

John Boccacino:

Hello, and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'm John Boccacino, Senior Internal Communications Specialist at Syracuse University.

Bakeer Ganesharatnam:

First thing I noticed, and this was from the very first meeting I had with the student athletes, the returners who were remaining on the roster, is they were completely open to this process. They were excited, and they wanted to succeed. And they were welcoming me, the approach we had, and they were completely, completely bought in from the first moment, and that has carried throughout this whole process. We have a group of players who are willing to work hard, who are willing to make sacrifices, who are completely 100% bought into what we want to do, and who are hungry for success.

John Boccacino:

The start of the fall sports season is right around the corner, and this year, for the first time in more than a decade, the Syracuse University women's volleyball program will have a new head coach leading the Orange. Earlier this summer Bakeer Ganesharatnam was hired as the seventh women's volleyball coach in school history, and he brings quite the resume to Syracuse. Bakeer spent the previous 11 seasons as the head coach at Temple University, winning 173 matches and posting four 20 win seasons. During his final season with the Owls, Bakeer was named the 2020-2021 American Volleyball Coaches Association's North Region Coach of the Year, and also was named the American Athletic Conferences Co-Coach of the Year for guiding Temple into the AAC Tournament championship. Bakeer, it's an impressive resume, we're happy to have you on the program and happier to have you on campus, welcome to Syracuse University.

Bakeer Ganesharatnam:

Yeah, yeah, thank you for having me. It's been busy, but very exciting at the same time too.

John Boccacino:

How have you been adjusting to life as the new women's volleyball coach here at Syracuse?

Bakeer Ganesharatnam:

I have to say everybody has been very welcoming, and everybody wants to help and make sure we succeed, so it's been really, really good so far.

John Boccacino:

I mentioned during the introduction that not many people have had the honor of coaching this program, you are just the seventh person to take over as the Orange women's volleyball head coach. Why did you want to become a part of that history here at Syracuse?

Bakeer Ganesharatnam:

Yeah, first of all, the university itself. It's a big, big grant, it's a great academic institution, it has a beautiful campus, and on top of that the athletics department, I mean, everybody knows Syracuse athletics, the history of the program. On top of that you have the conference. The ACC is one of the top rated conferences in athletics, but especially in the sport of volleyball. So you combine all that, it's the whole package. And you're absolutely right, being only the seventh head coach of the program, that

speaks for itself, it shows you that a lot of coaches who are in charge of this program stay here and want to build a legacy.

John Boccacino:

What were your thoughts during the interview process, and before you took over, were named the head coach, just how good of a position was this for a coach like yourself who was looking for that next challenge?

Bakeer Ganesharatnam:

Yeah, I mean, for me it was all about potential. I feel like if you do this, and as a competitor, you want to compete at the highest level, and this position, this institution, allows me to do that. Throughout the process, one of the things I really found out very fast was everybody was really hungry to take the next step, and everybody involved in the process, we were committed to making this program successful. And that was one of the biggest things for me to take on this position, because it takes multiple people in order to make this position, this program successful, and to get it to that level where we want it to be.

John Boccacino:

And how would you describe your coaching style? What makes you the viable coach that you are?

Bakeer Ganesharatnam:

Yeah, I think throughout the years I picked up different things from coaches I worked for, and coaches I worked with, but also I was able to experience some really high level coaches throughout my playing career, and I was able to pick up some of the good things I thought they did, and maybe avoid some of the things that I didn't want to see as a player. So when you combine all that, it came up with a style that fits my personality, and where I felt like I got the best results from my student athletes as well.

In general I'm more on the analytic side, I try to explain my students why we do certain things and what the expectations are, and how we can achieve those goals. So I'm not somebody who's going to just force somebody to do something, I want them to do it because they bought in and they understand why we are doing it, it just felt like when you do that you have a better result, and especially long term you have a better result.

John Boccacino:

How exactly do you go about incorporating analytics into the volleyball program?

Bakeer Ganesharatnam:

Yeah, I mean, it's a very technical game. It's like if you ever played golf, you know how frustrating golf is. I mean, I'm not a very good golf player, but I compete, and it's very frustrating because it's such a technical sport. And I think volleyball has a lot in common with golf, it's a very technical sport, so whenever technical aspects are there, I think you have to incorporate data, and you have to break it down to the bare minimum and find out what the best percentage are in certain situations, and then you have to combine that with skillset. You have to be able to perform a certain task at a pretty high level in order to get the best outcome, or the highest percentage of the outcome. So that's what we try to do, we try to combine data and analytic with teaching basic and solid technical skillset.

John Boccacino:

And I know that you only took over the job in June, so it's not like you've had a long time to make your mark, but how have you found your student athletes? How receptive have they been and how quickly are they picking up what you're trying to teach them?

Bakeer Ganesharatnam:

I took the job on June 27th, I think. It's been a little bit over six weeks, but it feels like five, six years, just because of the amount of events that occurred, but also the amount of things we have accomplished in this small period of time. Well, the first thing I noticed, and this was from the very first meeting I had with the student athletes, the returners who were remaining on the roster, is they were completely open to this process. They were excited, and they wanted to succeed. And they were welcoming me, the approach we had, and they were completely, completely bought in from the first moment, very open, and that has carried throughout this whole process. We have a group of players who willing to work hard, who are willing to make sacrifices, who are completely 100% bought into what we want to do, and who are hungry for success, so if you combine all that, it makes our job much, much easier and more enjoyable, so I'm very thankful for that.

John Boccacino:

We love our venues for athletics here on campus, there's so many memorable places where students go to watch their classmates play their different games and strive for victory. And the women's building, I think, is one of the real hidden gems, and we need to make it not be a hidden gem because it's such a cool, unique venue for volleyball.

Bakeer Ganesharatnam:

I agree.

John Boccacino:

What do you think is going to be such a fun part of the atmosphere when people come out to watch one of the 12 regular season home games that your team's going to play this year?

Bakeer Ganesharatnam:

Yeah, I agree. I mean, I'm really about history and culture and longevity, and the women's building, I agree, I think it's a really cool place to play volleyball. Now we might need to make some small adjustments and small upgrades in order to make it an even more enjoyable venue for our fans, but for us, we want to get as many people in the gym, create an atmosphere where it's not just going to the match, it's a whole event. We want to create events that leads up to the match, and then maybe even present a platform other for other students to perform during the second and third set, and then combine it with something we do after the match, maybe autograph sessions where we involve some of the fans even after the match.

I think it's a great venue because you pack that place with 800, 900, 1000 people, it's a very, very hard place to compete in, if you're an opposing team, and it's going to create a really exciting environment. So I'm very excited to compete there, I competed with my former teams in the women's building, so I know how hard it is, so I'm glad I'm on the other side. But I think it's a great environment already, but we can make it even better moving forward.

John Boccacino:

The home opener for Syracuse is the Syracuse tournament when Army, Hofstra, and Yale will come to the women's building September 8th, 9th, and 10th, and again, admission to all women's volleyball matches is free. Bakeer, you can't beat free for that type of entertainment, right?

Bakeer Ganesharatnam:

No, I mean, it's free because we want to make sure we reach as many people as we can, and we want to make sure everybody has the opportunity to see these incredible athletes compete at the highest level in this country. And we have some incredible athletes on our team, but also incredible athletes on our opposing teams that will be competing against us. So yeah, absolutely, we can use anybody that is interested in the sport of volleyball to come and check us out, but even people who have no idea about the sport of volleyball, I urge you, please come, watch it, support us. You don't have to know all the rules, I will promise you you will get hooked and you will come back because it's such an exciting sport to watch.

John Boccacino:

Now I know every coach would love to get three people up front who are six foot seven who can bring the hammer with some fascinating and fantastic blocks and kills, you love your acrobatic serves and your great setters to really get the offense running for Syracuse, but how would you describe what you think our team is going to be all about? What our philosophies might be, what kind of style of volleyball are we going to play this year?

Bakeer Ganesharatnam:

Yeah, we're going to be very feisty. We're going to base it on first touches, we're going to serve very aggressively, we're going to try to control the ball on first touches on our side, on serve, receive and defense, and then we want to run a very diverse and sophisticated outfit. So the basic basic formalized control, if we can control the ball on our side as much as we want, then we can control the likelihood of the outcome of the side out, and therefore the match. But we're going to be feisty, we're going to be gritty, we're going to play some hot defense, we're not going to let any balls hit the ground, we're going to pursue balls, and we're going to be competing together as a team as a whole, so that's going to be our trademark.

John Boccacino:

And what are your expectations for the team this year?

Bakeer Ganesharatnam:

Well, I feel like there are so many expectations out there for this team from the outside. For us, we want to make sure we form these individual players into a team, and then compete at the highest level we can possibly compete. I feel like whenever you go and play another team, it's very simple, you want to beat the other team. And that's the goal for us, every match we have on the schedule, we want to try to win, and we're going to put ourselves in the best position to achieve that. Now I can't predict the outcome, but we will certainly, certainly do the best we can and we will compete hard in order to get that W first Syracuse.

John Boccacino:

It's a loaded schedule, there's nine teams that appeared in the NCAA tournament last year, three in the ACC that played in the elite eight alone, great competition, again, you'll see some fantastic volleyball going out to the women's building. And I want to highlight one of your, you have six returners who are coming back including a talented outside hitter Polina Shemanova, who was an all region pick last year. That's got to be nice to know you've got someone coming back who can really adapt to your system and put the plays in place that you want to run. How great is it knowing that you've got talented returners like Polina and her other classmates who are going to come back and try to give us the upper hand?

Bakeer Ganesharatnam:

It's huge. I mean, Polina is arguably one of the best outside hitters in our conference, and you are absolutely right, our conference is completely, completely loaded with top teams that compete at the highest level, and she can play for any of those teams. So I feel like I hit the jackpot when she decided to stay and be a part of this. And it's not just from a volleyball standpoint, she is really important for the program and for the group here from a leadership standpoint. She was one of the very first who was expressing herself and making sure she's bought into what we want to do, and she made sure everybody knew that around her, so therefore the team could build on that.

So I'm very excited, I feel very fortunate to be able to work with her. The only wish I had is it would be more than just one year, but unfortunately she exhausted her eligibility after this season. But we're very happy that she's here, and she's going to be huge for our program, and we want to do everything we can to make sure not just her, but all three seniors, have a great season. So we're also doing this for them, but also for the program and for everybody else as well.

John Boccacino:

It's really a fascinating study, sports at the college level. You're bringing in returners and new student athletes, how do you try to go about building and developing that positive culture when you have some women who have played together, and then others who are new to the scene, how do you build that program up?

Bakeer Ganesharatnam:

Yeah, it's a very unique situation, and it's also a very interesting situation, you're absolutely right, because we have all different players from all different types of background and level, and then you have the six returns who are a pretty tight group. But again, I think the openness of the six returners has really allowed us to incorporate the new players. But we also made sure we came up with a structured plan that incorporated some rules and regulations that allowed everybody to get on the same page pretty fast throughout this process. And then we have to identify expectations for ourselves as a group, and individually as well, and then come up with a plan for everybody to achieve those expectations. And then you have to keep people accountable. So when you combine all that, you can come up with a plan that works throughout this process in order to get everybody on the same page, everybody coming together and working together towards this common goal.

John Boccacino:

And it's not just that common goal on the court, your teams have a reputation for succeeding in the classroom, being multiple all academic honorees during the time you've coached at Temple, and your other stops in your collegiate career. How do you go about making sure that your student athletes do succeed when it comes to the books and not just being great student athletes on the court?

Bakeer Ganesharatnam:

Yeah, yeah. I had opportunities to coach professional teams in Europe and I choose not to just because I like this setup. I think the setup we have in this country where you can compete at a really, really high level academically and athletically is very unique in the world. And we want to make sure all our student athletes excel, not just on the code, and achieve those goals, but also have the opportunity to pursue their goals and their dreams academically as well, and whatever the university might be able to offer. I think being at a university campus, it's a great setup. You have great opportunities beyond just the athletics, and it will be foolish of me not to allow my student athletes to explore and follow those opportunities. So we do everything we can to making sure we present those opportunities to them, but also working on plans and ways for them to achieving those opportunities and allowing them to do those things. I don't think you have to pick and choose if you want to do one or the other, I think you can do both at a very high level.

John Boccacino:

I know you've only been on the job for six weeks or so, but in that brief tenure, what are some of those great resources that our student athletes have access to that will allow them to succeed when it comes to academic pursuits?

Bakeer Ganesharatnam:

Oh, I think we have a great setup. I mean, first of all, the communication between the university and the athletics department via the academic advisors is great. They're working hand in hand together, which really allows us to provide the best service we can possibly do. The academic advisors on campus have the first say, and then our academic advisor follows up and make sure they're on track to achieving their goals combined with being a student athlete. And then we have resources within the department here, we have tutors, we have learning specialists, we have specialists who will help them out from a mental standpoint, so I think the resources are great. It's almost, I feel like it's almost harder to fail than succeeding.

John Boccacino:

That's a good position to be in.

Bakeer Ganesharatnam:

Yeah, yeah, absolutely, absolutely. So I'm very happy with the resources we have, and obviously we're going to keep building it, and we want to make sure we incorporate student athletes, get their feedback throughout this process, and do what we can do in order to make it better.

John Boccacino:

When your hiring was announced our Athletic Director John Wildhack praised your recruiting skills as one of the biggest factors for why you were hired. What is your philosophy when it comes to recruiting, and what are some of the biggest reasons you think a student athlete should come to Syracuse?

Bakeer Ganesharatnam:

Yeah, throughout my career I never thought there was a bad place to recruit to. I think you just have to identify the prospect you are exactly looking for to the institution you're representing. I think what I learned is you have to be honest and you have to be truthful to yourself and to your institution.

Sometimes people say, "Well, we have to sell this institution," or, "We have to sell this place." I don't believe in it. I feel like you have to present yourself, highlight your advantages, but still point out some of the negatives, so that way the students can make an informed decision. We want them to come here not because we trick them into coming to Syracuse, not that you have to do that, but we want them to come here because they full heartily bought into this, this is the place they want, and this is their first choice. We want people who want to be here and want to be part of what we want to do.

That being said, for us two things are important. One, we want to recruit the best possible volleyball players that are out there. So obviously there are target areas within the country where there's better volleyball than others, but in general we want to identify and recruit the best possible volleyball players that we can possibly get to come to Syracuse University. But we also want to make sure we recruit the best characters that fit our team culture, that share our values, that share the importance of our academics in order for us to be succeeding as a whole as a program. Everything we do is based on longevity. We don't want the quick fix, we want to make sure we build a strong foundation, a culture that can be successful for multiple, multiple years and possibly decades. So that's our philosophy, but we're not shy, we're not shying away from the top recruits, we are going after the best kids in the country, and in the world, and trying to inform them about Syracuse University so they can make a decision and come here because they want to be here.

John Boccacino:

You mentioned during your coaching journey that you were fortunate enough to work with and get advice from some really talented and knowledgeable coaches. What are some of the biggest lessons that you have learned during your previous coaching stops that you think will serve our program well here at Syracuse?

Bakeer Ganesharatnam:

Yeah, so one of the things I learned really fast throughout my career is that being in the gym and training is actually the smallest aspect of coaching, being a head coach. There's a lot that goes into, from an administrative standpoint, that is necessary to be successful as a program or as a head coach. So those are some of the areas I had to learn and get better at. The other thing I learned really early on is we're here to provide a service to our student athletes. We're here to help them and guide them throughout this process. It's not about the coaches, it's not about me as a head coach, it's all about the student athletes and their experience and their success. The main thing for us is we want to make sure they graduate with a really good degree, with a major they like, and that they can be successful after this, they can be succeeding in life afterwards. So those are some of the things I learned early on which really allowed me to put the focus on the student athletes.

John Boccacino:

I love hearing that student athlete-centric approach, benefiting them, again, both on the court and in the classroom. And if people need to wonder about your background, Bakeer, you walk the walk and you talk the talk, you were a very talented club level player, you were a collegiate star for Queens College before getting into the coaching game with volleyball. How did you get started in volleyball? What was that seminal moment that hooked you on the sport?

Bakeer Ganesharatnam:

Well, first of all, I wouldn't say I was a star as a player, I was very fortunate to have star teammates on my team.

John Boccacino:

You're very humble, I like that.

Bakeer Ganesharatnam:

I was the best role player, I think. I was very fortunate to be on some very successful teams, and very, very humble to be a part of that. For me, so this is how everything started. I grew up in Germany, I was born in Sri Lanka but we immigrated to Germany when I was five, and in Germany the system is a little different. So we have physical education classes in school, and we have pro-teams, pro-programs, that come out to those classes and identify prospect early on and get them into the feeder system. So that's what happened with me, there were recruiters that came to our physical education classes, identified me as a future prospect, and then I was put into the club youth system that would train me and eventually allow me to play for the first team, which was the professional team of that club. And that's how I got started.

But growing up, my brother and I played pretty much anything we can think of, I mean, we played basketball, soccer, track and field, table tennis, anything you can compete, we were in it. But eventually we stuck with basketball and volleyball, I stuck with volleyball and he stuck with basketball and that's how our career went. I always say he made the right decision from a financial standpoint.

John Boccacino:

Well, the finances aside, what was it about the sport of volleyball that really, once you're in that feeder system and you're playing it, what did you love about the sport so much?

Bakeer Ganesharatnam:

Oh, I loved everything about it. I think it's a true team sport. If you play soccer, or even basketball, you can overpower another team if you have one or two star player who's much better than the others, but in volleyball, because everybody touches the ball, I mean, you got to touch it. I mean, you don't have to, but if you want to have a good chance to putting a high percentage ball for the side out, you usually have three people touching the ball, so that's half the team. So I think you're so depending on your teammates, because of that it's a true team sport. So you can be teams that are more talented if you have a better team per se, a team as a collective. So that's what was intriguing to me from the early age on, and plus some of my former teammates growing up were my best friends. And maybe that's another testament to the sport, it creates such close relationships because you're so depending on your teammates.

John Boccacino:

He is Bakeer Ganesharatnam, he is the new head coach of the Syracuse University women's head volleyball program, and the Orange kickoff the season Friday at the Charlotte Invitational, the Orange's first home matches are September 8th and 9th during the Syracuse Tournaments. Bakeer, it's been a pleasure having you on the podcast, thank you so much and welcome to Syracuse.

Bakeer Ganesharatnam:

John, the pleasures on me, thank you for having me, I'm really excited to be a part of this university and this athletic department.

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.