

What the Virginia Cavs Coach Wants You to Know in the Midst of March Madness

Tony Bennett and the Virginia Cavaliers are heading to the Sweet 16 in the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament, ready to put up their strong defense against Iowa State.

Bennett certainly wants that win, but as a follower of Christ, he knows the true victory comes long after the madness of March is complete.

"When you have a relationship with Lord, there's a peace and perspective you have," Bennett said. "The world didn't give it, and the world can't take it away. Your relationship with the Lord and with your friends, that's what matters."

Bennett has talked with Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA,) about his faith journey and how his commitment to Christ impacts his coaching. In fact, Bennett first accepted Jesus as his Savior while at an FCA camp in Colorado in eighth grade.

Basketball was in Bennett's blood from the day he took his first breath. His father, Dick, placed a small basketball in his newborn son's hospital crib, perhaps setting his course for life. Dick was a high school coach in Wisconsin at the time and eventually became one of the most respected college coaches in the country.

"I remember shooting balls into lamp shades at home," Bennett told *FCA Magazine* back when he was coaching at Washington State. "I cracked a few. I can still hear Mom's voice telling me to stop."

Bennett enjoyed a superb college career under his dad at

Wisconsin-Green Bay and was then drafted by the Charlotte Hornets in 1992. There, he played for three years as a backup guard before injuries forced him out of the league.

Bennett tried to rehabilitate himself back into NBA shape, traveling to Australia to play for the Sydney Kings, where he was cut after two months. He then landed in Auckland, New Zealand, where he played and eventually coached for the Burger King Kings (Bennett jokes they were sometimes paid in Whoppers)—seemingly lightyears away from the NBA.

In 1999, he returned stateside to become an assistant coach at the University of Wisconsin, where his father was transforming the Badgers from a Big Ten pushover into a national powerhouse. Together, the Bennetts led the team to the Final Four that season.

While Tony stayed three more seasons in Madison, Dick called it quits, only to be lured out of retirement in 2003 by another major reclamation project, Washington State. The Cougars hadn't enjoyed a winning season since 1995-96. Dick advised Tony not to join him, but his son didn't listen. The two made steady headway, turning a laughingstock of a program into a respectable PAC-10 competitor. In 2006, after 27 years of college coaching, the elder Bennett and his 490-306 career record retired.

"He has a great mind for rebuilding programs," said Tony, who took over the head-coaching reins at Washington State in 2007, when he was named the National Coach of the Year. "It was significant for me to finish his career with him."

Bennett saw three standout seasons at Washington State, with impact both on the court and off. For instance, after a particularly poor Saturday preseason practice at Washington, Bennett's players arrived at the gym the next day, fully expecting to be chewed out and run mercilessly. Instead, Bennett gathered his team and said, "I don't want to practice

today. We showed a lot of weaknesses yesterday; but I want to honor the Sabbath as much as I can this year. Today, I want you to spend time with family and honor the Sabbath.”

His players were stunned. Bennett then organized a voluntary 20-minute chapel service. Virtually the entire team showed up.

Bennett coached at Washington State until late March 2009, when he made the move to Virginia. Since then, the Cavaliers enjoyed two back-to-back outright ACC regular-season titles, the 2014 ACC Tournament title and a No. 2 ranking in the Associated Press poll, marking Virginia’s highest ranking since 1982-83.

Now, the Cavaliers hope to continue another incredible season when they take on Iowa State Friday at 7:10 p.m. ET on CBS. The last time the two teams met was Dec. 30, 2010, with the Cyclones winning 60-47.

Even in the excitement—and sometimes anxiety—of college basketball, Bennett’s faith keeps him grounded.

“It gives you a chance to have a balanced life as a father, a husband and a coach,” he said. “Any coach will tell you it’s tough to have that balance, because this profession can overwhelm you. It’s tough. But you need to be what God wants you to be and be successful in His eyes.”