

# Inside a UVA basketball huddle: Virginia's Tony Bennett has a unique approach to in-game timeouts

Dick Bennett didn't waste any time.

When he was coaching basketball at Wisconsin, and later Washington State, and there was a timeout, the fiery Bennett headed straight for his players, armed with instructions and corrections.

Sometimes, his son Tony, an assistant in those days, would try to intervene.

"I'd try to, like, catch him, when he was hot, before he'd make a beeline to the huddle," said Tony Bennett. "And a lot of times I got the forearm shiver, 'Get the heck out of my way, I've got something to say.'"

How coaches approach those in-game stoppages varies as widely as their X and O strategies. Tony Bennett has borrowed and built on much of his experiences with his father, but his style in timeouts was inspired more by former UCLA coach Ben Howland.

While most coaches either race to get in front of their players during a stoppage, or quickly confer with staff before addressing their teams, Bennett has a different formula.

Bennett spends most of the time huddling with his assistants, often hearing from each of them before they all agree on a message to deliver to the team. Sometimes, if a call hasn't gone his way or if he has an issue with the way the game is being officiated, he'll talk to a referee at the start of the timeout.

Then, he gets together with his staff, near the 3-point line. That conference uses most of the time.

"Just gather your thoughts," said Bennett, whose team played Louisville in the second round of the ACC tournament Wednesday night. "Is there anything someone saw? Gather my own thoughts, talk a little bit. Let the guys rest, and then walk in with enough time. Sometimes you're out there a little long and you've got to speed talk and sometimes you go in there."

Only then, after conferring with his assistants, does Bennett make his way to the circle of chairs where the five players who are on the floor are seated, surrounded by a semicircle of the bench players, delivering one or two key points, sometimes adjustments, sometimes reminders.

"I remember those huddles and sometimes they had a different flavor to them than others," said Liberty coach Ritchie McKay, a UVA assistant from 2009-15. "They were, I thought, fruitful."

In an average college game, there are four media timeouts per half, which generally last 105 seconds, time for 90-second television commercials, with a 15-second buffer. Additionally, each coach has four timeouts — three 30-second and one 60-second timeouts — per game.

And while there have been times when Bennett found himself “speed talking,” for the most part, he’s found the time allotted more than ample.

During the 2017-18 college basketball season, when Virginia went 31-3, Tony Bennett’s team beat opponents by an average of 13 points per game. It won 10 games by at least 20 points.

And it was during one of those blowout victories that Ron Sanchez, a Virginia assistant from 2009-18 and now the head coach at Charlotte, recalled one of the lighter moments of the season during a timeout.

“We’re in a timeout and we’re going to the team huddle and Tony’s like, ‘No, no. Let’s not go in the huddle yet,” said Sanchez. ““There’s too much time. I don’t have much to say.””

In fact, when asked about his approach to timeouts, Bennett initially joked, “Well there’s big decisions to be made: Where or what you’re gonna have for dinner that night. Who’s buying and all that.”

But the truth, Bennett’s players and former assistants said, is that Bennett is a master at delivering a concise and impactful message during those stoppages.

“He’s pretty deliberate and straight to the point and just gets to what he needs from us,” said forward Jayden Gardner. “He gets it across pretty well.”

In games this season at Pittsburgh and Notre Dame, more than once, Panthers coach Jeff Capel and Notre Dame’s Mike Brey had concluded their in-timeout remarks to their players before Bennett even got in front of his.

“Something I really appreciated about Tony is, he was willing to listen to his assistants,” said McKay. “He really took in advice from the other coaches and I think relayed them, when he thought it was appropriate, to our team.”

# UVA basketball star Reece Beekman is fueled by memory of his late brother

For a split second, when her youngest son, the basketball star, anticipates a pass, steps in and makes a steal, Julie Jackson can close her eyes and see her oldest boy, the one who made his mark on the football field.

Reece and Bryce Beekman, brothers four years apart in age, couldn't have been more different, Jackson said. Bryce was the outgoing, outspoken one. Reece was the quiet one who kept to himself. The brothers shared two things in common — their passion for sports and love for each other.

“How Reece steals the ball, I can send you videos where that's exactly how Bryce stole the ball,” said Jackson. “Bryce used to get picks all the time. That was his thing.”

Reece Beekman, now a sophomore guard at Virginia, has made defense his thing in college, a fitting tribute to the older brother who helped mold, guide and support him on his journey.

Bryce Beekman was a senior defensive back at Washington State in 2020 when, on March 23, he died at 22 years old, due to what the coroner ruled was an accidental overdose caused by taking both a powerful painkiller (fentanyl) and a common allergy medication (promethazine).

Reece already had committed to play at UVA when it happened.

“We both ended up fulfilling our dreams, playing on the Division I level,” said Reece. “Him playing at Washington State, me at UVA, it was cross country, but it didn't really matter to him. We were both doing our thing.”

Reece said he thinks about his late brother at some point “every day.” He'll be thinking about him this week as Virginia plays in the ACC tournament, hoping to make a run that could earn it a spot in the NCAA tournament.

Reece has a picture with his brother as the lock screen on his cell phone.

“So every time I pick up my phone, I see me and him,” said Reece. “I know he's proud of me. He would tell me so many times he was proud of me for what I was doing.”

Reece's mother and father — Demetri Beekman, the all-time assists leader in Division II basketball after starring at Assumption — divorced when he was young, and Julie raised the boys as a single mother, originally in the Milwaukee area.

Watching Bryce play football and basketball was what initially drew in Reece.

“I would say he was the start of it,” said Reece. “Before I even thought about playing basketball, I’d be in the gym watching him play basketball. I was seeing the game at an early age. That kind of helped with my IQ and the fundamentals I started with. I feel like that took me a long way.”

In 2016, Jackson changed jobs and moved with her boys to Baton Rouge, La. Bryce immediately flourished as a football star, but Reece, an eighth-grader at the time, struggled to adjust. He leaned on his older brother even more heavily during that time.

“He would be competitive at times,” said Reece. “But he was still older. He was more the supportive side. He was one of my biggest fans. He always had my back. He was always encouraging me.”

Reece said his mother always has been that way, too, and was not just for him but also for Bryce, shuffling the boys to and from practices and tournaments from an early age. When they moved to Baton Rouge, Reece kept playing his summer club basketball for an AAU team in Wisconsin, with Jackson flying him back for practices and games.

In the Virginia program, Reece found a new support system, one that stepped up for him when Bryce died. Still a senior in high school, Reece had not met most of his future UVA teammates, but they reached out to him by phone and on Zoom. He and Jackson heard from the Virginia coaches and even athletic director Carla Williams.

The GoFundMe fundraiser to support the family after Bryce’s death got its biggest spike when UVA coach Tony Bennett’s wife, Laurel, shared it on her social media accounts.

Tony Bennett played against Demetri Beekman as a prep player, and UVA assistant Orlando Vandross — who recruited Reece to Virginia — played against him in college.

In Reece, the UVA coaches saw the potential to develop an elite defender.

“I saw him and I saw just a feel, I saw some of those instincts,” Bennett said. “He had the makings with his length and his know-how to impact the game on both ends.”

Reece’s first year at UVA presented a new challenge. With the COVID-19 pandemic disrupting college athletics and life in general, the naturally introverted freshman was further isolated, meeting only members of the basketball team and spending all of his time either in his apartment or at John Paul Jones Arena.

Still, there were highlights from his rookie season, perhaps none more memorable than Reece’s buzzer-beating 3-pointer to lift Virginia to a win over Syracuse in last year’s ACC tournament in Greensboro, N.C.

Jackson was in the stands for that shot and again last month, when Reece’s 3-pointer with 1.1 seconds to go gave UVA an upset win over Duke at Cameron Indoor. On a whim, she decided to attend the day before, buying a plane ticket, booking an Airbnb and asking Reece for a ticket so she could see him play.

Bryce is, of course, always with Reece, too.

“He’s that extra push or motivation for me,” said Reece. “I try to live by that and keep doing the things I know he wanted me to do.”

# Former Virginia player Nigel Johnson recovering from being struck by a car, eyes a return to basketball

Nigel Johnson doesn't remember the last time he played basketball. But he's determined to make sure that wasn't his last game.

The former Virginia guard was struck by a car while he stood by the side of the road with a flat tire. He had just played a game at New York's famed Dyckman Park, and was driving home to Northern Virginia when a flat forced him to pull to the side of the Henry Hudson Parkway, along the Hudson River.

"I was standing in front of my car and then I looked up saw the headlights, heard the engine, and then that's it," said Johnson, a guard on the 2017-18 UVa team. "That's the last thing I remember."

The game he had played just about an hour earlier?

"I have no idea," said the 27-year-old Johnson. "I don't remember if we won, if we lost. I don't even remember if I scored or not."

The driver who hit him collided with Johnson's car and fled the scene on foot. Johnson said he was later charged by police.

Johnson, who had been playing professionally overseas since the end of his college career, suffered a litany of serious and painful injuries. When he's asked to recount them all, he said he lists them "from the top down."

He had a concussion, a brain bleed, a broken cheekbone, a broken collarbone, a broken hand, a torn labrum, a dislocated hip and a fractured pelvis. He spent a week in a New York City hospital before he was able to go home to Ashburn.

He spent two months doing in-home physical therapy before he was strong enough to visit the trainer's facility or a local gym.

Still, Johnson knows his injuries could have been worse. He miraculously avoided any organ damage in the accident.

"All of that type of stuff will heal in time and I can come back from that," Johnson said. "Things could have been way worse, way worse. It doesn't make sense how it wasn't."

Now, four months removed from being struck, it's his shattered right hand that is requiring the most attention and rehabilitation. It's the biggest obstacle to his comeback to a basketball court, something Johnson is confident will happen in 2023.

He had hoped to play internationally again, before the accident, anticipating a chance at a league in France, Italy or Spain.

Now, he's putting in the work to get back, doing physical therapy 5-6 times a week and building up his strength and mobility in the swimming pool. Next month, he hopes to return to UVa to work with Cavaliers strength and conditioning coach Mike Curtis.

"I have a great chance of making a full comeback," Johnson said. "I'm doing anything and everything in my control to make sure that does happen."

Johnson started his career at Kansas State before transferring to Rutgers for his junior season. He transferred to Virginia as a senior.

He played in 31 games that year, averaging 4.9 points, 1.6 assists and 1.6 rebounds while playing 16.5 minutes per game. UVa went 31-3 and won the ACC's regular-season title.

It was his only season in Charlottesville.

"He was at a couple different schools, but he finished with us," said Virginia coach Tony Bennett.

"He's ours, whether it was for a year or four years."

Johnson has remained close with a number of his former teammates, especially guard Devon Hall, a childhood friend, and forward Isaiah Wilkins, now a graduate assistant for the Cavaliers. He returned to Charlottesville for the Blue-White preseason scrimmage, when he was still in a wheelchair, and visited again to attend the game against Houston on Dec. 6.

"Seeing him seemingly back to normal, smiling, happy, and all that good stuff and at that game was awesome," Wilkins said.

Johnson also received an outpouring of support from his former teammates and coaches, and from the Virginia fan base. A GoFundMe account set up to help him and his family with medical bills, childcare and travel costs, and lost income during his recovery has raised more than \$45,000 to date, and is still active.

That, Johnson said, was a "surprise" and a "blessing."

"That's why I've enjoyed being here so much. People care about the right stuff," Bennett said. "To see the community rally and the fans rally around him, it warms my heart. Because they don't have to. There are so many people pulling at you for different things, but when there's a

chance to help somebody in need, that speaks volumes about the kind of people that are in Charlottesville, the state of Virginia and the Virginia fan base.”

Beyond the intense work Johnson has put in to get his body back to being healthy, Johnson said his post-accident limitations have been hard because they impact what he can do with his young son, 4-year-old Kairo.

Johnson and his wife, Bailey, have been helped by his parents, who — in addition to helping Johnson on his road to recovery — spent extra time with Kairo.

“I was laying around all day. I wasn’t able to play with him,” Johnson said. “They were helping us with that, helping him enjoy his childhood. Cooking meals.”

Heading into the holidays, Johnson is spending time with family and trying to get everything on Kairo’s wish list.

And while many of his young son’s requests are Spiderman themed, there’s something else Johnson’s son wants for Christmas.

“Anything basketball related,” Johnson said with a mix of excitement and a father’s pride.