

John Boccacino:

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

Britni Smith:

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John Boccacino:

I am so thrilled to welcome on our next guest, who is the newest member of the Syracuse University athletic staff at the Head Coaching position, taking over for a legend. She is Britni Smith, who is the new women's ice hockey coach. And she's replacing the legendary Paul Flanigan who retired at the end of last season. The Orange have their second coach in program history. And she is, Britni Smith, kind enough to join us here on the podcast. Britni, welcome to Syracuse.

Britni Smith:

Thank you. Happy to be here.

John Boccacino:

How is the adjustment period gone for you so far? I know we're, the season's underway and you kind of hit the ground running. What's it been like getting used to coming to campus and working for the Orange?

Britni Smith:

Yeah, definitely hit the ground running. There's times where I haven't really had a chance to sit back and really recognize how much has already gone on. We jumped into our season pretty quickly with some September games. So things definitely happened quite quickly. Had to get a staff on board, and 24 athletes to meet and get to know. So a very exciting start so far and a lot to build on for sure.

John Boccacino:

What was it about Syracuse University and our women's ice hockey program that made you want to be the next head coach?

Britni Smith:

A couple things that went into it for sure. I mean personally, I'm definitely a big family person, so whether it be in my college playing days or coaching now, I've always been within four hours of family and I think that's something that's important to me.

Also, I just felt like it was the right time for me to take that next step and that next challenge in my coaching career. And then when it comes to Syracuse specifically, obviously a fantastic institution, the resources provided to student athletes here are impressive, to say the least.

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 of ways. I think the staff's very important. I think having Megan Quinn on staff, is a little bit younger and she's just removed from the program four years ago. So she has that fresh out of college feel to her as well. So having a staff well rounded is very important. And when it comes to relating to players, she brings that piece to our staff and I think that's very important. Personally, I think no matter how long you've been out, you kind of know what players want. You know that they want to have relationships with their coaches. They want to know why. They want to be able to come in, and sit down on the couch, and talk hockey or talk class or talk life. So just being open and honest, and allowing that kind of relationship to organically build is very important.

John Boccacino:

What's your assessment of the team, given the fact that there's so many returners and yet you've got eight newcomers that are going to play a key role as well? Take us inside the rink. How's the team looking this year?

Britni Smith:

We're very happy with where we're at. I mentioned a little earlier about our team culture being a huge focus and that's really what has driven our first couple months here on campus. We've had some fantastic leadership from our returners that have really allowed us to push our team culture to determine what our core values are going to be and what our team identity is going to be. And they've really stepped into leadership roles and led the way there. And then, like you said, we have eight incomers who have really hit the ground running. It's a big piece of the program when you can find incomers who impact immediately. And I feel like we've done a good job finding what is important within our incoming class, and where they fit in, and how they can impact this program.

John Boccacino:

How would you describe the style of hockey that fans can expect from your team?

Britni Smith:

I think something that I had mentioned is that compete, that grit, never being outworked. We're a team that wants to be consistent for 60 when it comes to our efforts, our attitude, and our commitment. And that's something that is definitely within our control, no matter who the opponent is, no matter what the score is. And that's a consistent thing that we push in practice, and hopefully fans see that within our game. I think that is what really drives our Monday to Thursday work week. And then what becomes the consistent baseline for our games comes Friday, Saturday.

John Boccacino:

And where did you learn that mentality of outworking the opposition, being gritty, being defensive minded? Where did that philosophy come from?

Britni Smith:

Definitely been lucky my eight years at Clarkson, working with both players and staff, that was the standard, that was the expectation and that's something that definitely led to success in my time there as well. So was fortunate to come to a program that was already a foundational piece. And like I said, just really focusing on continuing to drive that.

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 have been a part of this program. And if they could pick all over again that they would be picking Syracuse as well.

John Boccacino:

We love to hear that. We love to hear you've picked up on the Orange Pride. Again, we are very proud at this institution. Tenuity Ice Arena is a fantastic place to go check. We have such great venues on campus too for our home games. What do you think is so special about playing in Tenuity, for your student athletes?

Britni Smith:

You definitely bring that tight knit community atmosphere. You get a good crowd in here that really gets behind us, which is fantastic. A big piece of this athletic department, which I've quickly learned, is the support you get from team to team. So we see other teams in the building, we see other coaches in the building. And like I said, part of the reason that Syracuse was so appealing to me is because family is important to me, and this is my family away from home now. And I feel like you feel that when you play at Tenuity.

John Boccacino:

Not everyone who plays a sport wants to become a coach, but you did. You were very successful at Clarkson, working there as an assistant coach for some extremely talented teams. And now you're taking over at Syracuse as our second head coach. When did the light bulb go off in your head that coaching would be a way for you to make your living and you have a future career in?

Britni Smith:

It wasn't until after my college experience. I actually was going back to the University of Toronto, and getting a couple of classes to get into PT. And the coach there just asked if I would help out, and I started helping out part-time, and just found a complete love for it. And decided, at that point, that maybe PT wasn't the answer and made the shift, at that point, to be full time with University of Toronto. And then was lucky enough to get the opportunity with Clarkson in 2014.

John Boccacino:

And then what made you ready to make the leap from being an assistant coach to a head coach on your own? Was there a moment? Was there an experience that you think really set you up to prepare you to take on this new job?

Britni Smith:

I don't know if you ever feel completely ready to be honest. There's definitely, there's things I come across every day that I'm learning, and probably will be for quite some time still. So I don't think you ever feel completely ready. I think a big piece of it was, within my eight years working with Matt Durocher, with the players that we had as well, I was put in a lot of different situations that I had the

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 culture. People want to know that they're coming to a place that they're going to develop, they're going to get better every single day, and they're going to be around people who push them, and they respect, and they trust. I think that's a huge piece of recruiting is making sure that they feel comfortable with that decision when it comes to what culture are they coming into.

John Boccacino:

And part of the culture we've created here at Syracuse is having student athletes that win, both in their sport, but also are outstanding student athletes who give back to their community as well. What role do you think you get to play, Britni, with your student athletes in helping their holistic development? Making them be well rounded, not only just in hockey but in their classroom and for the community contributions?

Britni Smith:

For sure. We have five core values, like I mentioned earlier, and one of them is humility. And that, at the end of the day, is being part of something bigger than yourself. And when we talk about being involved with the community, I think that is a great example of humility. And that's something that we've already seen a couple opportunities, and been a part of a couple opportunities so far and definitely want to find more within, whether it's on campus or within the community that we can get out to show our support and give thanks to those who support us. I think that's a big piece of humility. And then when it comes to being a student athlete, yes, the classroom's extremely important. And when we talked, at the beginning of the year, about what our team goals are, one of them is that we get a 3.4 GPA in the classroom and that's completely run by the players. And I think that that's extremely important. And great to hear it from them, that that's important to them as well.

John Boccacino:

I'm sure it can't be easy to come in and take over a program that's only had one coach before. What are some of the ways you would want to point out credit and support? Who's really helped you make this transition?

Britni Smith:

No program has a head coach that does it by themselves. It is the support of everyone. Players, staff, everyone needs to be pushing and pulling in the same direction. And here we're lucky to have, like I said, fantastic resources. So whether it's our assistant coaches, in Megan and Heather, or our athletic trainers, or our equipment manager, everyone is living and breathing our culture. And everyone is using our core values to push their habits, behaviors, decisions. And at the end of the day, it has to take everyone. And I feel like we're on the right path to finding the success from everyone being on that same page.

John Boccacino:

How about the alumni? We pride ourselves on having, again, very passionate fans who come to the games and alumni who want to stay connected. What kind of role and interactions have you had with the alumni so far?

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 you like to do in your free time, any kind of hobbies?

Britni Smith:

That hasn't been much free time, as of yet.

John Boccacino:

Probably a good answer so far.

Britni Smith:

I do like, especially in the fall with all the changing colors of leaves, hiking, getting out, riding my bike, things like that. So maybe not so much this fall, but looking forward to maybe having a little bit more time next fall.

John Boccacino:

And have you had any favorite restaurant experiences or places to go with precious little free time that you've got?

Britni Smith:



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.