

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to

I think that it's a place that provides individuals with the complete student athlete experience. And I think that's something that's important, something I've experienced as a player and want to provide as a coach. So whether it's the education or the resources or the tight knit community, I just feel like it's a great place to be a part of both as a new head coach and to build a program. So I think the other thing that is a huge piece is the Orange Pride. People bleed orange around here, whether it's students, fans, community. It's in their blood and it's a very special experience to be a part of.

John Boccacino:

The fact that you're only the second person to hold the title of head coach for this program, and you're taking over a program that's in great shape. Last year, winning the College Hockey America regular season championship, and tournament championship, and going to the NCAA tournament, you came into a really good position talent wise. And we'll talk about expectations for the year with 17 returning letter winners and eight newcomers on the roster. You've got a good mix of young and old talent coming back. But what did you know about this program before you got involved in the interview process? What kind of reputation did Syracuse Ice Hockey have when you were at Clarkson and when you were coaching with Hockey Canada?

Britni Smith:

Yeah, at Clarkson we played Syracuse pretty much twice every single year, so saw them consistently. And with that I think that there was always one thing that came out in their game and that was they were never going to be at worst. They were always going to be the team that came to compete for 60 minutes. And that's tough to play against. And that's something that, as we look to continue to build the program, that we want to make sure we keep as part of what makes Syracuse Hockey, what is our team identity. And that's a huge piece I think, of what we can build off of as we continue to grow the program.

John Boccacino:

Now take me through the process of how you've gone about getting to know the student athletes and recruiting your coaching staff. What have you done to really let people know who you are and build a team up?

Britni Smith:

I think the first thing is just building those relationships. Such a big piece of not only team culture but individual player development, and comfortability among staff is having those relationships that go beyond the 200 by 85 foot ice surface that you play on. So that was a big piece of coming on board, was getting to know all 24 athletes, getting to know the staff in place, finding the right people to bring in, as well, to help continue to build the program. But the relationships took a big piece of the first month or so. Just really getting to know what makes our athletes tick, what makes them successful, why they chose Syracuse, why they love Syracuse, what's great about the program. I think that was, like I said, the first month was very heavily focused on just building those relationships.

John Boccacino:

And how do you go about relating to the student athletes, I mean it wasn't that long ago that you were skating for Clarkson, but there is a little bit of time that's lapsed between you and the current student athletes at Syracuse. So connect the dots for us. How do you build that relationship and really gain their trust?

Britni Smith:

I mean there's a number

John Boccacino:

And I'm sure a lot of that comes too from your career as a college hockey defenseman that kind of plays in a little bit to that defensive approach

Britni Smith:

I would guess so, yes.

John Boccacino:

I know that you were a very talented coach at Clarkson. You were a very talented defenseman at St. Lawrence. How did you get started with hockey in the first place?

Britni Smith:

Grew up on a farm that had a pond. So the access to get free ice whenever you wanted. So I'm sure that helped. And then just a lot of my friends were in the game. I actually spent a year figure skating, definitely didn't love that. And had some friends that were hockey players, so kind of just made that transition. And I think I was four or five when I actually started playing structured hockey and loved it.

John Boccacino:

What was it exactly about the game? I'm picturing the farm in the backyard, the frozen late fall, early winter days of getting in as much ice time as you can. But what was it about the game itself that really called out to you?

Britni Smith:

Honestly, I think it was just the atmosphere at the rink. I think it was a great place to go and be amongst friends and be with people that had common interests. And from where I grew up, it was kind of what you did. Everyone was on a pond or an outdoor rink, or watching the Leafs, or whatever it was. So I think hockey was just kind of part of my upbringing.

John Boccacino:

Were you always a defenseman or was that a position? I know cause a lot of kids probably dream about being Wayne Gretzky and putting pucks on net, but you took the defensive side of things. How did that come to be?

Britni Smith:

I was forward for the first little bit. I'd say I probably transitioned to D around, I don't know, 10 or 11 years old. But I definitely think being a defense suited my style of play a little bit more, a little bit more defensive minded, a good first pass out of zone, not necessarily the hands in tight to finish the plays.

John Boccacino:

And then when it comes to obviously, you know again had a great career at St. Lawrence as a student athlete there, how do you think your experiences playing with the St Lawrence team as a student athlete, how does that help you with your coaching career?

Britni Smith:

I think Syracuse is a place that provides the complete package for student athlete experience, and that's important to me because that's something I got at St. Lawrence. That's something that when I look back, I would pick St. Lawrence every time over again if I could. So I think as I'm getting into my first head coach role here, that's something that's very important to me, is to provide that student athlete experience that when they graduate they are proud to

opportunity to wear a lot of different hats, that have prepared me to be a head coach. So I think that just gave me some confidence in knowing that the foundation I have, and had built over the last eight years, put me in a place that I'm ready to take on that next challenge and kind of learn what I need to in order to be a head coach.

John Boccacino:

It's great to hear you say that you're never complacent, you're always learning, always picking up aspects of the game that you can pass on to your student athletes. What was it like for the very first time when you were a head coach? When you're guiding our Orange against Merrimack, you come away with a three two win in overtime. What was that feeling like that day?

Britni Smith:

Honestly, a little bit surreal. I think it was one of those moments that you don't really recognize what just happened until you get back to the locker room. The players had a helmet that they had all signed that they gave me after the game for the first win. And it was almost, in that moment, that you kind of take a step back and realize that that's the achievement that you've just been a part of. So it was a very special moment, no question. And as we talk about team culture, I think that was a huge. It just shows where our team culture is, when the players take that upon themselves to celebrate the success of others, I think, is extremely important. So it was a surreal moment for sure.

John Boccacino:

Were there any words of wisdom from your past coaches that you've been trying to keep with you during this process of being a first time head coach?

Britni Smith:

I've definitely learned a ton, whether it be with Clarkson or Hockey Canada. Always challenging myself to take what I can from every coach that you have a conversation with. Everyone sees the game a little differently. Everyone coaches the game a little differently. And even though it might not be your style, there's always something that you can take, and learn from, and use within your program or your coaching philosophy. And I'm lucky enough to have coached with some fantastic coaches.

John Boccacino:

Now. There was a phenomenal story that was written up on your being hired. And our athletic director, John Wildhack, really heaped some high praise on you, especially with regards to your recruiting ability. Can you give us some insights as to what allows you to excel as a recruiter? I know you mentioned relating to student athletes in a previous question, but what is it about you as a recruiter that's able to really convince these young women to come over to Syracuse, and this is where they want to study and play and grow?

Britni Smith:

I think there's a couple things that come into play there. Having the mindset and the philosophy that no year is a rebuild. You're always reloading. So you're looking for student athletes who can come in and make an immediate impact. And that can look different from recruit to recruit, whether it's someone coming in to play big minutes, whether it's someone coming in to take a leadership role.

An impact can mean many things, but if you can find those players that can come in and impact the program immediately, and replace that senior class from the year before, I think that's what makes a successful recruiting class. And then when it comes to actually recruiting the student athlete themselves, or the recruit, it's a big piece of it now is the challenge of finding

Britni Smith:

We're actually getting geared up right now for November 4th, 5th. We have our first league weekend, and we're having an alumni weekend as well. There's going to be a ring ceremony for the CHA championship team from last year. So that's going to be kind of the event that kickstarts a lot of our networking and bringing alumni back to campus, getting them involved in our current culture and in our team, and allowing them to meet the current athletes and make those connections. So very excited for that first opportunity to really get the alumni back on campus in the next couple weeks.

John Boccacino:

There's been some really good games on your schedule. You've had a lot of close games, including taking on Clarkson. You guys had a home and home with them in the middle of October. What do you think are some lessons that student athletes can learn, so far, through the early part of the season?

Britni Smith:

Just to continue to focus on the process. Our process is to get better every day, have a growth mindset. We want the rink to be a place that's fun to come to. That we compete hard. That we challenge each other. And I think that we've done a fantastic job. Like you said, we'd like to see a couple more wins on our record, but when we're focused on the process, it's safe to say, at this point, that we're making those strides that we need early in the year. There's definitely, from game to game, there are major improvements and that's what we're focusing on right now.

John Boccacino:

You certainly have the community support behind you. I know that our students and faculty and staff love to go to Tennity again to cheer on the Orange. It's a great opportunity. And Britni, before I let you go, I'd be remiss if I didn't go off the ice with a question or two. As much as I'm sure you're watching game film all the time, what do



Possibilities is up there for sure. I think that was one of the first places I went when I got to Syracuse, and I've been back a couple times since. So Possibilities is up there.

John Boccacino:

Yeah, that's a classic for sure. It's a great place too to bring any, when you gather with alumni or bring prospective students to meet up, it's a good place that shows off the charm. And of course you can't go wrong with a good Italian meal here in Syracuse. Britni, it's been a pleasure getting to tell your story and introduce you to our campus community. Again, her name is Britni Smith, the fantastic rising star in the coaching ranks here, as the head coach of the women's hockey program at Syracuse. Britni, give them hell and thank you for making the time today.

Britni Smith:

Thanks so much.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the 'Cuse Conversations podcast. My name is John Boccacino, signing off for the 'Cuse Conversations podcast.