heath Miller went to. We played against them. It was a pretty tough game. And then, towards the end-- well, honestly throughout the game, I had multiple dunks-- but then towards the end, my little cousin [? Dimitri ?] [? Moravek. ?] We've been playing together our whole lives. And we're honestly on the same type of keys, we know what each other wants, we know what to do.

And he had got a steal one time, and I saw him look back at me, like real quick. And I was just thinking, he's about to try something really crazy right here. I already know it. So he was on a fast break, and it was this guy on his hip. So I was just traveling, and then all of a sudden, he threw it up off the backboard. And I just went up and just caught it and just threw it down. And then Carl went crazy and everything.

But then after that, we won. And then I went home later that night, and I was sitting there just watching SportsCenter like I always do. I watch it all the time, just do it because I love sports. And I was just sitting there. And at the end of the show, you know how they show the top 10 players, and I was just sitting there watching it. It was just winding down. He got down to number two. And all of a sudden, it said Alta Vista's Juan Thornhill, and I immediately jumped like, whoa what's going on?

I was really shocked. My mom was right there. I started yelling. I said, dad, dad, wake up, wake up. I went to wake him up. It was late at night, too. And he was like, I can't believe you made it on there. Everybody in my house was excited. I made it to number two, and I was just really shocked.

Where was that game, in Lynchburg or Richmond?

Oh, it was in Richmond.

The Siegel Center?

Yeah.

Charlottesville made headlines last month for all the wrong reasons because of the rally that turned violent here. What effect did that have on the team, do you think? And do you see that Who's Together Campaign as a unifying force for the team?

So we've seen what was going on. We tried not to pay much attention to it. But when we saw, we saw it as being an opportunity to unite and bring everyone together. So that's why we had taken a picture at the rotunda just to show everybody that we're going to stay together through all of this that's going on. And we also were trying to get more wins to bring everybody together and to just make this world a better place.

Well, it's a big game on Saturday. I know you've got to get ready for that. One final question. Back to basketball. If you had to choose a basketball team from guys on this football team, who would make the cut, besides you, of course.

How many do I get?

We can start with five, but if you've got more, we could go to 10.

All right, top five. Let's see. Definitely, I would have to put myself on the team. I would put Warren Craft because he's a really good basketball player. Playing at the AMC, I think I'd have to take Bryce Hall, Devante Cross.

You got any bigs on the team?

I'm trying to think of a big man. I'm trying to think of a big man. I can't really think of any, though, right now.

Trying to think, we need a fifth right? It's just anybody, doesn't have to be by position.

All right, the fifth, let's see. Who would it be? It's kind of hard to think. I'm really thinking right now. I would take Quin just to put him in a corner and let him shoot a little bit because he calls himself Klay Thompson. So I'll take Quin.

Quin Blanding as Klay Thompson.

Yeah, I'll take Quin Blanding, and put him in a corner, and let him shoot.

All right, well anyway, I know your focus this week is on football. Good luck with that, and thanks again for your time.

All right, thank you.

There will be a multitude of UVA athletic events in Charlottesville over the next few days, starting tonight with women's soccer at Klockner Stadium. The weather forecast for Saturday looks fantastic, and we're hoping to see a big crowd at Scott Stadium. For schedules and information on all our teams, check virginiasports.com. I'll be back next week with another podcast. Until then, thanks for listening.