

Welcome to the Virginia Athletics Weekly Podcast, which originates from our studio here in my office at University Hall. I'm Jeff White from virginiasports.com, and joining me this afternoon is one of the elder statesmen of the men's basketball team, Devon Hall. Devon, I remember interviewing you once in the plush lobby of a hotel in Valencia, Spain. I'm sorry this isn't quite that luxurious, but I appreciate your making time for this. How's it going?

I'm good, man. Everything's great.

You span several generations in this basketball program. When you were a freshman, Joe Harris and Akil Mitchell were seniors. When Joe and Akil were freshmen, Marco Anthony and Frankie Badocchi were in the sixth grade. Have you ever tried to calculate how many guys you've played with here?

I haven't. But I just know I'm one of the elder guys on the team now. And yeah, like you said, I was a freshman when all the older guys were here, like Joe and Akil. And so, I mean, just to see those guys-- they come back now.

Like we had a little pool party at Coach Bennett's, and Akil came back and said he only knew me. Well, me and Isaiah is all. It was kind of awkward a little bit for him. I had to introduce him to everybody.

Do you kind of notice your role within the team evolving over time, where you come in your first year and you don't say as much. You just kind of defer to your elders. And all of the sudden you're second and third year, and you've been here longer than a lot of the guys.

Yeah.

And then you get to where you are now.

Yeah. A lot of it. I mean, when you're first coming in, a lot of it is learning. So I mean, you literally start at the bottom of the totem pole. And you just learn from the older guys.

And you know the way to go about things. So there's a lot of learning first. And then, you know, you just take your steps and progress as a leader. And being vocal or just even just leading by example, too.

You received your bachelor's degree in May of 2016, and you walked the lawn that day with your brother Mark, who played football here. What was that experience like for you and Mark and for your family?

It was probably one of the best experiences I've ever had in my life, to be honest with you. Yeah. It was a special moment for my family, because, you know, my brother and I are role models to a lot of younger cousins we have and a lot of friends we have in general. But a lot of guys look up to us. So just to be able to do that was special for

my family, have two kids graduate at the same time and coming from a prestigious university like Virginia.

The list of students who have graduated from UVA in three years is not a long one, because it's difficult to do. You are on that list. Was that a goal for you when you came here out of Cape Henry Collegiate? And at what point did you realize, hey, I can do this?

Well, I just had the opportunity to take some extra classes. So I was a little bit, I guess, excited about taking a few extra classes. And I got a little too ambitious. And then I was looking at my classes, like, I could possibly do this in three years.

So me doing it at first, I mean, first coming in here, I would never have thought I would graduate in three years from UVA, because it's such a tough school. But yeah, like I said, I was able to just take some extra classes. And stuff started rolling. And I had a few tough summers where I took about-- I took six classes in the summer, which is-- we usually only take two.

Right.

And then I took 18 credits in a semester. We usually only take 12.

So that's a lot with basketball, isn't it?

Yeah. For sure.

I mean, it'd be a lot if you didn't have basketball.

It was so much to manage at times, where I would just like come home from practice and I'd just be studying and fall asleep. You know what I mean? So I then get up, have to do class, practice, and then the same thing, routine, over and over again. But once I started to get the hang of it, it was like second nature.

You got your bachelor's in media studies, right? What kind of piqued your interest about that major?

When I first got there, I had this professor named William Woodall. Actually, in my undergrad, he was my advisor. And I got real close to him, because he taught this class called American Gangster Films.

And my major doesn't necessarily have to do exactly with film in general. And it just piqued my interest, because he would literally dissect the entire film. But just media in general, like I'm fascinated by the stuff you do. Even [INAUDIBLE], stuff like that.

Your brother left the university with two degrees, and you're going to do the same in the spring. Tell us about the master's program you're in.

So, I'm in the Curry School Master's Program, higher education, probably in the athletics administration track, or whatever. There's three. There's student affairs, athletic administration, and then there's administration just by itself, or whatever.

But yeah. My brother was in it. He really liked it. So it was probably the best situation for me.

Is that something you could see yourself doing when basketball is over, whenever you stop playing?

For sure. I mean, you can range from anywhere from coaching to teaching. And you know, being a compliance person or--

It's not uncommon in college basketball today for players to transfer, especially if they have eligibility left after they've graduated.

Yeah.

Did that ever cross your mind at any point?

Transferring from here?

Yeah.

This is my home, man. It's just too much for me to ever even think about something like that, where I've created so many memories and I've grown as a man here. So there's no need for me to leave home. That's like leaving home at the age of 16, you know?

I mean, you're not ready to go into the real world. You know what I mean? This is where I've created memories here. And this is a special place to me and my family.

You came in with London Perrantes in 2013. You two lived together for four years. Is it strange being in Charlottesville now and not seeing him every day? Not seeing him at JVJ, not seeing him at home?

For sure. It was kind of weird. We were super tight. He was my best friend here, basically like a brother. We argued and we fussed and fought like brothers.

But we had some great times here and created some great memories. It was kind of awkward, like you said, not seeing him every single day. And you know, even going to classes. Most of the time, well, for two years, we kind of took the same classes. So we saw each other every single day, every moment.

He signed his deal with the Spurs I think last month, or recently. Have you talked to him a lot since then? I know--

Yeah.

--that's an exciting opportunity for him.

Absolutely, man. Super proud of his opportunity and his work ethic. So that's just super exciting to hear. And I've talked to him a few times, FaceTime, called and text and stuff. So I mean, he's one of my best friends. So I'm going to talk to him all the time regardless

You were one of three players on the team to start all 34 games last season. You averaged 8.4, 0.4, 0.4 rebounds. You were third on the team in assists.

What are your kind of realistic expectations for yourself this year? I think you've kind of taken a jump, kind of a significant jump up, statistically every year. Do you have another jump like that in you, do you think?

For sure. I think it's just a matter of you learn and you step into different roles each and every year that you're a part of a team. I think that this year, I'll be stepping into a bigger role. It's just a matter of staying aggressive and doing the little things that I've always done, and just continue to stay consistent in certain areas. And just be the player that I know I can be.

Every team has to forge its own identity. Do you have a good read on this team yet, or do you have to wait kind of until the games start--

Well--

--till you know.

Well, you and I both know Coach Bennett. So yeah. Our identity will be on the defensive end for sure. We have a good young team, and different type of team, too. We've got some guys who can really score the ball, some guys who can get up and down the floor. So this team will be a little bit different, in my opinion.

It seems to me, from what I've looked at, this team probably has more defensive questions now than offensive at this stage. I mean, there are guys like you've mentioned who've shown they can do some things offensively.

For sure. Yeah. I think that we just have to forge our identity on the defensive end. And it's really a mindset. I mean, we have older guys like myself, Isaiah, and Jack, who've played a lot of games in this program. So we kind of know exactly what to expect from these good teams that we're playing in the ACC. But I don't think other guys really know coming in.

The most experienced players on the roster are you and Isaiah Wilkins. From what I saw this summer, I thought Zay had a particularly good summer.

For sure.

What have you seen from him? It seemed like, I mean, he's always been a constant in the program, kind of a rock. But it seemed like he was more assertive and took on an even bigger role at both ends of the court.

He's so special, man, to our team. He does the smallest things that make the biggest--

Yeah. The dirty work.

Yeah, that makes a big difference. And he plays so hard. But I think this summer that he just took on a role of just trying to be more aggressive inside the paint. And we've been working a lot of jump stop stuff and pivot.

So he was able to find his groove in that, pivot here, pivot there, and make a lot of shots. He was just being more aggressive off the bounce and score. I think he's really good. I like Isaiah.

There was a practice this summer-- I'm not going to name any names-- but one of your teammates had been late to something he was supposed to be on time for. And I think the players kind of instituted, you know, a punishment for him that involved some running.

Running. Uh-huh.

That accountability, how important is that to this program?

I think that when you're trying to forge identities, you have to start with the small things first. And accountability is one of the biggest things that can either help or hurt a team. So, if we're not going to hold guys accountable for small things like being late to-- even if, I think in that instance it was late to pick up or not communicating right about the time for pick up, or something like that. If you're not going to communicate, if we're not going to hold each other accountable, then how are we going to be successful on the court?

You came in in 2013. You ended up redshirting that first year. At the time, you know, redshirting wasn't actually as common in the program as it now.

And now it's kind of one of the trademarks of the program. There's been Jack and Mamadi and Jay and DeAndre. Have the coaches had you talk to these players or had them come to you to kind of get your feedback on it and tell them how it worked out for you?

Yeah, for sure. I've talked to every last one of them. And it's tough to deal with when you're coming from high

school where you're pretty much the guy wherever you played. And it's a humbling experience that you just have to take a step back and look at the long term aspect of things.

And, you know, there's certain things you don't want to hear. You don't want to hear you're not going to play for a year. You know what I mean?

Yeah.

And it takes a hit on your pride. But you've got to set aside and realize that there's a bigger outlook on things. And there is room for you in the future to be more successful. But just taking this year to get better and grow and become a better player and a person, or learning. It just really will help you change your game.

Yeah. I don't know, when you come in that first year, how much people are thinking about long term academic goals, too. But it's allowed you to get-- I mean, you will leave here with two degrees.

Correct.

Other players will have done that as well.

Uh-huh. Absolutely.

Hard core UVA fans have-- when they scour the internet for YouTube or Virginia Sports TV-- they've seen bits and pieces of Jay Huff and DeAndre Hunter.

Yeah.

You know, no one had seen them play a game yet at JPJ really. You see those guys in the gym every day. What do you think about them after sitting out--

Two special players.

--one year?

Two special players. DeAndre is really, really talented, super. He's tall. He's really long. I think he's got a 7'3" wingspan. He's going to play multiple positions for us, can really defend too.

So he's going to be really, really good for us. He's got to stay aggressive. And we want him to stay aggressive, because we can be successful like that with him being aggressive on the floor. And he's really talented.

Jay Huff, really athletic. Big. I mean, we're going to have some real options with him on the court. He can shoot a

three, blocking shots. Man, he's special too.

There are three newcomers on this team. The first two years, Frankie and Marco, and Nigel Johnson, who's a graduate transfer from Rutgers. You and Nigel go back a long ways, don't you?

Yeah. Yeah.

When did you first meet him?

I can't be exact. I may have been 12? 12 or 13. We played on the same AE team back in Virginia Beach. He's always been from Ashburn.

That's a haul for him--

Man.

--to go from that part of Northern Virginia to Tidewater.

Yeah. We were one of the best teams around the area, or whatever. And he was a good piece for us when we were younger. One thing-- I think I talked to you about this before-- good thing I remember about him, he always had big hands and huge feet. I remember he's been wearing size 13s since about age 13. But yeah. Me and Nigel go way back, so it was good to get him on board.

He adds an element that I'm not sure there was already in the back court with his quickness. What do you think he can bring to the team?

Yeah. Super quick. Super, super quick. Really hard to stay in front, keep him in front. But yeah. On the offensive end, if he gets the rebound, he's able to push that thing up the floor and get in the lane.

He's also been able to-- watch him in practice-- he's able to get in the lane, and just with his bounce more, rather than using screens. He's special in that way, and then defensively too. He can probably pick up most of the guards full court and slide with them.

I think we talked about it earlier, but how much of a culture shock is it for a guy? I mean, it's tough enough for a first year guy coming in here to learn the defense and kind of appreciate the importance placed on defense here. But if you're a guy who's played four years of college basketball, like he has, and then you come in here and get thrown in there.

Yeah.

I mean, it takes a little while, doesn't it?

Yeah. It does. This is not a typical, you know, program you think you're coming into, I guess. And when you have to figure out how tough this is and exactly what to do on the defensive end, it may be even more challenging. But I think the biggest part is just staying continuous. And that's the biggest thing that I think you can take from--

That's one of Coach Bennett's, like, pet phrases.

Yeah.

Stay continuous. For laymen out there, what does it mean to stay continuous on the court?

So I guess we'll put it in basketball terms, is you're playing on defense and a shot goes up. Just a matter of blocking your man out and continuing to go get the rebound. But also after you go get the rebound, securing the ball and making sure nobody is slapping it from you. So like, just the small things that go into everything.

You get an opportunity as a student athlete here to get involved in the community and do community service. I know the team has done Habitat for Humanity. Last weekend at a local church you had a shoe and clothing drive for hurricane relief efforts. What's that been like over your four plus years now to be able to do things like that?

I think it's special, because we have so-called big names around this area and around the community. So whenever we're able to reach out into the community or step out and give or provide clothes for people in hurricane relief, I think that that's huge for us. Because it's bigger than basketball, to be honest with you.

Most, if not all, of the basketball players were out of town. I think maybe Jack was here last month when that alt-right rally took place in Charlottesville and the violence occurred. Where were you during that? And what was that like watching on TV?

It's frustrating. It's frustrating to see stuff like that. I was home in Virginia Beach, so I actually turned my TV on and it was on CNN. So, I mean, that stuff, it hits you.

It hits you hard when it's in other places. But when that stuff happens where you go to school and where you have created memories and special things with special people-- and I've spent four years of my life here-- it touches your heart in a bad way. And it's frustrating to be able to have to see that now.

Is that a topic-- you know, there's been a lot of discussion about the effect of that on the community and how it could bring different groups together-- you've seen that on grounds at all?

Yeah. I've seen-- actually, a few of us, we went to-- there's a Black Student Alliance-- they had a march not too

long ago. And they just pretty much gave out a few demands to the President, Theresa Sullivan. And it's just basically bringing people together and just trying to not incite violence or anything like that, but just bring people together just to try to get on the same page.

Yeah. Well, listen. I appreciate your coming over. It's always good to talk to you. Good luck this season. We'll see you at JPJ.

Absolutely, man.

The schedule for UVA athletic events in Charlottesville is not nearly as heavy this weekend as it was a week ago. But there's field hockey on Friday and Sunday and football here on Saturday. For schedules and information on all our teams, check viriniasports.com. I'll be back next week with another podcast. Until then, thanks for listening.