

SPORTS

Bishop Profile: First-Year Lax Head Coach Evan Merrill

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(Editor's Note: Coach Merrill was interviewed earlier in the semester.)

During my sit down with Evan Merrill, I learned more about the head lacrosse coach. Merrill is of average height with brown hair, wearing a Nike lacrosse pullover and athletic pants. If one were to join our conversation in his office, one would see a small office painted white with a blue and gold stripe running horizontally across each wall. Scattered with lacrosse sticks and game balls, it is clear this is a coach's office with game plays, player statistics, and practice schedules pasted on the whiteboards. On his desk, he has pictures of his wife and kid along with miscellaneous papers and notebooks.

A native of Westminster, Maryland, Merrill was born on November 16, 1994. He is the older of two brothers by two and half years, so he was able to have a built-in practice partner for lacrosse throughout his adolescence. He started playing lacrosse around fifth grade when his dad coached his team.

Merrill's biggest influence growing up was his grandfather, an electrician and volunteer fireman. He enjoyed their summer

visits, he said. "I always loved spending my summer in the fire department with him." Merrill added that his travel coaches, Mark and Frank, also played a significant role in his life until he graduated from Westminster High School in 2013.

Growing up, Merrill played both soccer and lacrosse. Lacrosse is a major sport in Maryland, so he often went to Division I, I and III national championship games in Baltimore with his dad. "I think I transitioned into liking lacrosse more at the start of high school," he said. "I played soccer for so long that I was committed to it, but ultimately I liked lacrosse a lot more." He had an offer to play soccer at the college level, but at that point, he was focused on lacrosse.

Merrill graduated from Virginia Wesleyan University in 2017 with a degree in business and a concentration in accounting. He spent his college career playing defense and long-stick midfield for their lacrosse team, earning recognition as "Freshman of the Year." He was named Old Dominion Athletic Conference All-Academic from 2015-2017.

As a senior, he started all 16 games as the leader of the defensive unit. Merrill's most memorable college game was a 17-15 victory over Roanoke College during his sophomore year. "They were one of our biggest rivals, so we always had intense games against them," he said. "Our defense got a stop in the last 30 seconds of the game. As I was clearing the ball up the field, I heard the final whistle sound."

Merrill has wanted to be a coach since he was in high school. After sustaining a sprained ACL/PCL knee injury as a high school junior, he realized that playing lacrosse at a DI level was out of the picture. When entering college, he did not know that there were degrees in coaching, so he took the business route as it was applicable to anything he wanted to do.

After graduating from college, Merrill became the men's assistant lacrosse coach at Davis & Elkins College, a DII institution in West Virginia, for the 2017-2018 season. The following three seasons he spent as the head coach. He was named NC Wesleyan's assistant coach in the summer of 2021, and he became the head coach this past sum-



Lacrosse coach Evan Merrill huddles with his players.

C. Lewis photo

mer after former Head Coach Bridget Walker left the program.

Merrill said that he took the Wesleyan job because he felt a need to change. During his time at his previous job, he helped with their women's lacrosse team, which made the transition from men's to women's sports seamless. "I think my coaching style fits better with women's sports," he said. "Men tend to need a more 'drill-instructor' leader, and that's just not my style."

Merrill explained that it is different coaching DII versus DIII lacrosse. In DII, he is allotted more time to work with the team year-round, including both on-field and off-field experiences. Because it is a higher NCAA affiliation, sports are more of a job in DII; everything is mandatory with repercussions for the student-athletes if they fail to uphold the standards.

At Wesleyan, he enjoys the freedom to run the program the way he wants. "If there are things I want to do for my program, and the funding allows it, I'm able to do so," he said. On the downside, college tuitions continue to rise, making it challenging to recruit athletes to a DIII program when they may be offered athletic scholarships to DII schools.

With only three seniors on the current roster, Merrill says they have a lot of potential for the years to come. "It takes time to learn the pace of the game at a college level," he said. "It just takes time to put the pieces together and gain trust among teammates. Nonetheless we have a much more skilled team than we've had in the past."

As head coach, he hopes to grow the roster size. To field a more competitive team, he feels that the program needs around 20-25 players.

Merrill is grateful for his players as they're the main reason for his promotion to head coach. He feels blessed to engage his athletes on a personal and professional level, and he is looking forward to seeing the growth of the players that have been with him at Wesleyan for the past two years.

If he were not a coach, Merrill could see himself working in financial or retirement planning where he could use his business and finance degree. He said he could also see himself owning a restaurant. When he is not coaching or playing lacrosse, Merrill can be found playing golf or going on day excursions with his family. He has been married for three years to Colleen, whom

he met during his sophomore year at VA Wesleyan. The couple has a 2-year-old son, Landon, and another child on the way.

When asked what word he would use to describe himself, he answered "growth." "I don't believe in being complacent," he said. "There's always room to grow and do more work."

Merrill added that his friends would describe him as composed and level-headed. He said he's most proud of how he and his wife are building their family together. I asked him to identify one thing about him that only a few people know, and he said he was addicted to competition. "Whether it's college sports or tic-tac-toe," he said, "I've got a need to win."

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One day prior to an 8 and under game, Hardy and his father stopped at McDonald's to get a pre-game meal.

Hardy ordered two McDoubles and a large Sprite. Following his meal, he went 6-6 at bat, recording two doubles, a triple, and three singles to lead his team to victory. Ever since that day at the YMCA, his dad made sure his son ate two McDoubles and a large Sprite before every game.

After coming to college and assuming responsibility for his meals, Hardy changed his superstition only once and that resulted in what he called "the worst defensive performance of my life," as he led the team with three errors at shortstop.

Second baseman Davie Morgan has a unique superstition, one that occurs in the batter's box. The senior has taken the same approach to hitting since he was in 8th grade. Walking to the plate, Morgan flips his bat and draws a cross into the ground with the knob. Following this, he sweeps the dirt with his right foot in the batter's box to make the box look clean. After sweeping the dirt, Morgan taps the barrel of his bat on home plate two times and gets ready to face the pitcher.

Always among the team leaders in batting average and run production, Morgan started this habit after his dad suggested he read the Bible before his games. Drawing the cross into the ground before stepping into the box, Morgan felt like God was right by his side, blessing him with a good day of baseball. Morgan has never switched up this superstition, even in the worst of his slumps. He claims that "drawing that cross into the ground means more than baseball." It's a reflection of his strong faith as well.

Harley Finishes NCW Lacrosse Career As Second All-Time in Goals with 79

Wesleyan's lacrosse season ended with a 20-0 loss May 2 to eventual champion Meredith in the first round of the USA South Conference tournament.

Dating back to 2006, Wesleyan lacrosse has seen three incarnations, spread over 13 seasons. The latest began in 2018 with former head coach Bridget Walker's first year at the helm. In 2022, the Bishops set a program record with four wins, all recorded in consecutive matches.

This year, Evan Merrill's first as head coach, the Bishops were 2-7 in the conference, 3-12 overall. The season's highlights were victories over William Peace (10-6) and Greensboro (13-2) as well as a non-conference win over Warren Wilson, 9-8.

This marked the final season for senior midfielder Blaire Harley, who ranked second on the team in goals with 20, 7 behind team leader Lailah Espinal. Harley ends her career with 79 goals, ranking her second on the all-time list behind Ali Cucinotta's program record of 195 (2018-21).

Harley, a native of Owings, Maryland, was interviewed by The Decree after the conference tourney.

Q: What's your best memory about playing at Wesleyan?

A: I would say it was our Huntingdon game my sophomore year; we won in overtime. The game was explosive from the jump, with each team fighting hard. We got to the end of the game, and we were winning 11-10 when Huntingdon's defense gained possession and moved to our defensive end to score, tying the game. We went into overtime and after Huntingdon had a controversial near goal, we moved the ball to our offensive end,

where (then - Assistant) Coach Merrill called a timeout and devised a solid play. We went back on the field, ready to execute. It ended with me on the 8-meter (about 25 feet from the goal), as one of Huntingdon's defensive players fouled me. Then it was me one-on-one with the goalie. The whistle blew, I shot, and the ball was in the net. I ended that game scoring 7 of our 12 goals but what really mattered was seeing the seniors run to me with tears in their eyes; they had never won against Huntingdon. That game started our four-game win streak, the most in lacrosse history here at Wesleyan.

Q: Wesleyan's lacrosse program has struggled to find it footing since its introduction in 2006. Did you ever think about transferring to a new school to play your sport there?

A: Every year I thought about leaving the program. I strongly considered transferring to Meredith following my sophomore season. Leaving has always been on my mind; it isn't just the losing that was difficult to face; it was also some of the players. While I hope to remain close with some teammates, there were others who showed a daily lack of commitment. It can be discouraging to see athletes disregard the sport (don't show up to practice on time, argue with the coaches, don't try). These actions made me want to go to a team where all players expressed commitment and drive.

Losing is always going to happen; that's how a program begins. Wesleyan's lacrosse team is only six years old, so it's a very new program. Around campus many people know we aren't successful, yet they fail to realize we're one of the newest programs. No new

program is going to be successful until it has time to grow and build its roots. I've stayed motivated knowing that every win contributes to the growth of this program. By staying and working hard, I know that the program can grow, and I try to spread that to my teammates.

Q: What's one move Wesleyan can make to improve the program moving forward?

A: Wesleyan could work on campus life. It's not located in or near a large city (within 30 minutes). Wesleyan needs to make campus life more appealing to students. Another key factor, one that even coaches have discussed, is tuition. Wesleyan tuition is expensive and continues to rise, yet no improvements have been made to student life. As a captain, I hear a lot of complaints from teammates, and no one is satisfied with the cafeteria. Complaints vary but I seldom hear a positive remark about it.

As for the athletics, the school should create a program that brings more students to watch our teams play. Football (even with a losing record), baseball, basketball, and volleyball all get great turnouts at their games. Less popular teams seldom get an audience. The athletics program needs to incentivize students and fellow athletes to attend more games.

Q: Do you plan to remain involved with lacrosse?

A: I do hope to continue playing lacrosse. Our team is always low in numbers, so I plan to attend fall ball practices to be an extra player. After I graduate in December, it will be the time for high school lacrosse. Then, I plan to apply to be an assistant at one of the local high schools in my county and maybe join an adult league.