

Good afternoon. And welcome to another edition of the weekly *Virginia Athletics* podcast. I'm your host, Jeff White, from virginiasports.com. And joining me today is Lars Tiffany, who is in his second year as head men's lacrosse coach at UVA. Lars, great to have you back on the show.

Jeff, thank you for having me. And let's talk some Virginia lacrosse.

Yes. First, let me segue into that by bringing up UVA football. This is Bronco Mendenhall's second year at UVA too. And he talked at length during the off season about how he had a much better read on the strengths and weaknesses of his players, and the needs of his program heading into year two than he did his first year. Has it been the same for you?

Absolutely. I keep telling people I like change. I like year ones. But I'm really enjoying year two. One, culturally there's been a significant shift with this teams in through the fall training, the camaraderie, the cohesiveness of this group. It's more than palpable. It's infectious. And I'm really enjoying seeing the men come together and certainly our staff. We understand this group much better. We understood the mistakes we made, especially on team defense and what I was asking and asking too much of the men. And so yeah, in terms of the cohesiveness of the group and schematically, especially on the defensive end we're seeing a lot of progress.

I'm guessing even away from the lacrosse field you have a better understanding about how the university itself works and probably know your way around Charlottesville a little better, don't you?

I can still get lost. And again, part of me likes that. Part of me likes being in the unknown. But knowing how the university operates and having a little bit more institutional savviness is helping me anticipate what could go wrong and help direct our men in the better direction. But again, we have great support here.

The administrative support has been fantastic, even despite the turnover and the changing guard coming. But over on the other side of campus dean of students, Allen Groves, is fantastic to work with. And so I've been really, really well supported and thus our men have been taken care of.

You wrapped up fall ball last month. What were your goals heading into it? Were you happy coming out of it? And did you take any different approach this year than you did last fall?

Simple. We tried to make it much simpler this year. And that is something I should have done last year recognizing what the experience level of these men were being asked to play multiple different types of slides games and this year pulling back on that the old acronym, KISS, keep it simple stupid. And it's been much more effective. And so I've really enjoyed seeing the progress at the defensive end.

And then, offensively, Coach Kirwan is one of the best offensive coordinators out there, and we're really fortunate to have him. But was interesting to see him make some adjustments and change. He's a younger coach. He's under 30. And to see the adjustments as he recognizes the different personnel, what we're seeing is that we obviously have some real impactful midfielders here.

And Dom Starsia and Marc Van and their staff brought us some fantastic athletes in the midfield. And Sean's starting to adapt his offensive systems. At Brown, we were more attack-dominated and orientated. But recognizing what the strengths are here, that he's made some shifts with the things we're going to do and how we're going to attack opposing defenses.

And so I'm seeing some great things that are gonna allow the Dox Aitkens, Ryan Conrads, Matt Moores, Milan Murrays, Wade Maloneys, and Matt Emerys to have a little bit more freedom and be a little bit more involved and impactful.

One guy you've mentioned to me a couple times is a player with whom UVA fans are not at all familiar. He's a walk-on. Kyle Kology, if I'm pronouncing his last name right. At this time last year, did you have any idea who he was or that he would end up at Virginia?

I think that this time last year he was committed to a division three lacrosse program in New England, and he was all set to go there. Then took a visit there and decided that maybe it wasn't the right place for him long-term academically in where he wanted to go to school. So we started hearing about Kyle in the spring, and I really did the best I could to dissuade him from coming, that we were not going to offer him a spot, that he had no support here in the admissions process.

Kyle's a strong student, and he was able to gain acceptance and admission on his own. And while he visited this past spring, and he was looking at several schools, one of which doesn't even have college lacrosse, I continued to say that you're on your own, buddy. And sure enough, I was proven wrong immediately when he chose obviously to come to Charlottesville for four years. And in those first couple tryouts, we saw immediately that this is somebody who has a really good feel for the game.

And he's a defenseman, right?

He's a defenseman, right. He's a defensemen. And so one, it's a state of where we are defensively that we do have to improve our recruiting at that end of the field. But I do like the crew we have now, but we've got to get better. And two, it's a statement of who Kyle is. Kyle's combine numbers, if we are going to throw out his bench press numbers and his squat numbers and is 40 times, you might cut him.

But when you put him on the field and you see his anticipation, his recognition, his communication with the slide schemes, he's got a savviness that belies his youthful 18 years on this planet. He's somebody that we're really going to be able to lean on, and if we had a game tomorrow, would be on the field.

Wow. Your first team here finished 8 and 7, missed the ACC and NCAA tournaments. Of those seven losses, four were by a single goal, the Penn, Syracuse, Notre Dame, and Johns Hopkins games. That's got to be agonizing for a coach, isn't it, to look back on a season like that and look back at games and realize how easily those outcomes could have gone the other way.

Sure. You know, I try not to be too outcome-related in terms of how we assess the program. We can also look back that we did win three one-goal games that we were fortunate--

And sometimes if you take it, you got to--

Yeah, you got to look at it both ways.

Give it away.

We're down by one with a minute to go against Richmond and winning regulation thanks to goals by Cox and Jared Conners and sneaking out of being down 6 to Cornell out in California.

Yeah, you won 19-18, yeah.

And what a dramatic overtime game there. And so we were on both ends of that. But if I think about those four losses, and it was almost consecutive weekends, where every weekend was a one-goal game. And unfortunately, that stretch in March where we lose to Notre Dame in overtime and we lose to Hopkins in overtime. I don't know if I lament it too much.

There's a progress here where we're heading with this program. If anything, I may go back and say what mistakes did I make as a coach, and what didn't we do well as a team on those days. And certainly against Hopkins, we did not play great team defense, and they exposed us there. I think about the Penn game, and I don't think we really showed up ready to play. We were 3 and 0 and maybe feeling pretty good about ourselves and not really focused on the task at hand.

Those are the things that we're trying to learn from as a program. And certainly when you get in those one-goal games, sometimes it's just the composition, the men and the heart in those moments, and who's going to step up and make those plays. And man, we did lose to Hopkins by one, right?

Mm-hmm.

But boy, Ryan Conrad and Zed Williams and a couple of others made some huge plays to get us tied when we were down three with under two minutes left. And so there were some great efforts there. But I'm looking forward to seeing who's going to be that leadership this year, who's going to step up in those moments, because those guys one-goal games are coming at us. And obviously, we've got to find a way to be on the positive side.

You know a lot more about the ACC and how rugged it is than you did going into your first season. Any philosophical changes on your part about how you want to play or the best way to play to succeed in this league?

That's a great question. We certainly came in riding on our horses with this fast-paced game, and we were going to push this ball up and down as quick as possible. We do recognize that some of the key ingredients are certainly going to be the face-off acts and the goal.

The goal.

If we're going to promote games that have 30 to 35 goals scored, and therefore, 35 to 40 face-offs, well, if you're only winning 25% to 35% of the face-offs, you're now losing up to say 15, 16, 17 possessions, relative to if the score is 8 to 7, you're only losing five to six face-off possessions. So if we're going to exaggerate the scoreboard, we've got to be stronger at the face-off acts.

Same thing with the goal. If we're strong in the goal, then sure, let's see 50 shots. If we're not so strong in the goal, maybe we got to limit that to 30 shots. So how we compete early in the spring is going to have a lot to do with can we maintain the pace that we all want to play at that fast, frenzied, frenetic style. But it's really going to be dependent upon the face-off acts.

Virginia lacrosse is not going to slow down. But are we going to be at insanity level 11 on the 1 through 10 dial like we were this year? Or are there going to be games where we have to bring it back to seven or eight, because there is a discrepancy at the face-off acts.

You lost some important players, including Zed Williams and AJ Fish from last year, but you have four of your top six scorers back. What's your sense of the talent level on this team? You mentioned the midfield. You've got Ryan Conrad, Dox Aitken, Matt Moore as a first year.

Yeah, we feel really strong in the midfield. Just looking at those men play, you can see there's athleticism, there's really intense in terms of change of direction, there's heat with the way they shoot as a crew. And then just look at them physically. It's just a big athletic group of midfielders that Dom Starsia was able to provide us, so we're very fortunate there.

Combine them with an attack, two men with great experience. Obviously, Mike D'Amario has been here for three seasons already. And then Michael Kraus in just his first season, what he was able to put up. So we feel like we have a good core of eight or nine offensive players that are very dangerous. The key now is to figure out who's that third attack man. At this point, he's in his first year, Ian Laviano has risen above the rest, though Mikey Herring is still fighting for that time, as well as a couple others, such as Mitch Gordon and Tyler Kellogg.

But Ian Laviano, despite his 5 foot 6, 5 foot 7 stature, he's a great lacrosse player. He's got great hands. His quickness, his thinking, his feel for the game, his hands. He's really dynamic. There's a part of us that would love him to be an invert midfielder, but he rides so hard. He plays this game with a passion that's rarely seen. I've been doing this for 20-plus years. He throws the ball in passing drills faster than anyone else. He catches the ball and gets rid of it faster than anyone else.

He's playing at an intensity level that the rest of us need to adapt to. So having him on the field riding, having-- we just need him on the field, so that's probably why if we had a game tomorrow, he'd be starting on attack.

You mentioned Mike Kraus. He led the team in goals and was second in assists as a freshmen last season. Where can he kind of move his game forward? And have you seen that from him this fall?

Sure.

Because that's one of the better first years a UVA attack man's had.

Exactly. And now it's the-- why do sophomore slumps happen in all sports? Because if you have this fantastic freshman year, now you draw a lot of attention.

Right.

Now you're getting the number 1 guys. Zed Williams is no longer around. And defensive coordinators are watching a lot of film of you, whether you are a quarterback or a point guard, or in this case, a left-handed goal-scoring attack man. So he's going to be facing defenses that are designed to slow him down, if not shut him down. And so we've talked to him about this. Now you've got to take that next step, you know? You can't just be a one or two-trick pony.

Right.

You're being studied extensively on film as compared to many of your teammates. And so working on his off hand, becoming better and stronger with his right hand is going to make him more dynamic. Working on his game, his vision when he's driving, because he tends to be a hard charger. We had the similar with Dylan Molloy. Dylan

Molloy's freshman, sophomore year--

At Brown.

--at Brown. He just wanted to go hard, and he wanted to run through four guys. When we worked on him and started getting him to draw his head up and see the field, then our offense exploded. And so Kraus, he's trying to take that next step. And he recognizes the value in it for not only his own production, but certainly the team's.

Griffin Thompson started about half the games in the cage for you last year. He's back. You also have a highly touted first year, Alex Rode from St. Paul's in Baltimore. How did the goalie battle play out in the fall?

Great competition. One day, it was one of them, and the other day it was the other guy. And so it's a really good competition. And Griffin, the second-year, has admitted it's helping him, because he knows he's got to show up and be ready to compete, because the rookie down at the far end is making some great saves on certain days. So I think it's elevating both of their games, and I'm really excited about that.

So what certainly was a struggle for us in 2017, I'm not going to say it's an area of strength, but it won't be an area of struggle. I think the competition between the two of them, we're going to see the goalie play just get better and better as we move forward. And Griffin, Griffin has really improved his game and his mental outlook. I give Kip Turner so much credit for what he's done with Griffin Thompson. In those seven or eight games that Griffin played last year, invaluable experience, and the confidence he has moving forward. But he's become a better stopper, and he's becoming better with his outlets.

And then again, the competition, because Alex wants to be the starter, and he wants to be out there day 1. So I think it's really exciting to see the two of them compete. There were moments in '17 we were cringing what was going to-- what we were getting in goal. I think it's an area due to those two young men and Kip Turner that it's going to grow into an area that was a weakness into an area that's a strength, eventually.

Fans are always interested in hearing about new faces in a program. We've talked a little bit about Matt Moore in the midfield and Alex in goal, and Kyle as well. What other first-years are likely to have an impact in the spring?

Right, and obviously Ian Laviano, as we mentioned.

Yeah, you mentioned Ian, yep.

Mentioned on the attack. Griff Harris. He's banged up a little bit this fall, so we didn't get to see him at full speed. But he's someone who can get to the goal offensively and make an impression. Long stick middle Will Rock didn't get off to the greatest start. But boy, as the fall came along and he opened his mind to changing the way he does

certain things, how he approaches the ball, how he defends the ball, really, really intrigued to see his development.

And there's an opportunity to play on defense. There's a chance to play. Obviously, if we have a first-year walk-on, he's going to be on the field. Will Rock is squeezing the opportunity. So I've really been happy with Will Rock. I don't think I had the greatest first impression of him, and he's made sure-- and there's one more. Let me mention John Fox, a defensive midfielder, short stick defensive midfielder. First of all, that is a position that we have to play more of them. We recognize with our style of play, how fast we play, that those bodies can get tired.

And so Matt Dziama is clearly demonstrating to us that he's our best defensive midfielder. But we think we have to get four ready in that stable to just roll them out. And first-year John Fox, again, and someone who started a little slow, like Rock did. But he is demonstrating that he's got a good, firm chunky check there. When you dodge him and he gets his hands on you, he can stop you cold. And so he's a guy that we're really looking towards seeing some playing time right away.

The early signing period ended this week, and nine recruits sent their letters of intent into UVA. Haven't put out the official release yet, but you did announce each one on Twitter. How many of these guys committed to Virginia when Dom Starsia was here, and how many did you and your staff kind of add to the class?

Sure. Well, it's an interesting way to answer, because one of them, Payton Cormier, committed to Dom as a 2019 with the anticipation that he was always going to do an extra year, a gap year, a PG year. Well, we decided that when we watched him this summer, sure, the PG year would help, but you really don't need it. You can be that impactful right away.

I know several of the men are Dom's commits in the 2018 class. But six of them, of those nine, were ones that Kip Turner, Sean Kirwan, and I went out and brought him to Charlottesville. So we think it's a well-balanced class. We feel really strong with the goalie that's coming in. We already have two goalies that we talked about here with Griffin and Alex. And now with Patrick Burkinshaw coming, we do think that the future for the next five, six years is going to be very strong in the cage.

We need help with the face-off acts, as you know. It's been a struggle here. Right now we have Luke Brugel, Justin Schwenk, David Smith, Theo Dol, and Sam Offutt fighting for time there. We're bringing in Petey LaSalla from Long Island, Rocky Point, and we hope he can give us some more possessions there. But as a whole, we think this class is strong and balanced. And maybe Payton Cormier was probably the-- there was not a real, true goal scorer in the class, and that was probably another reason to move him from '19 to '18.

It's like we've got some good athletic middies, offensive, defense. We've got some good defensemen here with

some range. We got a face-off goalie, a good feeder, and good feel for the games. Andrew Dixon [INAUDIBLE] a goal-scoring, and they just insert Payton Cormier in there.

You are not a proponent of early recruiting in your sport, and you've adhered to that here. I don't think Virginia has any 2020 commitments at this point.

Correct.

Now that you're a year into this, you seem like you're as confident as you were before that you can wait, and there will be good players and players who can make an impact out there that you can pick up when they're sophomores and juniors and maybe seniors, in some cases.

Sure. And our recruiting legislation did change for men's and women's lacrosse.

Right, so others are following suit, right? They have to.

Yes. But you wonder-- there's always loopholes, but for the most part, I think most division one lacrosse coaches are following the spirit of the legislation as well. What will be interesting, we've got probably another year here where it all sorts itself out. Maybe it won't be until the class of 2021, the current high school freshmen, when they become juniors, September 1, where truly none of them have committed yet. Because this class of 2020s, the sophomores, we have none. But there are some programs that have seven or eight, because they had them before the legislation went into effect.

Now the legislation is completely prohibitive. We're not supposed to have any communication whatsoever. Not even with a club coach or high school coach. I'm not even supposed to tell the high school coach, hey, we really like your guy. We can just say, he's on our list. Very generic statement there. So I do believe in our system. I believe being patient, again, because the academics are so critical here at UVA, we've got to find strong students. Finding that maturity, that emotional maturity, and then seeing who actually develops talent-wise.

So we have zero in 2020. We're OK with that. We're focusing on the '19s now. We have six or seven verbal commitments there that I can't discuss, obviously. So we have about three or four more spots left to go there. But yeah, moving forward, I like our patient policy.

You named your captains last month, Ryan Conrad and Scott Hooper. Scott is a senior. Ryan's only a junior. Is that unusual for you to have a third year as a team captain?

It's not the norm. We did have one recently at Brown, Jack Kelly, who's certainly proved himself both on and off the field as a first team All-American and an incredible leader for us. But Ryan Conrad is not a stretch at all. This

was not Ryan Conrad becoming a captain because there was no one else available in the fourth class to go along with Hooper. This was because Ryan Conrad is a really unique leader, and he seems to be able to get more done in a day than the rest of us.

He's a member of the McIntire Commerce School, which is very difficult to gain entry into. Student athlete honor committees, member of a fraternity, now a captain. It's like, how do you compare yourself to this guy? But yeah, he's-- and I think he's done a decent job so far. It's not easy to be a third year and to be a captain, when you've got older men, some cases two years older, because they're fifth years, that you're supposed to guide and lead. And it's tough, it's difficult enough to be a captain. Now all of a sudden, your own personal concerns may not be the most important thing for the team. You've got to think about others.

The great book here-- and I just, I'll segue back to what we were to respond to but-- *Captain Class* just came out this year in 2017 by author Sam Walker. It talks about the greatest teams in the history of sport. He goes through a very subjective decision how he chooses these 16 teams. But then he studies the captains, and it's amazing to see the characteristics and qualities of these captains. And it's very unlike what you might expect. There are some qualities that make you cringe, but on the field, there was no one better as a captain.

And so I understand the qualities that we're looking for. Both Hooper and Conrad are fantastic young men. Great guys, good leaders. The question is, are they going to be, in this upcoming spring, are they willing to do some of the nitty-gritty stuff, the tough stuff, to get in their teammates' faces, the things that push the team forward as opposed to personal agendas and maybe being the good guy agenda.

Season tickets for men's lacrosse and women's lacrosse at UVA go on sale Monday, November 27. Your home schedule includes games with Syracuse, Hopkins, Richmond, and Duke, and Loyola, which will be the opener. And the men's season ticket also includes admission to the ACC tournament, which will be held at Klockner Stadium. That's a pretty good schedule, isn't it? A pretty good home schedule.

Especially compared to last year. So I apologize for last year's home schedule. I didn't realize the difference between a weekend game versus a weekday game here in Charlottesville. In Providence, it wasn't that much of a dropoff. In Charlottesville, obviously, a lot of people drive hours to come to games. They don't do that on a Tuesday night. They do that on a Saturday. So I apologize for that to the Cavalier faithful.

We're really excited about having these six home games. I think the other home game on a Saturday is Princeton. Putting them back on the schedule. That's a team that we're excited to have back for that traditional rivalry. Yeah, and then with the ACC championships here, we have a lot to do to get better and be part of that, but that's certainly one of our main goals. And So we're excited about all this action that's going to happen here in Charlottesville.

OK. Well, fans who want more information on season tickets can visit virginiasports.com and click on the Tickets tab. I hope you get a little downtime between now and the start of practice, which will be here before you know it. But thanks again for stopping by.

Thanks, Jeff.

There's a full slate of UVA athletic events in town over the next few days, beginning Thursday night with women's basketball at JPJ. Following that will be wrestling, volleyball, squash, men's basketball, and NCAA men's soccer, all in Charlottesville. For details, check virginiasports.com. I'll be back next week ahead a Thanksgiving with another podcast. Until then, thanks for listening.

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