Welcome to Episode 2 of CommRadio’s coverage of successful community building strategies and efforts among Penn State Athletics Teams. This episode focuses on effective community and building relationships to foster strong team dynamics as well as a successful team. Ben Liscum and Matthew Henderson are entering their second season as men’s soccer captains and spoke about what they learned from year one and how they’ve evolved as leaders in the offseason to prepare for the fall season. Jack Rachinsky, CommRadio Sports Director, conducted the interview.

Jack: All right. So just kind of first, like base question, how long have you been playing soccer? Just your whole career, whole life, and then just what group, what year are you in here at Penn State? Just to start off.

Liscum: *Yeah, I guess I could start. I'll be going into finishing up my senior year right now. I've got a fifth year of eligibility, so that'll be in the fall. So toward the tail end of my career Penn State and I've probably been playing now soccer for close to two decades. So it's been, it's been a long journey. It's been integral to my life so far. But yeah, it's gone. It's gone really well here at Penn State.*

Henderson: *Currently, I'm a junior, gonna go into my senior year. So coming up, obviously coming up last year, and I've been playing soccer for started playing with club, with my first ever club was about like eight or nine years old, so probably, like, close to, like 15 years like, at the club, but obviously playing soccer, like around, around my house and with my dad, like for the only 20 years ago.*

Jack: So I guess kind of jumping into, kind of the questions about, you know, you guys both serving as captains. And what do you see that? What is that role for you on and off the field? And then, what is your job to kind of create a good culture and a good environment for the team as a whole?

Liscum: *So I mean our role as captains, obviously, on field leadership, we work a lot with our team in game. There's a lot of problems to be solved on the field, and I think a lot of times they look to captains and some of our junior and senior leaders to find solutions in game and then off the field. I mean, our head coach relies on us for feedback. We kind of look after the squad in the locker room, just make sure that everyone's doing well. If we know that, like a freshman or sophomore is kind of struggling some stuff off the field, or maybe transition into college is hard, and we're there to help guide them. And ultimately, we've been through it ourselves, so we understand the hardship, and there's there's certainly growing pains with with the journey and the process. So we're there to provide that. And I think another part of being a leader, Hendo and me, both kind of learned it this year, but like we were newer captains in the fall, but we'll go into our second year as captains. You can't do it alone, and you've got to have, like, a solid foundation and group around you that can help support you as leaders. So a lot of it is like empowering your teammates to be leaders in their own right, whether that's again, like a couple of juniors here and there that step up and take a bigger leadership role, and then all of a sudden, you've got five or six leaders for a team of 26-27 and it just helps drive, drive the objectives and the goals home. And also, maybe it's another person who is going to lead by following like I think some of the best leaders are those that can follow and really buy into a cause and get on board with what we're trying to do. So I think there's multiple facets that go to it, but in general, I mean, if you're going to generalize it, it's holding yourself to very high standards on and off the field, and setting a really good example for your teammates and those around you to also find success.*

Henderson: *For me, the main ones about being a leader a captain would be more sort of holding us like make sure we are holding ourselves to a high standard, because everyone looks up to us like we are sort of set the we're setting the tone for, like, if so, if we keep ourselves a high standard, then everybody else follows. So, and then it's also holding each other accountable, which is something I think we've learned over the past, over the past, like, year or so, like, or whatever it has been nine months or a year, we captains is holding each other accountable. I think we got better at it because once we hold each other accountable, the standards raises. So that's and also just being, I don't think I've thought as well as just be sort of someone who, like other teammates can rely on, or, like, just to just start anything, just like you can be that sort of like mentor to the younger guys, or someone you just go and, like, how to talk to, and then we can help them out. I think as a big part of being a leader is, like communication. I think a lot of communication has been simply, even on the field, off the field, like, I just think that's a massive part. That's a massive part of like us being leaders and captains.*

Jack: Yeah, and just expanding on that, you both touched on it a little bit. But how important is having that accountability, having that culture, integral to just working as a unit throughout the season?

Liscum: *Yeah, I mean, I think we learned that lesson in the fall. I think at times as younger leaders. I mean, I know I can't speak for Hendo but for me, maybe I was a little nervous to step on people's toes and hold my friends accountable. I knew the standards probably weren't good enough, and I didn't do it. And again, that's like a lesson I learned, and not something that'll happen again. But I think, like Hendo said, like, you've got to be willing to have tough conversations with people, especially as leaders. You're not always going to be liked. You have to be okay with sometimes being the bad guy, but knowing that what you're doing is is getting the very best out of your teammates and the people around you, and at the end of the day, like you do that consistently, 3,4,5,6, months over. And you know, through that journey, your team is going to get a lot better, but you've got to be okay with having tough conversations. And so I think it's interim you need to have, you need to have good leaders who are willing to set the standard and hold it, no matter who it is that breaking it or who's exceeding it. You've just you've got to have those leaders if not. I mean, you don't have a captain that's steering the ship, like, where everyone's rowing in different directions, you're really not going to get very far, so you've got to find a way to get everyone on board and rowing in the same direction if you want to be successful.*

Henderson: *Yeah, just like, like, holding each other accountable was massive for us, like, like, it's been massive for us this spring. That's something we've really stepped up, and I think it's really working for us. Like, it also helps that once we as leaders, me and Ben, as we set the standard, we hold other people accountable, other people follow along, and then they start, as I said, like earlier, but you need numbers to help you out as captains. So like, once we start holding this person accountable, he's gonna hold his friend accountable, and then everyone holds each other accountable. So it all just kind of like wraps into, like we all just wrap into one team, rather than be just as steering the ship, as Liscum said. So like, that was massive fun. I think in the fall, I think I was in the same boat. I think I sort of kind of was about standoffish, like, trying to, like, not want to maybe step on some toes, just because I thought, well, like, I don't want to upset anybody. Or, like, I wasn't sure if I was too ready, but now that we've established that it's not the case, I think we've been so much better at doing this spring, and it's worked massively with standards that we the standards have been set, and everybody's been holding each other accountable. And it's, I think it's just, I think it's integral to, like, sort of our team culture and where we want to go in the future as a program.*

Jack: Yeah, going off of what Ben said, kind of touched a little bit, kind of, you know, coming into that captain role, kind of realizing that you might have to be the bad guy sometimes, what was that dynamic like between the two of you? Where you had a situation or had to, you know, step up, where you're talking about how, what is that like from your perspective of, here's how we have to handle this, to maintain, as you said, that accountability and that good culture?

Liscum: *Yeah, I think it's important that Hendo and me and farther leaders are on the same page. And, like, we have a united front. You can't have, like, two different messages. So I think one thing for us has been clear is, like, whatever we're putting forward in front of the team, it's got to be a clear message, and there can only be one interpretation of it, just to make sure that everyone's again, like, understanding of what we're asking. Think that's something that's come a long way for me as a leader, is communication skills and not beating around the bush, per se, but getting straight to the point and being specific. Like, that's something our head coaches tried to get on me for. Like, sometimes I know something's not good enough on the field, and I'll vocalize that, but I'm not specific to the person. The message is not getting there, like, this is what I need you to do. It's more of like a sense of frustration, and the words just go into the air and they don't mean anything. So like, finding specific ways to improve and help people and our team get better. And I think, like, back to your question, like, how it is from our perspective, meaning we have conversations Hendo and me about it, like, whether it's after training or after a game, like, we'll say, Oh, what did you think about this and that? And we kind of gather our thoughts, and we can review it and see what happened and then figure out, like, the best path forward. But like I said, like united front is huge for me, and that's something that our leadership group really values, is making sure that we're all on the same page and that all of the guys that look to us understand exactly what's expected of them, so that they can then go execute on it*

Henderson: *As well, when it comes to the communication side of like, how we, like, maybe handle certain situations. I think knowing who you're going to talk to as well isa big one for me. Like, I'll there'll be certain people who listen to me more than and there'll be certain people who will take information better from Ben, and than they will for me. So I think it's picking, choosing, like, knowing your players as well. That's like, obviously, that comes down to like relationships with players. Like obviously Ben might have a better conversation with like some of his roommates, or if we have to speak to someone specifically about something. So that was a big one, as well as this kind of knowing each other and knowing our players so you can, so we can get that message across as well as possible. So there's no, there's no, I'm not speaking to someone, and they're going, I'm not gonna listen because x, y, z, but so we know, like,  Liscum you have good conversations with this guy, you go talk to him about that, and then listen, consult, and he listens. So that's how we get the that's the good way to get like, I think personally, that we've got like specific messages across the people, so like, I'm not being if I've not got a good relationship, but I don't know how someone handles certain criticism or something, or maybe better coming from because you got a better relationship, or knows how how to communicate with someone. So it just comes down to like relationships, as well as a big one for us when it comes to communication, I think personally.*

Jack: And my final question is, you talked a bit about your communication, you know, establishing those relationships. What is that like in the offseason? Of course, I know you're still training. You have spring games. There are opportunities out of season to have that, but especially when you're not you know, in the heat of the battle and going through the regular season play, what do you guys do to kind of maintain that throughout the school year, throughout your time as a group?

Liscum: *Yeah, I think that's a good question. I think in season, it's difficult because again, like you finish a game and you're already preparing for the next you're trying to recover for the next one. You can't really look back too much like you have to live in the present and have thick skin and a short memory. So a lot of times, there's not a ton of opportunity in the fall for that. And also, it's worth noting, like a lot of our freshmen come in, like in June, July, and then we're right into the season in August. So like, we don't know them for that long before games start rolling around. We might, we might have four or five, six weeks together prior to that, if we're lucky. But I think the spring is a great that's a great bonding time for the team. And especially as captains, you can kind of take a step back, because, yes, results matter. And like, this spring, we're 5-0 and, like, we certainly got our results. But at the end of the day, it's about like, long term progress your horizon is longer. In the fall, you're looking at a one to two month horizon where you need to get results, versus in the spring, it's it's very focused on development. And like teams like you've got a nine month horizon from January to August to get better. And a lot of what contributes to that is relationship, chemistry on and off the field, the team being able to function well together, and so there's opportunities to bond. I mean, like, obviously we see each other every weekend, like we see each other every single day of training. The summer is big for us. In July, four weeks, like, we're here in July, and we train together and we hang out together all the time. Like, personally, I think this is the closest our group has ever been. We've been intentional about that. Everyone gets along. Everyone's got great working relationships, but it means even more than that off the field. And I think when you bring that love off the field onto the field, then you're willing to fight for each other and sacrifice and put the team before yourself. That's when the real magic happens, and you'll start to again, like its 1-0 in the 85th minute, you got to go find a goal and, like, somebody's gonna make a play and and maybe you get out and you get a two one result, like, it's like things like that, where, like, when you need that final little push, like having a really strong culture, strong bonds and relationships, and again, being willing to sacrifice for the guy next to you, or do the work like that stuff pays off tenfold. And in my opinion, it can be the difference between a good team and a great team, or a team that makes a semi-final, or a team that wins a championship. And we're certainly after championships, and we want to be back in the NCAA tournament. And so any any way that we can get 1% better, we're going to do it. And I think that, again, something this spring and summer that we've been able to focus on is getting closer as a team and really understanding each other better, so that when the battle comes and we're in the heat of the moment the fall like you can look to your left and right and you can rely on that guy, you can be confident that you can rely on*

*them.*

Henderson*: I think the spring is a lot easier as less to handle than the fall, just because it's a less hectic schedule. However, I do think it's where, like, kind of same, obviously, just repeat the same part of Liscum, where, like we I think this spring is where good teams can become, like, great teams through, like, your relationships and all that. Yeah, like, I just, I just think it's vital for us to like create, because it's the pressures off and the emotions are not as high. I think it's actually easier for us to instill those good habits and those good values early and get people on the right path early. Because I think once the season comes along, its hectic. Everyone's kind of worried about results wrap this. So it's good now, because we've got a lot of time just to, like, nail down our habits, like our team culture, our team goals, and hold everybody accountable. And also think that when you do that, when the new wave guys come in, as we said, like the freshmen, we only have like, four or six weeks with them, maybe, I think once you established that core group and core values in the spring, it's so much easier to integrate them through end of the fall. So that's like. So I think it's the spring is probably valuable to like what we think those same games are won and lost in the spring, but definitely championships are won and lost in the spring, through like, through team like, culture and team dynamic. Because I think you, as last we said, you be that nine month off period. So that's your time to really knuckle down, do the work, create a good team dynamic, and get everyone fired right the right direction. And I don't, I think if you slack off in the spring it, don't, it, don't, it makes a hell of a lot harder. When you're coming into August and you're playing the first big tech game away like a hostile environment, you're just, you're not prepared for that, whereas you can prepare for all that in the spring, and then you should feel ready as a team, and you get united group together to go and tackle those challenges at the fall. So I think for me, I think the springs, even though it is a little bit less hectic, I think it's vital for us to succeed at the fall.*

Jack: Alright, awesome. Well, Ben, Matt, that's all the questions I have. Thank you so much for your time. Really appreciate it.