

# *UMW teams eager to shake off rust, return to court*

**W**HENEVER Riley Welch tuned in to a college basketball broadcast last winter, the enjoyment of watching the game he loves was tempered by wistful nostalgia.

Welch attends the University of Mary

## **POINT AFTER**

Steve DeShazo



Washington. The Eagles, like many NCAA Division III schools, canceled the 2020–21 winter sports season due to the

coronavirus pandemic. That also happened to be Welch's senior year.

"It was kind of like the FOMO feeling—staying at home when all your friends are going out," Welch said this week. "You feel like you're missing out on the party. It was fun to watch col-

lege basketball, but it makes you miss the game when you can't be part of it."

To its credit—something that can't often be said—the NCAA felt the athletes' pain and bestowed on them an extra year of eligibility. Welch,

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a Springfield native who graduated from UMW in the spring, decided to use it, enrolling in a graduate program.

The chance to play one final season “was a big part of my decision,” Welch said. “I kind of knew I would go the grad school route, anyway. But having missed last year, I really wanted to have a final season of basketball, and I wanted to do it with this group and with the coaching staff here.”

It begins Saturday night when the Eagle men play their first game in 617 days, facing Mount Aloysius (Pa.) in the Penn State–Harrisburg Tipoff Tournament. Unlike most court dates, this one is highly anticipated.

UMW’s Marcus Kahn has spent two decades as a college coach and knows that early-season games are rarely aesthetically pleasing. How much more rust will 20 months between



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## After not playing last spring, UMW’s Riley Welch (12) is happy to return to the Eagles.

contests require shaking off?

“I have no idea what to expect,” Kahn said with a laugh. “I just know the guys are excited and will play hard. But it’s not going to be pretty basketball, I wouldn’t think.”

UMW’s women open their season at home on Monday night against Lynchburg. All spectators at UMW home game this season will be required to wear masks and show proof of vaccination or evidence of



Kahn

a recent negative PCR COVID test or negative antigen test.

In Kahn’s six seasons in charge, UMW’s men have played an up-tempo style that requires a high level of fitness. Therefore, much of the Eagles’ preseason workouts centered on conditioning. It wasn’t quite like “Hoosiers,” when Gene Hackman’s character, Norman Dale, put his high school charges through boot camp without taking a shot, but cardiovascular training was a priority.

“We talked a lot about that, telling them that they had to come back in better shape than they’d been in their lives, because we don’t have a lot of time,” Kahn said. “I think our guys did a good job. ... but I think the soreness from two-a-days felt a lot worse.”

“The easy part has been getting the energy level up in practice. The guys have been so

excited. The challenge has been controlling the pace and trying not to do too much too early from a coaching standpoint, not getting ahead of ourselves, because we’re all so anxious to get back to it. Every year, seniors try to force it a little bit, and it’s even more so this year.”

Fortunately for Kahn, he has a relatively experienced team that was happy to go the extra mile.

“We have a group of hard-working guys who have taken it personally to do a little extra,” Welch said. “On days when we don’t have as much team stuff, we’ll do a sprint workout or go for a run. The skill was always there, but until you’re back full-time, you’re not in the shape you need to be in.”

UMW’s teams were limited to indoor masked workouts in groups of four last winter. In the spring, they were allowed two weeks of masked team practice.

Said Kahn: “We used that time to get ready. We said, ‘let’s pretend we’re a college football team, and this is spring

ball,’ knowing what this year’s schedule would be like.”

The ball is still round and the basket is still 10 feet above the court, which measures the standard 94 feet. But reacquainting themselves with the routine may be the Eagles’ biggest challenge.

“I’ve got to get myself back in coaching shape, getting used to riding a bus for three hours,” Kahn said.

Giving players an extra year of eligibility may complicate future roster decisions, although roughly half of UMW’s men may be playing their final seasons. That’s a problem that can wait, though. For now, getting back on the court is enticement enough.

“It’s been exciting,” Kahn said. “The easy part has been getting the energy level up in practice. The guys are so excited. The challenge is not getting ahead of ourselves. We’re all so anxious to get back to it.”

# Oliver was 'merciless' on field, a 'teddy bear' off it

Family didn't trump football in the Oliver household—at least not on Friday nights.

Matt Oliver learned that lesson painfully in the 1990s, when he was Orange High School's starting quarterback. The Hornets were facing Chancellor, where his father Bob was then the Chargers' defensive coordinator, and Matt knew better than to expect literal kid-glove treatment.

"I believe I had No. 40 and 48 imprinted on both sides of my jersey," he said with a laugh on Tuesday. "... He blitzed me on every single down, and I would have expected nothing less. That was a week of no talking before the game, and probably for two weeks after."

Father and son eventually made up. But that story pretty well captures Oliver, who died at age 65 after suffering a massive heart attack last Saturday: relentless on the field, and according to his son, "a teddy bear" off it.

"The first things that come to mind are toughness and intensity," Courtland coach J.C. Hall said.

Tough enough to survive being struck by lightning twice and to coach a game while being besieged by kidney stones, Oliver eventually became Chancellor's head coach for 19 seasons before heart issues forced him to retire after the 2016 season.

He also coached baseball and has the unique claim of guiding two future NFL players (offensive lineman Darnell Alford and current Carolina Panthers defensive lineman Yetur Gross-Matos) and two players chosen in the first 40 picks of the Major League Baseball draft (Matt Halloran and Chris Stowe). He's part of Chancellor's first hall of fame class.

Still, football was his passion. He's the

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# DESHAZO

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Chargers' winningest head coach (116–88, including a 2008 state semifinal appearance). And the former undersized linebacker from Division III Emory & Henry passed on that intensity to his charges (and his Chargers).

"I challenge anyone to convince me there's a better defensive coordinator in the state of Virginia," said Tony DeMarco, who coached with and under Oliver at Chancellor and later faced him as Riverbend's head coach. "He would stop you from running the football, and if you couldn't figure out how to beat him some other way, you were done."

Courtland's Hall faced Oliver annually for 15 seasons when the county rivals met. The Cougars' Wing-T offense—which Hall ran as a player and now coaches—generally gave opponents fits with its misdirection, but Oliver seemed to have a personal Rosetta Stone.

"I would stay up way more hours the week of the Chancellor game than for anybody else," Hall said, "making sure that from an execution standpoint, everything was exactly right—and even trying to throw in a wrinkle to fool him."

But in the off-season, Hall and Oliver would meet as friends. Oliver reminded Hall of his mentor, hall of fame coach

Ken Brown, despite their differing personalities.

"When we sat down and talked, he taught me more, not only about his defense, but about the Wing-T," said Hall, who will serve as a pallbearer at Oliver's funeral on Saturday. "He gave me a lot more answers that I thought existed."

DeMarco said Oliver demanded the most from his players and joked that when they faced Orange, "They took out [their aggression] on his son. I think they sacked him eight times. [Oliver] was merciless."

"He pushed them hard, and they complained about it," DeMarco said. "But when you get a little older, you realize, 'He pushed me to make me good.'"

One of those players is Jason Brown, who quarterbacked Oliver's most talented team in 2016—a squad that included Gross-Matos and receiver E.J. Jenkins, who recently transferred along with Brown to the University of South Carolina after two seasons at St. Francis (Pa.).

"He always had your best interest in mind, on and off the field," Brown said of Oliver. "I could talk to him about anything. After he was done teaching, I would go into his office and talk to him just about life. He was always there for us."

"He just wanted to win. He was very passionate about what he did."

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## POINT AFTER

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# *Lord, I wasn't born a gambling man*

**S**moking isn't a crime, but it's demonstrably bad for your health. The same could be said for sports gambling, which is now legal in Virginia as of last week and, just like cigarettes, can raise your blood pressure—and perhaps deplete your bank account.

This isn't a sermon, just a bit of friendly advice that you can take or leave. Just remember that famous old saying about casinos: They don't build themselves.

So if you want to gamble—if it enhances your enjoyment of games, fights and races—have at it. Just remember to limit your investment to what you can afford to lose.

Just in time for Sunday's Super Bowl, FanDuel, DraftKings, BetMGM, and BetRivers sportsbooks are up and running in the commonwealth. Users cannot bet on in-state college games (for logical reasons), but most other contests are fair game.

For the Super Bowl, among hundreds of other options, you can bet on who wins the game or the coin toss; the order of commercials shown; and whether groundbreaking female official Sarah Thomas wears her hair in a pony tail or under her cap. No lie: There's even a bet as to which head coach's nostrils will be visible first under his mask.

No, we don't have a gambling problem.

With demand rising, pro leagues finally on board and pandemic-related budget shortfalls everywhere, it's not surprising that Virginia lawmakers finally approved sports gambling last month. Jess Feil, senior director of government relations at the American Gaming

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Association, told Washingtonian magazine that Americans wagered \$21 billion on sports in 2020, a 62 percent increase over 2019. Fans stuck at home, she said, are “using sports betting as a way to engage with sports.”

She’s right. And I have plenty of friends who wouldn’t bother to watch a game if they didn’t have a financial interest. They don’t mind losing a little cash if they enjoyed doing it.

I’m exactly the opposite.

Maybe it’s 35 years in a job that requires professional objectivity, but I have little to no interest in gambling. I don’t play the lottery or fantasy sports; I even stopped filling out an NCAA tournament bracket several years ago because, in an odd twist, I enjoy watching the games more if I *don’t* really care who wins.

How far do I take it? When I’m covering a game at any level, I actively try not to wear so much as socks that match the color of either team’s uniform, just so no one can accuse me of playing favorites. (Trust me, I’ve gotten nasty letters and emails in three and a half decades in this job.) My closet is full of khakis and charcoal sweaters.

I like to think I know a thing or two about sports. You might think that If I were any good at my job—insert your own joke here—I would embrace sports gambling in the way an inside trader flocks to the stock market.

But have you read this column over the years?

Sure, I get my share of predictions right from time to time and show a glimmer of insight. But in print, I forecast Duke to beat UNLV in the 1990 NCAA championship game. (Final: Rebels, 103—73). I ventured a guess that the Colorado Rockies would conquer Boston in the 2007 World Series, which ended in a four-game Red Sox sweep.

And I repeatedly picked against Michael Jordan and Tom Brady in championship games, including the Super Bowl two short years ago.

That’s why I’m not a betting man.

You can be one if you’d like. A select few people profit off gambling. But since I don’t have a “Rain Man”-like savant brother—or a consistent track record—I always figured I’d get ahead in life through hard work, my male-model good looks and my sense of humor. Or marrying into money.

Hmm, maybe just one quick peek at FanDuel.

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