

Atlantic Coast Conference

Operation Basketball

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Tony Bennett

Virginia Cavaliers



THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Virginia coach Tony Bennett.

Q. To have the transfers going out of the program as well as the freshmen coming in, can you speak on the dynamic of the team this year and if it feels drastically different from maybe what you're used to at Virginia?

COACH BENNETT: Good question. It is. There's a newness to this team and an uncertainty with that. Short term, to lose the two, Marial and Darius were going into their last year, had a lot of college experience, had been in our system. You never want to see that.

And we lost a lot of quality play and good experience. Short term, that may affect us. I don't know for sure. But I think what it's going to do is allow us to -- there won't be as difficult playing time.

Guys are going to get thrown into the fire -- the DeAndre Hunters, the Ty Jeromes, and Kyle Guys, the returners. And there's going to be opportunity to play. I think that's going to be good for the long term. But there's an uncertainty and newness to this team that I haven't had in a number of years.

I think there's some excitement. The two redshirt players, Jay Huff and DeAndre Hunter, I think will have to continue to evolve. But I'm used to having double digit returning scorers, guys who are established.

Now we have that in leadership and guys that have been crucial in our winning in Isaiah and Devon and Jack Salt. But the rest are either going into their second or first year in our program which will be interesting. And again they've been working hard. So we'll find out.

Q. It's very clear that your team, since media day and then the breakout sessions earlier, there's a lot of personality on this team and a lot of humor, not necessarily on the court. They made it very clear when they're in practice it was serious business. But maybe off the court. And that never really has shown through in the last nine years. These guys, they're very friendly with each other, very loose. And do you pick up on that vibe?

COACH BENNETT: Yeah, it's a close group. I think we've had great unity on our team. But I think you gotta work like crazy on the court. I think you have to have fun on the court. But they seem to enjoy the process.

And Isaiah and Devon are great that way. I've really enjoyed this preseason with these guys, my time with them. I really enjoy all my teams. But this group has -- I think they know there is a proving -- we're going to have to earn it and prove it, like we've had to every year, but there's more -- maybe they're not as much is expected, and I think they're eager to try to show they can do some things.

But they seem to really -- it is probably feels like one of the closer teams I've had at this point. Now what will test that is when you get into the season and maybe playing time, though a lot of people will be playing, playing time is maybe not quite what they think or opportunities. You go through some difficult situations.

That always tests that bond. But we really have strong leadership at the top. And they do love life. And I've watched them do things behind the scenes that speak to what they're about, just in the community, that no one knows, no cameras are there, and they're doing things that have been really powerful.

So there's a good moral fiber on this team. We've been fortunate that way. But they're really going above and beyond even what some other teams have to make a difference in our community. And I love that about them.

Q. Without your two top scorers back from last season, where do you kind of foresee the offensive production coming from this season?

COACH BENNETT: I think it will have to be evenly distributed. Kyle Guy will be an important player. We had just a blue/white scrimmage but he showed some nice things.

We're going to have to try to figure out ways to get a little more interior scoring. I think that was a weakness last year. We did not go inside and whether it's guards getting in there at times or the bigs, just all those areas, I think evenly distributed. Some of guys that's where the uncertainty comes in.

I think everybody's going to have to step it up a little bit, find some different ways. And we've worked hard to make little adjustments, maybe it will be noticeable. Maybe it won't.

But also we're going to have to be defensively, because without that we've got no chance. But I hope we'll find -- we have some skill, some guys who can stretch it and shoot it, do different things. So we'll rely on that. So I'm hoping that it will be a little more balanced this year than perhaps in the past.

Q. How would you describe or evaluate Kyle's freshman year and what do you see as potential differences this year?

COACH BENNETT: Yeah, I think whenever you come in your first year, he was pretty slight coming in. And he's still -- he's not a hulk or anything like that but he put on some quality strength and weight. I think that will help him.

He'll know the physicality, the duration, what to expect. He showed -- Ty, Mamadi and Kyle, all three of those guys, in their first year, as the year progressed I thought they had nice showings and valuable experience that will bode well for them this year.

We've got to get Ty healthy. He's in a boot right now. An important part of it. But Kyle has that ability as he showed in big games, Carolina, ACC Tournament, hitting big shots, Florida State, where he can get it going. And whenever you have a weapon like that, certainly you want to use that.

I hope he'll be more assertive and aggressive this year with smarts. Doesn't mean you just are wild and crazy, but that's going to be the challenge for him to step that up with obviously more know-how and understanding and experience from last year.

Q. You talk about the fiber of your student-athletes. As you're entering into a year in which you're really not sure what to expect, what's the fiber of you telling you about your emotions, your feelings, how do you pack them, how do you unpack them, how do you approach it? The idea this might be a learning year for you your own feelings and emotions because you're not quite sure what to expect with this team, if you've had teams in the past you can expect things for, your emotion is pretty well much what you've known it to be.

COACH BENNETT: I think they have to know that I'm for them. I think that's important. Some teams you can drive. I push hard in practice. Sometimes you see my demeanor on the sideline and I try to be fairly positive and calm. But in practice we challenge. And we push

real hard and sometimes I can get a little pessimistic because I know defense is not natural, the way we've got to push it and we really go over the fine tooth comb the things I want.

But I have to have sound judgment and knowing these guys know I am for them. And there's got to be some patience and perspective with the uncertainty of their youth and the newness. But I think that's really important. And I've got to be mindful of that. I've got a great staff in that regard. And I think that the players have to know that.

We've done some different things this year, team bonding, however you want to say it, that I hope will show some fruit in that regard. But that part of it, that emotion and the feelings and the sense you get is important.

Q. You spoke on the team having some fun together. Isaiah Wilkins today said Nigel Johnson, Kyle Guy, DeAndre Hunter, Ty Jerome and Devon Hall are his top five comedians in no specific order. Do you have top five yourself or would you concur that's a fair list?

COACH BENNETT: Is it that I'm laughing at them or with them. Near them. Mamadi can be funny. They're light-hearted. I like that. I really do.

I like that they're not so gripping, so tight that they're white-knuckling everything. They do seem -- I think you need that. There's so much expected of these young men. There's a lot of pressure. They get praised. They get cut down. And I think if they can have a proper perspective, if us as coaches can show them that and encourage that, I think that's a healthy way to grow and live through life. It really is.

It's a fun-loving group that way for sure. And I'm sure they make fun of me behind my back more than I even care to know, but it's all part of being a good team and having fun with it.

Q. Do you have to have a piece of hardware to say we had a successful season?

COACH BENNETT: Define hardware. I mean, I think, success, we've had some really great years and we've been fortunate in that way. Your goal always is to have your team reach close to its full potential. Of course you want to win. We'll be evaluated and judged by everyone.

But you want to win. I know that. But it's how you go about it, the process, that's always going to matter. And I think there's the on-the-court success is one way and there's, of course, the off-court. And I think they're both equally important. And I'm judged by more of the

on-court. I get it.

And I'll be evaluated. But we know what we're capable of, what we're pushing for, and we're always going to be disappointed if we can't attain some of those goals that are important.

So hardware is that. The national championship, conference championship. All those things, the NCAA Tournament. It's where you're at, what your perspective on it.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.