

# SPORTS

## Maryville Ends Football Team's 3-Game Win Streak

Maryville College snapped Wesleyan's three-game winning streak, defeating the Bishops, 31-26, in Rocky Mount on October 16 in a game filled with big plays and momentum shifts.

The streak followed three Bishop losses to open the season. That was on top of the five straight losses last spring when the team played an abbreviated schedule after the fall season was canceled due to the pandemic.

Against the Scots, the Bishops fell behind early, as the Maryville built an 18-3 lead on the strength of two big plays—a 99-yard interception return by Dorian Champion and an 85-yard kick-off return by Mykel Santos.

With five minutes left in the first half, Wesleyan countered with a big play of its own, as Trey Blackwell dashed 64 yards on a pass from freshman quarterback Chaz Hirschman.

In the third quarter, Maryville extended its lead when quarterback Nelson Smith scored on a 26-yard run, capping a five-play drive that began after the Scots's Caden Harbin intercepted a Hirschman pass and returned it four yards to Wesleyan's 44.

Down 24-10, the Bishops battled back. After sacking Smith on consecutive plays to set up fourth down, Wesleyan's Jayden Denmark blocked the ensuing punt, and teammate Corrie Lee collected the loose ball and rambled 55 yards for a touchdown.

The Bishops then tied the game midway through the fourth quarter. With Storm Yarbrough replacing Hirschman at quarterback, Wesleyan embarked on an eight-play, 52-yard drive, capped by a 24-yard touchdown pass to senior Kevin Alford. Rafa Niederleyk's extra-point even the score at 24.



Freshman Trevon Crank rushed for 217 yards against Averett. SI photos

Maryville regained the lead on the following drive. Beginning at their 30, the Scots relied on their running game to drive down the field as Cody Estep carried five times for 53 yards and the tie-breaking touchdown.

With four minutes left in the game, the Bishops got two more possessions, but were unable to mount a drive.

Prior to Maryville, the Bishops had built a 3-1 record in USA Conference action, losing its first game to Brevard, and then rattling off wins against LaGrange, Averett and Greensboro.

The quarterback duties have been shared by Hirschman and Alex Stack, both freshmen, and Yarborough, a sophomore who's just returned from an early-season injury.

After Jeff Black, the team's leading rusher the past two seasons, sustained a season-ending injury, the Bishops promoted freshman fullback Trevon Crank, who compiled two impressive games, running for 107 yards and two touchdowns at LaGrange, and then 217 yards

and two touchdowns against Averett in Danville, Va.

The Decree spoke with Jeff Filkovski, now in his 9th season as head coach, just before the Maryville game.

**Q.** What was going through your mind after the first three games (plus 5 straight losses last spring)? Were you concerned?

**A.** I was never really concerned about where we were in the beginning. We're young and this team has talent; we just need to continue to get better each week. We're far from a finished product, and learning how to win is a process. It's good for them to taste success and learn how they got there, but when we mature, we have a chance to be very good.

**Q.** Let's review the quarterback situation. Who was the starter after training camp? Who's the starter going forward?

**A.** The QB situation is a fluid one. We're young! We have a room full of first-year players. There's talent there and I would recruit them all again, but a successful QB needs more than the ability to throw the ball around the yard. I've spoken to them about (former Bishop starter) Dustin Midgett. Dustin grinded on his craft and developed into a very good QB. One of our young guys will get it at some point and, like our team, have a chance to be very good. Right now we're going with Chaz Hirschman, and Storm Yarbrough is coming back from injury to back him up.

**Q.** Let's talk about Trevon Crank. Describe his running style and contrast him with Jeff Black, your leading rusher the past two seasons.

**A.** With the absence of Jeff Black due to season-ending injury, we went to our stable full of young

running backs and we'll continue to rotate guys. Trevon Crank got his opportunity at LaGrange and made the most of it. Then he followed it up with a very good performance at Averett. He's a strong runner and hits it downhill quick. He can break tackles and hit the home run from anywhere on the field. As a freshman, he's still learning. We're going with the hot hand at running back. Jaylen Perry, Anthony Byrd, Gary Daies, Sincere Johnson, Eli Reed will get their touches and if someone gets hot, we'll ride that horse. Our offensive line is continuing to develop, which has allowed for the running game to pick up. It's been

great to see! I love running the ball.

**Q.** The defense has yielded 9 points in the last two games, including last week's shutout of Greensboro. How do you account for the improvement in recent weeks?

**A.** As the offense continues to be a work-in-progress, we've leaned on our defense. The D has developed into a stingy bunch. They're learning the scheme as well; it's all about fits and not giving up the big play. If we make our opponent work for every score, we have enough talent to get off the field. I love watching them play. The D will continue to grow and get better, and they possess pride as part of the Dark Side.

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she had recently been teammates with the athletes she was coaching at the time. "It was hard to draw the line between players and friends," she said

In 2017 Batchelor enrolled in a master's program at UNC-Greensboro. While a graduate student, she interned with the UNC-G strength and conditioning program and worked at Athletic Lab in Cary, where she's still a staff member. She earned an M.S. in Kinesiology with a concentration in Exercise Physiology from the School of Health and Human Science in May 2019.

Besides serving as assistant soccer coach, Batchelor is a strength and conditioning coach for women's soccer and volleyball. She would like to expand her duties so that there is strength training for all women's sports. Asked whether she prefers coaching soccer or strength and conditioning, she identified the latter. Since no formal strength and conditioning program existed for the women's teams, she said, "I can make it what I want it to be."

Batchelor believes that her time at UNC-G prepared her well, providing her with hands-on activities and the general expertise to help her athletes with weight-lifting techniques and other exercises. But, she acknowledged, "It's one thing to learn about a topic. It's another to teach it, to coach it."

For Batchelor, a big challenge is keeping her players healthy and injury free. Coaching a fall sport means that the athletes oversee their own training during the summer. And sometimes that's not optimal, she said, adding, "You have to work with what your player brings you."

Batchelor likes the one-on-one time with her players. During most soccer practices, she leads separate 45-minute sessions with the keepers. Watching recent practices, it's clear that she's effective at holding their attention. "One-on-one training is important for developing skills and technique," she said.

She said she loves to watch the team's matches. When it comes to coaching, Batchelor said her favorite part is the competitive aspect of it all. "Working one-on-one is fun," she said. "But you don't get the highs and lows like you do from the wins and losses."

On the downside, Batchelor said that the time commitment in her new job, combined with



Coach Vanessa Batchelor SI photo

her daily commute from Raleigh, takes away from her personal life.

When she's not working, Batchelor enjoys taking hikes with her dog, practicing guitar and bass, and skateboarding. Her secret talent is that she can juggle, but not very well. "That's why it's a secret," she joked.

When it comes to Batchelor's own fitness, many aspects have changed since she was a college athlete. Rather than long-distance running, she said she now concentrates more on weightlifting and strength exercises. She said that she likes to experiment with new exercises and routines.

Batchelor works out five to six days a week in one-to-two-hour sessions. Within the last year, she's started participating in competitive weightlifting, noting that her favorite lift is the snatch. Her least favorite exercise is pull-ups because, she admits, she "can never do more than a few at a time."

She confessed to following a typical college student diet during her time at Wesleyan. But since late 2020, she has been a pescatarian (a fish-focused diet). Her favorite food is either sushi or Beyond Burgers, but her guilty pleasure will always be Oreos. "Anything involving Oreos, you can count me in," she said.

If she was not a coach, Batchelor said she would like to work in the arts, perhaps reviving her dream of a job in architecture. She also expressed interest in more "blue-collar" work, such as welding.

Batchelor appreciates the opportunities offered by her alma mater. As the Bishops wrap up their season, she hopes to see their progress made so far pay off in the playoffs.

When our walk around campus came to an end, I posed a final question: What advice do you have for Wesleyan athletes? Comprehending the unique position of Division III sports, she said Bishops must recognize their dual role as a student-athlete. She said it's often hard to find the motivation to excel in both sports and academics. "Always remember why you're here," she said.

## Volleyball on Pace for Winning Season

Wesleyan's volleyball team is on a pace that would give it the first winning record in nine seasons.

The Bishops took down rival Methodist for the second time this season October 21, winning on the road 3 sets to 1, and raising their overall record to 16-10 (7-6 and tied for 5th in the East Division of the USA South Conference).

The Bishops were paced by senior Michaela Seawell, who notched 17 kills over the four matches. She has now recorded 238 total kills on the season, joining fellow seniors Lauren Weaver (245) and Sydney Barnwell (238) in tallying more than 200.

Against the Monarchs, setter Sloan Martin compiled 45 assists, giving the sophomore 837 for the season.

The Bishops opened the season on a hot streak, finishing September with an 11-4 record. After winning its first October match against Randolph, the team began a skid that saw it lose four of its next five matches, beating Mary Baldwin and losing to Meredith, Peace, Pfeiffer and Southern Virginia.

Senior Mary Cat Davis explained that the Bishops played some tough competition during that stretch. She said that Meredith, a perennial power, and Peace were tough adversaries.

She called Pfeiffer "a scrappy team that hangs" with all opponents, often taking them to five matches. "That's hard to do on a consistent basis," she said.

Davis, a defensive specialist, noted that Southern Virginia is the newest member of the conference, arriving from the competitive ODAC in Virginia. Together with Pfeiffer, a former Division II program, Southern Virginia makes Wesleyan's regular season schedule much more challenging.

Davis believes the recent setbacks have sparked the team's competitive drive during the stretch run. As the team plays conference opponents a second time, it's looking for more wins and perhaps a few upsets, as it positions itself for the USA South tourney.

If Wesleyan finishes with a winning record, it will represent the first time it has done so since Head Coach Vicky Gentile succeeded Robin Pietryk in 2015, and the first overall since 2012. The Bishops were 5-10 in last year's Covid-abbreviated spring season, and 11-22 in the fall of 2019.

Davis said experience has been the key to Wesleyan's success this fall. She noted that the team includes eight seniors—two sophomore-year transfers and six who have played together for the past four years.

"This is a rare occurrence in Division III," she said, adding that a large senior cohort would typically be four or five. "It's made a huge difference for our team. We've had time to develop our skills and team chemistry. We're a much more confident group this season."



Sydney Barnwell is one of three seniors with more than 200 kills on the season.