

## Stat of the week

Senior distance runner Ashley Brown won the 1,000-meter run at the Darius Dixon Invitational at Liberty University on Saturday.

# A COACHING BREEDING GROUND: coaching staff infused with Randolph-Macon ties

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Jamal Brunt sat in the Randolph-Macon basketball office stuffing envelope after envelope, packing recruiting letters and other written materials the athletic department wanted sent out.

Although it wasn't the most glamorous task, Brunt did the job as a part of his work study his junior year. He was in the office more often, and he began talking with and watching assistant coach Miles Wilson, absorbing information about the other side of the team: coaching.

Brunt's senior year rolled around, and he began thinking about what he was going to do after basketball. At first, he didn't know. Then, he thought he was going to join the staff as a volunteer assistant, coaching part-time.

"After he graduated, he thought he was just going to go back to Baltimore and get a job," coach Mike Rhoades said. "I said, 'I think you're going to be a heck of a coach.'"

Rhoades recruited Brunt as a part of his first recruiting class at the helm of the Yellow Jackets.

Wilson moved on to The Citadel, and Rhoades knew who to ask to fill the vacant spot on his coaching staff.

"Before I graduated, coach [Rhoades] told me that he was going to hire me," Brunt said. "The rest is history."

Brunt and Rhoades are just two of the four coaches on the VCU men's basketball coaching staff who coached in Ashland — assistant coach J.D. Byers and Director of Operations Jimmy Martelli also made stops at Randolph-Macon.

## FIRST-YEAR HEAD COACH

Randolph-Macon is a small liberal arts college about 20 miles north of Richmond with an enrollment of 1,543 undergraduate students. Its basketball program has a rich history and tradition of winning, making 14 NCAA tournaments and a Division III Final Four appearance.

In 1996, the small D-III school hired a young Rhoades right out of college as an assistant. Three years later, he was named head coach at 25 years old.

"It was a great experience for me," Rhoades said. "And then getting the job at 25 at the time was a huge surprise, but what an awesome opportunity. I made a lot of mistakes, but boy we had a lot of fun doing it."

Rhoades said he put a lot of pressure on himself in his first head coaching job, and that hasn't changed throughout his career. He learned to deal with the pressure through trial and error while coaching the Yellow Jackets.

"You want to win so bad. You don't want to let your players down, you don't want to let the people around you that are supporting you down," Rhoades said. "So, every day was so darn important to me, but it was awesome because I learned so much."

The Mahanoy City, Pennsylvania, native said he learned patience and how to motivate his players in his early years at Randolph-Macon.

"Probably the biggest thing to me is finding different things to motivate and reach your players," Rhoades said. "At Randolph-Macon, that was really important to

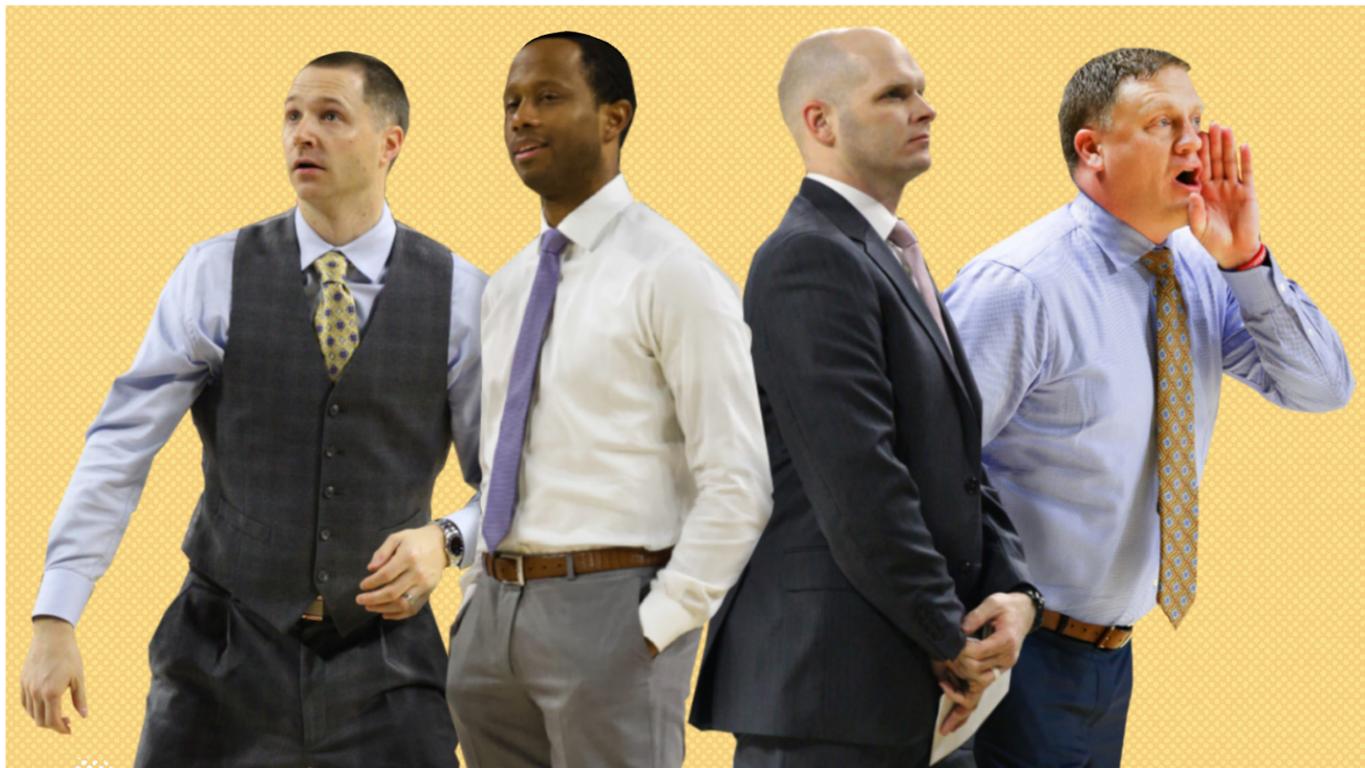


Illustration by Karly Andersen

me. I wanted to find ways to motivate each guy, and we still do that today."

In his 10 years leading the Yellow Jackets, Rhoades posted a 197-76 record, making four NCAA tournaments and two D-III Sweet 16 appearances.

## FROM PLAYING TO COACHING

Brunt starred on the court at Randolph-Macon, starting all four years as a point guard for Rhoades. The Yellow Jackets made both Sweet 16 appearances with Brunt at the point and were the No. 1 team in the country during the 2002-03 season.

When he accepted the coaching job from Rhoades, Brunt was coaching players who were his teammates the year before. He said the transition from player to coach was easier than expected because he was a captain for three years and was a leader on the team.

"I had to create a separation there — no more hanging out off the court and stuff like that," Brunt said. "When I did make the adjustment to being a coach and instructing those guys, it wasn't as foreign to them."

Brunt coached alongside Rhoades for the first two years of his career, and he noticed quickly how detail oriented Rhoades was. Brunt said Rhoades expected his players to pay close attention to detail and expected the same from his assistants.

"The thing about Randolph-Macon, and even to this day, everything is done with such a high-level attention to detail," Brunt said. "I had worked so hard, and the attention to detail was so high, that when I made the transition to Division I, it was easy for me."

Detail-oriented tendencies weren't Rhoades' only ask of his assistants; he needed them to be competitive, too.

"He was always such a competitive leader, and you want that in your assistants too," Rhoades said of Brunt. "When they go to do the scouting report, it's so competitive and personal to them."

Brunt left Randolph-Macon to join Richmond's coaching staff as the director of operations for two years before becoming an assistant. After a stop at Miami, Brunt reunited with Rhoades on Broad Street last year.

He said returning to Rhoades' coaching staff was a good fit because of the experience they gained as coaches together. Brunt said it was also different from their days at Randolph-Macon because now he's married with three children; both have grown and matured.

"I think that's what made both of us better, and I think that's why he wanted me to come back," Brunt said. "That's why I was excited to come back, because I think I knew I could bring value, and he saw the value I could bring."

## 'IT REINFORCED ALL THE REASONS WHY I WANTED TO COACH'

A former point guard from Lebanon Valley College, just like Rhoades, Byers coached in Ashland for three years and two with Rhoades. He said coaching the Yellow Jackets solidified his reasons for pursuing coaching.

"It gave me a good idea of how a big-time program should be run. They did everything first-class," Byers said. "The experience brought to light what I wanted to do. It reinforced all the reasons why I wanted to coach."

With Byers as an assistant, the Yellow Jackets won 66 games in his three years, including a trip to the Division III Final Four in 2010.

Byers said Randolph-Macon was the biggest game of the season for the opposing teams, something he has experienced while coaching at VCU.

"As people say all the time, it's all relative. It's tough for our guys every single night. It doesn't matter who we're playing or where we're going," Byers said. "I use things that I learned at Randolph-Macon every single day here, and I will the rest of my coaching career."

Byers rejoined Rhoades at Rice after stops at St. Francis (Pa.) and Radford, making the move to VCU in 2017.

## A JACK OF ALL TRADES

As director of operations, Martelli is a self-described Main Street of the basketball staff. Anything related to the team has the potential to come across his desk before he

passes some tasks on to the next person.

"From travel to budget to academics to anything under the sun, there's a lot of things that need to happen for a successful program to continue moving forward, and a lot of those things hit my desk," Martelli said. "I'm kind of directing what's going on and making sure it gets to the right places."

Martelli was an assistant coach under Rhoades at Randolph-Macon in 2006, and he said that experience has helped him with his current position at VCU.

"The experience was invaluable just from a job duty standpoint," Martelli said. "From managerial duties, to administrative duties, to the business side of things. So just having a holistic view of a successful program and how it ran and all the details that went into it was immensely beneficial for me."

After his one-year stint at Randolph-Macon, Martelli was an assistant at Robert Morris for three years and at Rutgers for another three. He returned to college basketball for the first time in four years at VCU when Rhoades was named coach in 2017.

## JUST LIKE FAMILY

When Rhoades left Randolph-Macon to become an assistant at VCU in 2010, part of him stayed with his coaching staff in Ashland. He was always in touch with Byers, talking about recruiting and basketball as a whole. Byers said it helped him to have a mentor like Rhoades.

When Rhoades was starting off as head coach in the late '90s, it was just him and his wife, Jody, at home. He wanted his assistant coaches to be like family. Rhoades surrounded himself with coaches he trusts in Richmond, calling the selection process a "no-brainer."

"We wanted coaches that we enjoyed being around, and we wanted coaches that were going to work so hard for us like we were for them," Rhoades said. "What happened was we found some really good young ones that have turned into great assistants."