

inside

# HOKIE SPORTS

Vol. 10 No. 3, January 2018

The Official Publication of Virginia Tech Athletics

## ANSWERING WHEN OPPORTUNITIES KNOCK

Devin Wilson has taken advantage of his chances to play two sports while at Virginia Tech, and he'll depart with two degrees as well

### WHAT'S INSIDE

Two former **TECH ATHLETES**  
graduate from Marine Corps  
Officer Candidates School

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Inside  
**HOKIESPORTS** January 2018  
inside.hokiesports.com Vol. 10, No. 3

**Jimmy Robertson**  
Editor

**John Sours**  
Designer

**Dave Knachel**  
Photographer

**Contributors**  
Carly Northup—Hokie Club  
Laura Bauer—IMG

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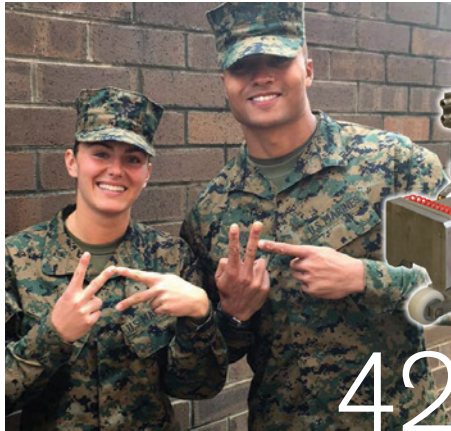
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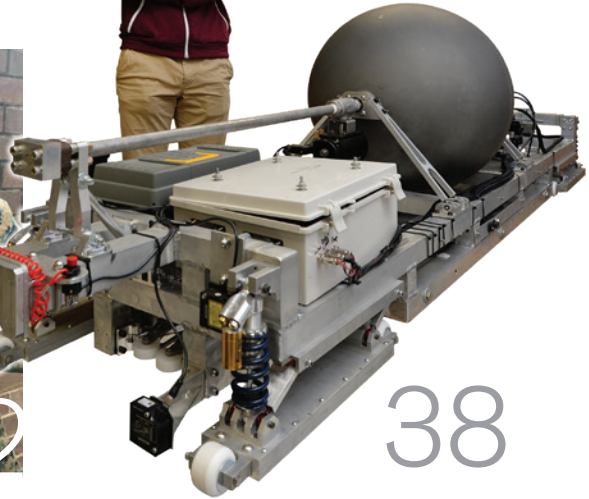
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**Published by the Virginia Tech Athletics Department** • Inside Hokie Sports (ISSN 8750-9148, periodical postage paid at Blacksburg, VA 24060 and additional mailing offices) covers Virginia Tech athletics and is published six times annually. The publisher is the Virginia Tech Athletics Department, 21 Beamer Way, Blacksburg, VA 24061. **SUBSCRIPTION PRICES:** \$37.95 for one year (six issues) and \$69.95 for two years. Mail all subscription inquiries, renewals, address changes, written inquiries and complaints to Inside Hokie Sports, Jamerson Athletic Center, Virginia Tech, 21 Beamer Way, Blacksburg, VA 24061 or call (540) 231-6726. Inside Hokie Sports assumes no responsibility for companies and persons who advertise in this publication. Reproduction of contents in whole or in part without written permission is prohibited. Publisher does not guarantee accuracy of information contained in any advertisement. **ATTN POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to Inside Hokie Sports, P.O. Box 11101, Blacksburg, VA, 24061-1101. Printed by Worth Higgins & Associates of Richmond, Virginia





## TECH ATHLETICS RECEIVES "GAME-CHANGING" DONATION

The Virginia Tech Athletics Department received the largest donation in university history when Tech President Dr. Timothy Sands and Director of Athletics Whit Babcock announced on Dec. 18 the securing of a \$15.2 million gift from a family who wished to remain anonymous. The money will be used to construct a 17,000-square foot Student-Athlete Performance Center as part of a renovation and expansion of the fourth floor of the Jamerson Athletics Center. The remainder of the costs for the \$16.5 million project, which takes the place of the current Bowman Room, has been taken care of by other families. The center will provide space for multiple uses, including donor hospitality functions before football and basketball games, departmental meetings, recruiting functions, etc., but will be used primarily to provide meals for Tech's approximately 600 student-athletes. Athletics department officials plan to enter into the design phase quickly and hope to conclude the project by the start of the 2019 football season.

## THE STUDENT-ATHLETE EXPERIENCE

"With wrestling, you need to manage your weight 365 days a year. The nutrition staff here at Virginia Tech helps us and provides the information and resources that help us feel our best during our matches. The new Student-Athlete Performance Center will be a game-changer for us, [in terms of] nutrition and recruiting. Everyone at this level wants to be the best and any help is appreciated, so thank you to the donors that are making this possible."

**David McFadden**  
Redshirt Sophomore • West Milford, New Jersey

"I'm thankful for all of the donors who were able to make this project happen, and I am looking forward to using the Student-Athlete Performance Center. Nutrition is a big part of being an athlete and is one of the tools we use to be our best. Having this facility directly connected to Cassell is also a plus, especially for the members of the basketball teams."

**Kendyl Brooks**  
Sophomore • Harrisonburg, Virginia



# The Donor File

## Q&A

**Q: A Hokie is...**

**A:** a special person who lives "Ut Prosim."

**Q: The Hokie Nation is real because...**

**A:** no matter where my travels take me, there is always someone I can say, "Go Hokies" to!

**Q: What is your best memory of Virginia Tech Athletics?**

**A:** Going to Ohio State and winning. I felt like I could not breathe until the clock ran out.

**Q: How did you get involved with the Hokie Club?**

**A:** I was interested in what the Hokie Club was and wanted to be more involved with the Virginia Tech Athletic Fund (Hokie Club) and the student-athletes. I attended a meeting and was hooked, knowing we can make a difference.

**Q: What caused you to become a fan of Virginia Tech?**

**A:** I have always been a sports fan, and being a student at Virginia Tech, I found a place where I could support all of the sports. I fondly remember just showing my student ID to get into the stadium on gameday. My how times have changed.

**Q: Do you have any gameday superstitions? If so, what are they?**

**A:** I always need to have something orange on, even if it is "White Out" or "Maroon Effect."

**Q: Describe your perfect day at Virginia Tech.**

**A:** Bright sunshine, crisp air, the leaves changing and a Hokie win!

**Q: Do you have any tailgating traditions? If so, tell us your best.**

**A:** Not sure these are suitable for print.

**Q: What motivates you to give back to help Virginia Tech Athletics?**

**A:** Listening to the impact that the Hokie Club support has on student-athletes and how it has changed their lives. I love watching football on Saturdays, but knowing that my support can help make a difference in someone's life feels amazing.

**Q: I'm a Hokie Club member because...**

**A:** I like to be involved in something I believe in. Virginia Tech is a place that shaped me and has had a lasting impact on who I am today.

**Q: My favorite Virginia Tech sports are...**

**A:** football, basketball, cross country, track and field, and volleyball.

**Q: My all-time favorite Virginia Tech football player is...**

**A:** There are so many, but Danny Coale is one of my favorites. That was a catch against Michigan!

**Q: My all-time favorite Virginia Tech student-athlete from another sport is...**

**A:** Bimbo Coles. He is a great athlete and a great man.

## Gretchen Strub

**HOKIE CLUB LEVEL:** Platinum

**CURRENTLY RESIDES:** Fairfax, Virginia

**GRADUATION YEAR:** 1988

**FAMILY:** Chris (husband - he married into this); Hannah (daughter) and Sydney (daughter)



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OPTION 3

### IN OFFICE

Stop by our offices at Lane Stadium, Suite 112 and a Hokie Club representative will be happy to assist you in renewing your gift to the Hokie Scholarship Fund! As a reminder, your gift must be received by the Hokie Club Office on or prior to March 31, 2018. Also, remember that the greatest of your football seating and parking and men's basketball seating gift requirements will determine your minimum gift for 2018 to retain all 2017 benefits.



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## NEWS & NOTES by Jimmy Robertson

### Beamer headed to College Football Hall of Fame

Frank Beamer received arguably the top accolade of his career when the National Football Foundation and College Hall of Fame selected the former longtime Virginia Tech head football coach for induction into the College Football Hall of Fame during his initial year on the ballot. Beamer will be one of 13 inducted at the 61st NFF Annual Awards Dinner to be held Dec. 4, 2018 at the New York Hilton Midtown. The inductees will be permanently enshrined at the College Football Hall of Fame in Atlanta later that December.

Beamer won 280 games during a coaching career that lasted 35 seasons, including 238 games during his 29 seasons at Tech. He led the Hokies to 23 consecutive bowl games, 11 bowl wins, and seven conference championships. His teams won 10 or more games in eight consecutive seasons (2004-11) and seven or more in 23 straight.

Beamer, a 1969 graduate of the school and a former player, will become just the fifth former Tech student-athlete to be inducted, joining Hunter Carpenter (inducted in 1957), Carroll Dale (1987), Frank Loria (1999) and Bruce Smith (2006).

### Hicks steals school record

Virginia Tech point guard Chanette Hicks etched her name in the women's basketball record books when she became the program's all-time leader in career steals during the Hokies' win over Chattanooga before Christmas.

Hicks' steal in the third quarter gave her 253 in her career, enabling her to surpass Taiqua Brittingham's previous school record of 252 set from 1981-85. Heading into a game against Pittsburgh, she has 269 career steals.

"It was exciting," Hicks said of the accomplishment after the game. "I've been seeing it a lot on social media lately when I've been getting close to it, but I didn't know I was that close until the last game [against

Maryland Eastern Shore]. When Coach said something, really, I was in awe because I actually did it, and I'm a junior."

Hicks, a native of Norfolk, Virginia, came into the season with two records already. As a freshman, she set the single-season record for steals with 91, and of course, a freshman record as well. Last year as a sophomore, she eclipsed that with 123 steals.

In both seasons, she surpassed Brittingham's best season, which came in 1983-84 when she recorded 78.

"You know, it's unbelievable," Tech head coach Kenny Brooks said. "When the sports information department alerted me that she was so close, I'm like, 'What? Are you serious?' It's a major accomplishment for someone in general, but to do it this early in their career is just tremendous."


Hicks is averaging 3.3 steals per game in her career. If she continues along at that pace, she will finish with more than 400 career steals.

Hicks reached a couple of other milestone as well over the winter break. In the Hokies' loss to NC State, she scored the 1,000th point of her career, becoming just the 25th player at Tech to do so. Also, she moved into second place on the program's all-time list for career assists. Heading into a game against Pittsburgh, she has 415 career assists and needs 221 over the remainder of this season and next season to break Lisa Witherspoon's (1995-99) record of 635.

### Sy returns to men's basketball program

Khadim Sy, who left the Tech men's basketball program in September for undisclosed reasons, decided to return to Blacksburg and met with head coach Buzz Williams, who announced on Dec. 27 that Sy was returning to the program.

Sy, a sophomore from Dakar, Senegal, played in 32 games as a freshman, starting 28 of those. He averaged 11.4 minutes per game and finished with averages of 4.0 points and 2.7 rebounds per game.

Williams and Sy agreed that Sy would take a redshirt season for the remainder of the 2017-18 campaign and enter next fall as a redshirt sophomore, with three years of eligibility remaining. 

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**EDITORS DESK** by Jimmy Robertson

## Despite bowl loss, Tech program headed in positive direction

Bitter cold temperatures and an unfriendly wind greeted those associated with the Virginia Tech football program after they arrived in Southwest Virginia in the early morning hours following a disappointing 30-21 loss to Oklahoma State in the Camping World Bowl.

The weather fit the mood, as the Hokies, at least from this perspective, played reasonably well, but an ill-timed turnover and missed opportunities dictated the game's outcome (*more in the bowl recap, pgs. 14-15*). Winter's doldrums set in shortly thereafter, with plunging mercury levels befitting the ending of the 2017 season and the departure of so many high-quality seniors.

But this column wasn't crafted to keep readers in a frosty mood. On the contrary, Tech fans should feel quite warm and fuzzy about their team—both about its season and its future.

To recap: the Hokies went 9-4 with a freshman quarterback and mostly freshman receivers. They qualified for a nice bowl game despite losing Terrell Edmunds for the final three games. They won without arguably their best offensive lineman for nearly the final half of the season (Yosuah Nijman). They beat Virginia for the 14th straight time without those two, Joey Slye or Mook Reynolds, all out with injuries.

Yes, Tech struggled on offense down the stretch. Yes, Tech's defense gave up too many big plays in the bowl game.

Yet overall, 2017 was very good work.

And the program appears poised to do more.

The Hokies return 13 starters, which makes for a great 2018 foundation even with the early departures of stalwarts like Tremaine Edmunds, Terrell Edmunds and Tim Settle—all of whom decided to forgo their final seasons and make themselves available for the NFL Draft.

Seven starters return on offense, led by quarterback Josh Jackson, who admitted following the bowl that he needed to play better. The redshirt freshman put up solid first-year stats, throwing for 2,991 yards and 20 touchdowns, with just nine interceptions. He also rushed for six touchdowns.

The 20 touchdown passes were more than those thrown by Michael Vick, Tyrod Taylor, Bryan Randall and Logan Thomas in their first seasons as starters, and the yardage was more than all but Thomas' (3,013). But in the bowl, Jackson missed a couple of open receivers for potential touchdowns—the types of plays that change the course of a game.

"First year, 9-4," Jackson said, assessing his season afterward. "I don't feel very good about this game. I think I missed too many throws. I don't think I played very well, but I hopefully got better as the season went along in some aspects. But [there's] a lot for me to get better at."

Aside from Cam Phillips and Travon McMillian, who decided to transfer, Tech returns all of its skill players. That makes head coach Justin Fuente happy, as Fuente said all season that he worried more about

the personnel around Jackson than Jackson himself.


A lot of that personnel played well in the bowl. Phil Patterson caught seven passes, while Eric Kumah and Hezekiah Grimsley each caught five. Deshawn McCleese ran for a career-high 124 yards in his first start. Tech's staff needs to replace two linemen (Wyatt Teller and Eric Gallo), but the offense should be ready to roll when spring practice commences.

The defense will require a bit of retooling after the three early departures and the graduations of Andrew Motuapuaka, Greg Stroman and Brandon Facyson. But Tech's staff received good news when defensive tackle Ricky Walker decided to return for his final season, and keep in mind that 17 different players started on defense at some point this past season. Defensive coordinator Bud Foster has some talent at his disposal.

For sure, the Hokies, overall, are losing some quality people. Those seniors led the way for this program to win 19 games over the past two seasons, putting Fuente in rare company. Only two other coaches in the history of the ACC have won more games in their first two seasons (Ralph Friedgen, Maryland and Jeff Jagodzinski, BC).

"They've really risen to change this program back to what Virginia Tech fans like to see and what we've done," Foster said of the seniors. "And you see where the future is going."

Yes, the Hokies lost three of their final five games, but Tech's program appears stocked with young, talented players. The roster also features 17 rising seniors, and nearly every recruiting service ranked Tech's recent recruiting haul among the top 20 nationally.

So when Tech fans sit at home on those icy nights for the remainder of this winter, they need only to remember this—those are the signs of a healthy program. For sure, there are much worse situations in which to be. 



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**BEHIND THE MIC** with  
Jon Laaser

## Balancing Act

As the calendar turned to 2018, my mind briefly turned, like yours I'm sure, to resolutions and growth in my life. But as I thought about it, I hesitated to aim at a specific resolution. Rather, I looked at my continued attempt to live a more balanced—and happier—life.

It was New Year's Eve 2012, and I remember two very clear realizations through the course of an otherwise blurry evening. The first: to have true happiness in life, you need balance. The second: I didn't have any.

I had been running pretty hard for a decade, as 2013 dawned, having spent time with seven different minor league baseball teams, one university, and a major-market radio station. I lived in six different states during that time span, and in the process, became covered in a thick coat of dream-chasing residue. My credit was in shambles, my relationships with friends and family felt distant, my physical health started declining, and probably most importantly, my attitude stunk.

I found myself at an odd place. You often rationalize a lot of things with a simple explanation of ambition, and my ambition was pursuing my dream of calling games in the big leagues. The beginning of the journey felt exhilarating. Being recognized as good enough to get paid to call games served as the first high. Acceptance by people within the game, and the gypsy lifestyle that came with it, was the second. I soaked up every sip of their acceptance, spending late nights with visiting scouts or managers receiving an education unable to be purchased with money. Only

your level of credibility gets you in those doors, and once I grabbed the key, I cherished it. Outsiders find it hard to understand the dynamic, and that's why they are outsiders. The insiders in my life failed to get it and became outsiders.

In the first handful of years, there was no evidence to show that I traveled down a rocky path. I ascended every year and became proud of my ability to pack and move in an hour with nothing but a few trash bags and a compact car. Promoted every year from 2004 to 2009, I jumped from Summer Collegiate ball to the lead broadcast position with a Double-A team. I failed to notice the gradual attrition of things. At one point, I went three or four years without seeing my sister. Phone calls with my brother became a semi-annual thing, and I missed out on seeing any of my friends from home for years.

The ballpark, wherever that may be, became my community. I became important there. I was the "Voice," and I had a voice—in all matters. From roster transactions to fireworks shows, my opinion mattered. I earned that through 18-hour days and 100-hour weeks—and by never saying no and never going home.

As the ball dropped to usher in 2013, the shine faded. I stayed in the same place for four seasons, never moving up, and I became the definition of insanity. I did the same thing year after year and hoped for different results. They weren't going to come, and realizing that sparked a positive change in my life.

I always had been a naturally skinny

person, but as I looked in the mirror, my face looked fat, along with my stomach. I fell out of shape. I wanted to change that, and so in my typical way, I overdid it, attempting a short-term solution. I went from never working out to attempting P90X. Various injuries and occasional vomiting ensued, but I eventually found a groove working out and started to recognize the mental rewards of physical exertion. I started counting calories and became one of those people.

I noticed that the small work helped, but I also realized that other larger scale changes needed to happen. I still lacked balance in my personal life, and much of that came about because of the people I surrounded myself with and the people whom I had shut out. I needed to accept the failing of a long-term relationship mainly because of me. Breaking something after that period of time tends to be messy. I caused pain, but only because I saw an unhappy future. It hurt me, too.

I also needed to recognize that the ballpark world where I comfortably found a home wasn't going to propel me forward. I opted to leave the security of my full-time position there to get back to pursuing various broadcast aspirations. I took a risk.

The results were immediate. I lacked money and felt a lot of regret at leaving my comfort zone. My credit got worse, my doubt grew stronger, and I wondered openly if I had made some big mistakes. But I stuck with it, and things started to turn. Renée [my fiancé] re-emerged in my life and provided the spark that I needed in many ways. Mentors appeared in some of the various freelance opportunities that I picked and gave me a fresh perspective on my goals. I started to rediscover the joy for sports that seemingly had been dulled through the years. I became more positive again, and I started to recognize myself again.

Clichés occasionally fit, and having written that, when you look at the world positively, it tends to look back on you the same way.



Life is a constant balancing act, and as the new year gets rolling along, the Voice of the Hokies, Jon Laaser, urges fans to be diligent in their daily pursuit of balance.

Some of the opportunities I took for little or no money turned out to be the ones that made the difference on my application at Virginia Tech. I don't want to make it sound like this opportunity came overnight, and it absolutely didn't, but recalibrating my attitude definitely put me in position to capitalize on some of my hibernating abilities.

I never want this want space to feel "preachy," and in no way is this column meant to imply that I have balanced my life like a checkbook and everything stands square—not even close. You see, coming to Blacksburg wasn't the finish line. I hadn't made it. It represented the starting line, and an opportunity to make the struggle worth it. My initial pursuit dug me a hole, whereas others my age found themselves in much better position. This role provided me a shovel.

I have made strides, and my progress now allows me to appreciate the past. I learned to do whatever it takes, no matter how long it takes, in that decade. That serves me well here because, believe me, the challenges continue, but I stop, partially, and make the necessary time for Renée and my family and friends. I appreciate their patience through the years and still now because I still struggle.

This leads me to the reason for this topic because, as I discover at the end of most of these columns, I write this as a reminder to myself. We just finished the busiest portion of our year, the football/basketball crossover. The physical challenge rarely wears on me. The emotional one tends to get me.

In this time, there are choices to be made in terms of time management. I find it hard to be all-in in two places at once—maybe

impossible. You can't be at football and basketball practice at the same time, and I find Christmas shopping from Hahn Hurst or the Beamer Barn to be futile. Wedding planning also takes a hit in terms of priority this time of the year. It grates on me to miss things. It always has. This time of year, I miss a lot.

So the lesson for myself—and maybe you, too—is that balance remains a pursuit. We never hold total possession of it. We only need to be diligent in our daily pursuit. I plan to get better at that this year, as I like to think I did last year.

See, you thought this was going to be a column about balancing the run game with the pass, and you got Christmas shopping and wedding planning! Thanks, as always, for bearing with me. Happy New Year, Hokies! Cheers to the year ahead!



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“*Ut Prosim.*” This short phrase, perhaps known by few outside of the Virginia Tech community, is ingrained in the collegiate experience for those who call Blacksburg “home.” The meaning is short and simple—“That I May Serve”—but tends to have a powerful impact on Virginia Tech students, staff, and the campus community.

During the 2016-17 academic year, Virginia Tech student-athletes completed more than 3,400 hours of community outreach—an increase of more than 1,000 hours from the previous academic year. This year, the student-athletes are well on their way to exceeding that number, having completed more than 1,100 hours during the 2017 fall semester alone.

The service that Virginia Tech student-athletes participate in takes a variety of shapes. Some teams create and facilitate these opportunities as a team to come together and achieve a common goal. The volleyball team this year, and specifically the seniors, adopted this approach.

At the beginning of the season, the six members of the senior class decided to organize an outreach project as a way to leave a mark on this community during their final year at Virginia Tech. They chose to partner with the Carilion Children’s Hospital in Roanoke, Virginia to complete this project.

Throughout the season, the team sponsored toy collections at many of their matches, where they asked fans and supporters to donate new and gently used toys to be given for the patients at Carilion Children’s. In early December, the seniors traveled to Roanoke to help with the annual Carilion Children’s Hospital Holiday Party, which allowed them to meet and interact with some of the patients and families who eventually would be receiving the donations collected by the team during the season. Later that month, the ladies took another trip to Roanoke to drop off the toys as a culmination of their semester-long project focused on giving back.

“Having community outreach be such a huge part of my athletics career has allowed me to see the impact we can have on the individuals that we get the opportunity to interact with,” redshirt senior and team liaison Stacey Christy said. “It allows us to make more personal relationships that we can continue even after our time at Virginia Tech is over. Our position as student-athletes gives us a great platform and allows us to promote and support amazing causes and messages that we’re passionate about.”

The volleyball team wasn’t the only group of student-athletes to rally around a cause this semester. The Virginia Tech Student-Athlete Advisory Committee, better known as “SAAC,” created a project of its own. This group, consisting of about two student-athletes from

# LIVING UP TO university’s motto, 2017 a banner year of service for TECH student-athletes

by Natalie Forbes  
Senior Director, Student-Athlete Development


each team tasked with representing their teammates and acting as the “voice” of Virginia Tech student-athletes, decided early in the fall semester to participate in a service project as a group. They settled on an “Adopt-A-Family” project in which they would raise money to purchase Christmas gifts for two local families in need.

The group contacted the local Salvation Army, and through the “Angel Tree” project, they were provided with information on the two families, along with the children’s “wants” and “needs.” Armed with this information, SAAC set out to fundraise, and through donations from various student-athletes, athletics staff, and Tech supporters, they raised more than \$1,600 to purchase gifts for the families.

Some individual student-athlete groups create their own community outreach events, but the most common outreach participation comes from student-athletes volunteering to help out at events and activities organized through the Office of Student-Athlete Development and various local organizations. In August of 2017, more than 100 student-athletes from 10 different teams participated in the annual “Hokie Helpers” project on campus, a project in which current student-athletes assisted new Hokies with moving into on-campus residence halls.

In addition, a number of student-athletes from various teams gave their time this holiday season to volunteer with the local Montgomery County Christmas Store. This organization

aids low-income families in the New River Valley by providing toys and clothes at a low cost, so that parents can purchase Christmas gifts for their children. Virginia Tech student-athletes served as volunteers at various toy collection events for the organization in addition to assisting with the “shopping days” when the store was open to local families in early December.

Whether it is aiding local families in need, supporting fellow Hokies, or spending time with children facing life-threatening illnesses, it is clear that the spirit of “*Ut Prosim*” runs deep in the culture and tradition of Virginia Tech athletics. 



Members of the Tech volleyball team played with children at the Carilion Children’s Hospital Holiday Party in early December, while other student-athletes (above right) helped students move in back in August - all as a way of helping within the community around them.

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Feb 11-15	Mardi Gras / Mobile, AL . . . . .	825	Mar 26	Harrah's Casino / Cherokee, NC . . . . .	40
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Feb 18-20	Sands Casino & Resort / Bethlehem, PA . . . .	295	Apr 6-7	“Jesus” / Lancaster, PA . . . . .	350
Feb 23	Southern Spring Show / Charlotte, NC . . . .	65	Apr 7	Biltmore House / Festival of Flowers . . . .	100
Feb 24	Southern Spring Show / Charlotte, NC . . . .	65	Apr 8-10	Sands Casino & Resorts / Bethlehem, PA . .	295
Feb 26	Harrah's Casino / Cherokee, NC . . . . .	40	Apr 13-15	Washington DC / Cherry Blossom Festival .	450
Mar 2-4	Winter Wildlife Cruise / Virginia Beach . . .	375	Apr 19-May 5	Southwest & California / Motorcoach. . .	2775
Mar 2	Southern Spring Show / Charlotte, NC . . . .	65	Apr 21	Biltmore House / Festival of Flowers . . . .	100
Mar 3	Southern Spring Show / Charlotte, NC . . . .	65	Apr 22-28	Charleston / Savannah / Jekyll Island . .	1175
Mar 3-10	Southern Comforts . . . . .	1395	Apr 24-May 3	Texas “The Lone Star State” . . . . .	1795
Mar 4-7	Atlantic City / Resorts Casino & Hotel . . . .	370	Apr 30	Harrah's Casino / Cherokee, NC . . . . .	40
Mar 8-10	Philadelphia Flower Show . . . . .	475			





# SOX

come  
up  
short  
in Camping World Bowl  
loss to Oklahoma State

*Despite racking up more than 500 yards, including 248 on the ground, Tech missed on some opportunities and allowed too many big plays in a 30-21 loss to the Cowboys to end the season*

by Jimmy Robertson

Virginia Tech's football coaches and players spent a week in Orlando enjoying their bowl experiences. They floated around the twists and turns of the lazy river at the team hotel. They visited Universal Studios Florida and Universal's Islands of Adventures and rode the many rides in both parks.

Yet nothing equaled the rollercoaster that was the Camping World Bowl.

Despite amassing 518 yards of offense—their most against a Power 5 opponent this season—the Hokies let some prime scoring opportunities slip away and gave up a few too many plays on defense, all of which added up to a 30-21 loss to Oklahoma State at Camping World Stadium on Dec. 28.

With the loss, Tech finished the season with a 9-4 record and saw its three-game bowl winning streak come to an end.

"I'm awfully proud of our squad," a disappointed Tech coach Justin Fuente said. "Proud of our kids. We're saying good-bye to some fantastic seniors that have set great examples for our younger players.

"We had a plan, and we executed it well at

times. Those are my initial thoughts on the game. I don't really remember Oklahoma State making very many, if any, mistakes. We made a handful, just enough to keep us from pulling the thing off."

As Tech enters its offseason, it will think about what could have been. The Hokies used their ground game to keep Oklahoma State's high-powered offense on the sideline and to control a chunk of the game. But a missed opportunity in the second quarter served as a foreshadowing of the rest of the game.

Tech led 7-3 and went on a 17-play march that gave it a first-and-goal at the Oklahoma State 1. But quarterback Josh Jackson and Steven Peoples couldn't orchestrate a handoff on a zone-read play and fumbled, and OSU's Ramon Richards recovered. The official scorers gave Jackson the fumble, which Oklahoma State ultimately converted into a field goal and got back in the game.

Instead of leading 14-3, Tech led just 7-6—a 10-point swing. "It was a mesh that those two guys [Jackson and Peoples] have made 10,000 times and just rode it a little too long," Fuente

said. "It was something we feel comfortable with because we've done it since day 1. We didn't execute."

"I tried to pull it [the ball] late and Peoples is strong guy, and he had a good grip on it," Jackson said. "I just didn't get it. That's my fault."

No one rode the rollercoaster more in this game than Jackson. The redshirt freshman quarterback accounted for 298 yards and three touchdowns, including two rushing. But in addition to the fumble, he also threw an interception, and he missed a few open receivers for potential big plays.

One of those came right before halftime. On second-and-17 from the Tech 30, Jackson lofted a pass to Henri Murphy, who raced past Richards, beating him by three or four steps. The pass, though, was too long, and Tech wound up punting. The Cowboys scored on the ensuing possession to take a 13-7 lead at halftime.

Jackson also missed a potential touchdown pass to Eric Kumah on the first play of the fourth quarter. The Hokies trailed 27-14 at

the time, and on third-and-8 from the Oklahoma State 11, Jackson led Kumah just a little too much. Tech went for it on fourth down, and a poor snap led to a sack.

"The one to [Eric] Kumah in the back of the end zone. He had to dive. Led him too much on that one. I missed Henri [Murphy] going into the half. Never really overthrown him before, but I did, so it was kind of surprising to me," Jackson said, referring to throws he'd like to have back. "Just some little ones like the screen that I threw [in the first half] that was almost picked off. There were some outs [out patterns]. Just things ... I didn't feel in my groove, I guess."

Jackson, however, got the Hokies within striking distance on a 5-yard touchdown run with 5:40 remaining that cut the lead to 27-21. Tech grabbed some momentum and only needed a stop to give itself a chance to grab the lead.

Yet Oklahoma State answered, getting a big play on third-and-11 from the Tech 49. Justice Hill broke through the Tech defense for a 31-yard gain to the Tech 18, and the Cowboys kicked a field goal to take a 30-21 lead with 2:34 to go.


That all but sealed things for the Cowboys. Hill's run was the sixth and final play of 20-plus yards for Oklahoma State, a cluster of plays that included a 50-yard pass play that led to a touchdown and a 65-yard touchdown pass from Mason Rudolph to James Washington.

"We had some opportunities to make some stops, and we didn't," Tech defensive coordinator Bud Foster said. "They hit us on a couple of big plays, and those were key plays. Then the big play in the game, I felt like, was the long third-down play at the end when we had a chance to make a stop and we didn't. We didn't do some things that, when it's all said and done, gave ourselves a better chance."

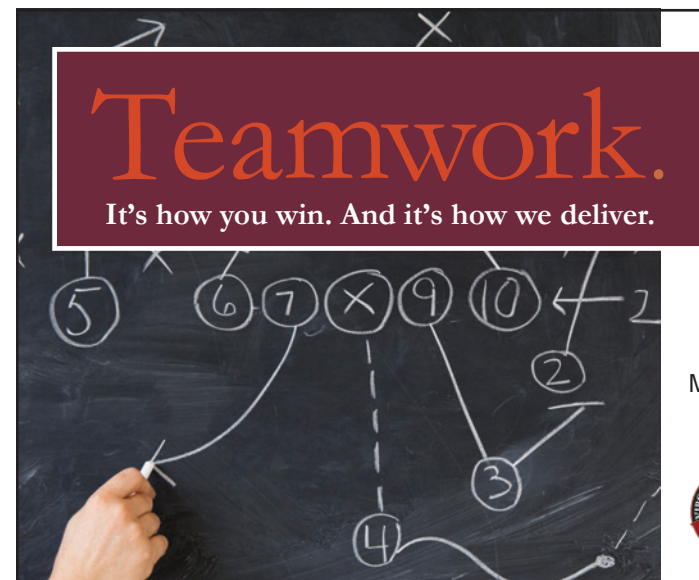
Unfortunately, this was one of those games where the Hokies basically won every statistical category except for the one that matters—the score. Tech out-gained Oklahoma State (518-488), and paced by a career-high 124 yards from Deshaun McCleese, out-rushed the Cowboys (248-137). The Hokies also hogged the ball for more than 38 minutes.

In addition, Tech got great performances from some of its younger players. McCleese led the way, but Phil Patterson—who saw extensive time because of the absence of Cam Phillips (injury)—caught seven passes, while Kumah and Hezekiah Grimsley each caught five.

Despite the loss, Tech's performance overall and the return of several talented young players creates optimism for spring practice and ultimately next fall. A group of incredible seniors have set the example going forward, a contingent that includes Phillips, Andrew Motuapuaka, Greg Stroman, Wyatt Teller and Brandon Facyson.

"They have a lot to be proud of," Fuente said of his 2017 team. "They accomplished a lot during the season. They won both of our rivalry games, and they won nine football games. Our kids have a lot of pride—a lot of pride in Virginia Tech, a lot of pride in themselves and this program. We knew we were going to get a great effort from our kids [tonight]." 

In his first career start, tailback Deshaun McCleese rushed for a career-high 124 yards in the Hokies' bowl loss to Oklahoma State.



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**R**oughly 10 weeks ago on a perfect fall Saturday afternoon, Greg Stroman parked himself at the 20-yard line at Virginia Tech's Lane Stadium and fielded a high, lazy punt from North Carolina punter Tom Sheldon. He made four or five moves to avoid would-be tacklers and then sprinted down the sideline un-impeded to the end zone.

On that journey, the normally stoic Justin Fuente tried to keep up. But the former college quarterback and now the 41-year-old head coach of the Hokies — long past his days of running sub-5.0 40's — ultimately slowed down and reveled in the glory of what turned out to be a 91-yard punt return.

"He's a lot faster than I am, I know that," Fuente said shortly thereafter, smiling. "It was just fun — to see him score from out of there, from my view ... Greg [Stroman] is a pretty special player, and he's an easy one to root for to do well. I still want all of our guys to do well, but he's kind of a special kid."

Without question, Greg Stroman was special this past season for the Hokies. That's not hyperbole. One only needs to look at his big plays to understand what he meant to the team.

There was the 91-yard punt return against the Tar Heels. The 61-yard punt return against Delaware on a day when the Hokies struggled offensively. The interception return for a touchdown against Georgia Tech that gave the Hokies a chance to win (they ultimately lost the game). The interception that led to the game-winning score against Pittsburgh. The deflected pass in the end zone against the Panthers to preserve that win.

Stroman led the team in interceptions and pass breakups, and he keyed the Hokies' success on special teams. Because of that, he earned first-team All-ACC honors.

But his teammates will tell you that Stroman deserves more than all-league recognition. They voted him as the 2017 MVP of the team.

"I feel like, if we didn't have Greg Stroman, we wouldn't have won as many games as we did," defensive tackle Tim Settle said. "Greg's just a different player. Special. One-of-a-kind-type guy to help us out on defense and score at any time. We can always count on him. You never know when he's going to make a big play."

"Greg has helped us a lot, especially with clutch moments, interceptions and stuff like that," mike linebacker Andrew Motuapuaka said. "He's definitely a competitor. We wouldn't be the defense we are today without him."

Stroman closed his Tech career in the Camping World Bowl. It was a largely successful one, though large and Stroman rarely go in the same sentence when using the literal definition of the word. Only four scholarship players weighed less than Stroman's listed 181 pounds this season — Bryce Watts, Hezekiah Grimsley, Khalil Ladler and C.J. Carroll — and the first three in that group are freshmen.

But the spindly Stroman never let size get in the way of success. He dominated the recreation league scene in Northern Virginia and then went on to more success at Stonewall Jackson High School in Manassas as a quarterback.

Once, he played despite being cursed with the flu, which ultimately forced a hospital visit just two days before a game against Freedom High. Yet that Friday night, he accounted for more than 500 yards of offense and five touchdowns.

"I had gone to the hospital that week, and that's when I weighed in," Stroman said. "I think I was 140, maybe 139. I was with my mom, but yeah, I played that game. We won that game."

Most college coaches loved his game at the time, but some expressed concern of Stroman's slight build. They also debated his position — quarterback or cornerback. Many felt he could only play cornerback at the collegiate level, but they rarely saw his skills on defense because he only played on defense once Stonewall Jackson made the playoffs.

“

*I feel like, if we didn't have Greg Stroman, we wouldn't have won as many games as we did. Greg's just a different player. Special. One-of-a-kind-type guy to help us out on defense and score at any time. We can always count on him. You never know when he's going to make a big play."*

Tim Settle on teammate Greg Stroman

”



Still, the coaching staff at UMass wasn't afraid. The coaches there recruited him as their quarterback of the future.

"Right after they offered me, my dad and I took a flight and went straight up there and talked to the coach," Stroman said. "I think it was a junior day. With them being my first and only offer [at the time], they were definitely being considered."

Stroman later received offers from FBS schools, namely Virginia Tech, Virginia and Duke, with Blue Devils coach David Cutcliffe offering him an opportunity to play quarterback. Stroman's mom, Priscilla, loved Cutcliffe, and all that kept Duke in the picture.

Stroman also liked UVA coach Mike London, but the Cavaliers were struggling at the time. In the end, former Tech assistant Torrian Gray and current defensive coordinator Bud Foster convinced Stroman to come to Blacksburg — fortunately.

"I think the relationship I had with Coach Gray was very strong, and Coach Foster," Stroman said. "Those guys had our area, and I came to camp here my sophomore or maybe my junior year, and I just had a great relationship with Coach Gray from then on. That's just how that went, and I felt it was not too close to home, but close to home, and my mom liked it and my dad liked it, and it just felt like the place to be."

As many know, Stroman bounced between offense and defense his first two years. As a freshman, he recorded three tackles, and he also rushed for four yards and caught a pass as a receiver in Tech's win over Cincinnati in the Military Bowl. The next year, he rushed for 12 yards on seven carries, mostly on jet sweeps, while also playing at cornerback.

The past two seasons, Tech's staff kept him at cornerback, and that paid off handsomely, as he intercepted seven passes and broke up 21.

"It's always fun having the ball in your hands, but I think I found my home at corner," Stroman said. "I like corner."

"You know, Stroman comes to work every day," Foster said. "He's one of the most competitive guys that we've had in our program. He's not the biggest guy, but he comes to work every day ... just comes and fights and competes and works at it every day, and you can see the results of that."

Of course, Tech fans also know that Stroman has been equally valuable as a punt returner. His four career punt returns for touchdowns rank second in school history behind DeAngelo Hall's five, and he also finished his career second in both punt returns and punt return yards.

Perhaps more impressively, he became just the third player in Tech history (John Ludlow, 1979-82; and Eddie Royal, 2004-07) to lead the Hokies in punt returns and yardage all four seasons of his career.

*Continued on page 18*

**Early  
INVESTMENT  
in STROMAN  
Provided  
BIG  
RETURNS**

*Greg Stroman played on both sides of the ball early in his career, but he became a playmaker as a cornerback the past two seasons, and he departed as one of the school's all-time greatest punt returners*  
by Jimmy Robertson



# Early INVESTMENT in STROMAN Provided BIG RETURNS


Continued  
from  
page 17

“I just think it’s courage and making sure you’re focused,” Stroman said of the skills needed to be a good punt returner. “If you’re not focused, the ball can definitely go through your hands or anything like that. You’ve got to have focus and courage and decision-making — decision-making is one of the biggest parts of that. Coach [James] Shibest [Tech’s special teams coordinator] always harps on wanting me to be aggressive, always be aggressive and take the aggressive side. I think all of those are important things.”

Stroman hopes his future in football continues. Like most players, he dreams of playing at the professional level, and specifically in the NFL. With his 6-foot height, long arms and top-end speed, he certainly makes for an intriguing prospect. Plus, his return abilities figure to make him even more valuable in the eyes of NFL personnel evaluators.

If a future in the NFL doesn’t work out, though, he has put himself in position for other options. He graduated in mid-December — in 3.5 years — with a degree in consumer studies, and a future helping other athletes to grow in a similar manner as him sounds appealing to him.

“I have a couple of different plans in my head, but I think I want to have my own training facility,” Stroman said. “I want to train high school kids, middle school kids — kids that want to get better at their sport and eventually make that grow. I would probably start around my hometown with that.”

The possibilities are numerous for Stroman, which seems only fitting. His future may well be reminiscent of being a punt returner — fielding an opportunity and going where only he wants to go without being caught. 



## GETTING TO KNOW GREG STROMAN

**Q: If you could trade places with someone for a day, who would it be?**

**GS:** LeBron James [of the Cleveland Cavaliers]. It’s because of what he can do on a basketball court, just the gift that God’s given him — being 6-8, fast, athletic and can jump out of the gym. Just those things.

**Q: What would be a dream vacation for you?**

**GS:** I’d say on an island by itself away from everything and everyone. Hang with my family and everyone that I wanted to be with in this whole world. I don’t think I have a specific city that I would want to live in.

**Q: Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat ... what’s your favorite?**

**GS:** Instagram. I like to see other people’s photos and videos.

**Q: What do you like the most about Blacksburg?**

**GS:** I think it’s just the guys that I’m playing with, really. It’s just fun. I mean, those guys, just competing every day and working every day and being able to chase a dream of winning a championship with all of those guys. It’s just definitely fun. That’s the beauty of it, I think.

**Q: Where do you see yourself in 10 years?**

**GS:** God willing, still playing football. I want to play football forever, but I know that it will end one day.



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# Early national signing period *no problem* for TECH football staff

*The Hokies’ coaches signed 24 prospects during in the inaugural early national signing period, and the class has been rated among the top 20 nationally by three recruiting services*  
by Jimmy Robertson

The first day of the new December early national signing period for prospective football prospects came and went, and the words “odd,” “different,” and “strange” were used to describe the day by many coaching staffs around the country, including Virginia Tech’s.

“I clicked over, after our staff meeting, on ESPN and ESPN2, and I didn’t see all the hype that you’ve seen in past signing days,” Tech defensive coordinator Bud Foster said. “So it’s interesting ... it was just different, when it’s all said and done.”

Despite the oddness of the timing surrounding the early signing period, Tech’s staff performed quite well, adding 24 prospects to the program. Though coaches rarely concern themselves with recruiting rankings — understandably so — they had to be pleased that ESPN rated the class at No. 15 nationally, while Rivals ranked it No. 16 nationally. 247Sports ranked the class No. 17 nationally — and all had the class rated third in the ACC behind those at Clemson and Miami.

This well-rounded class, though, isn’t quite complete. Head coach Justin Fuente said that he and his staff plan to target roughly a handful of prospects to finish out the class and hope that those prospects sign with the Hokies during the traditional signing period, which occurs in early February.

“We still have a couple spots, though not very many, that we are still trying to chip away at,” Fuente said. “So when it is finally wrapped up, we can sit back and evaluate where it is all at. Obviously, there was a large portion of it today [Dec. 20], and I’m incredibly happy about it. I still think there are one or two things we will work on before heading into February.”

The class includes six prospects from Virginia, five from North Carolina and four from Florida in keeping with the program’s traditional

recruiting bases. The coaches focused heavily on defensive backs, offensive linemen, receivers and those listed as “athletes,” as they primarily went about injecting speed and playmaking ability on both sides of the ball.

The staff also addressed the most important position on the field — quarterback — signing two prospects to letters of intent. The two are DeJuan Ellis, a 5-foot-11, 180-pounder from Accokeek, Maryland and Quincy Patterson II, a 6-4, 230-pounder from Chicago. Ellis threw for more than 6,500 yards and accounted for 64 touchdowns in his career, while Patterson probably received more national attention because of his participation in the Elite 11, a quarterback competition in Beaverton, Oregon.

“Skill-wise, he has that unique skill type, in my opinion, to do both [run and pass],” Tech offensive coordinator Brad Cornelsen said of Patterson. “He’s a skilled, talented runner. He has the durability to be an inside and outside runner. He has those types of instincts, talent, and he has a big-time arm. He’s really technically sound and fundamental in the way that he throws the ball, and he just has a huge ceiling from that standpoint of being able to stand in the pocket and be a big-time thrower.”

Those two quarterbacks will be joined by three receivers — all of whom stand taller than 6-2. The contingent includes 6-3 Darryle Simmons from Philadelphia, 6-2 Kaleb Smith from Bumpass, Virginia; and 6-2 Tré Turner from Oak Ridge, North Carolina. Turner may be the most accomplished of the group, as he caught 123 passes for 2,614 yards and 31 touchdowns during his career at Northwest Guilford High.

Those three figure to help a receiving corps that has lacked depth the past two seasons. In 2016, the Hokies relied heavily on Bucky Hodges, Isaiah Ford and Cam Phillips. This fall, with Hodges and Ford off to the NFL, Phillips assumed much of the load, while the staff tried to develop younger players such as Sean Savoy, Hezekiah Grimsley and Eric Kumah.

But now Phillips departs, which necessitated the need to add more speed and talent at the receiver spots. In fact, speed and talent were the themes at many positions.

“I just feel like we got a little bit faster last year, and this year, we took a large step forward,” Fuente said. “You start talking about the guys who have put up the track times, and then you watch them play live and see the explosiveness. Some of them are offensive guys, and some of them are defensive guys. It is very difficult or impossible to teach somebody to run fast, but we feel like we can teach them a whole lot of other things.”

The four offensive linemen — Walker Culver from Soddy-Daisy, Tennessee; Christian Darrisaw from Upper Marlboro, Maryland; John Harris from Hoschton, Georgia; and Luke Tenuta from Crozet, Virginia — comprise the front of the future. Tailback Caleb Steward from Jacksonville, Florida and tight end James Mitchell from Big Stone Gap, Virginia added to the skill haul. Mitchell was the state’s Class 2A Offensive Player of the Year.

On defense, the Hokies desperately needed defensive backs, as cornerbacks Greg Stroman and Brandon Facyson graduate, and the program lacks depth behind them. Thus, the coaches brought in six defensive backs, and they all bring height and length — much in the same mold as Stroman, Facyson and Adonis Alexander.

The signees include 6-1 DJ Crossen from Greensboro, North Carolina; 6-o Chamarri Conner of Jacksonville, Florida; 6-1 Jermaine Waller from Washington, D.C.; 5-10 Nadir Thompson from Elm City, North Carolina; 6-o Nasir Peoples from Abington, Pennsylvania; and Jeremy Webb, a 6-3, 190-pounder from Florida who played two seasons at ASA College, a junior college in New York.

Given his experience, Webb probably possesses the ability to work his way into a prominent role rather quickly.

2017-18 FOOTBALL RECRUITING						
NAME	POS.	HT.	WT.	HOMETOWN	HIGH SCHOOL	RECRUITED BY
Eli Adams	DL	5-11	236	Rock Hill, SC	South Pointe	James Shibest
Keshon Artis	LB	5-11	227	Chesapeake, VA	Oscar Smith	Zohn Burden
Cole Beck	Ath.	6-0	185	Blacksburg, VA	Blacksburg	Brad Cornelsen
Armani Chatman	Ath.	6-0	173	Virginia Beach, VA	Bishop Sullivan	Zohn Burden
Chamarri Conner	DB	6-0	195	Jacksonville, FL	Trinity Christian	Charley Wiles
DJ Crossen	DB	6-1	186	Greensboro, NC	Dudley	Charley Wiles
Walker Culver	OL	6-5	275	Soddy-Daisy, TN	Baylor School	Brad Cornelsen
Christian Darrisaw	OL	6-5	290	Upper Marlboro, MD	Riverdale Baptist School/Fork Union	Holmon Wiggins
DeJuan Ellis	QB	5-11	180	Accokeek, MD	McDonough School	Galen Scott
John Harris	OL	6-4	278	Hoschton, GA	Mill Creek	Vance Vice
Joe Kane	DL	6-2	280	Wake Forest, NC	Heritage	Charley Wiles
James Mitchell	TE	6-4	227	Big Stone Gap, VA	Union	Charley Wiles
Quincy Patterson	QB	6-4	229	Chicago, IL	Solorio Academy	Brad Cornelsen
Nasir Peoples	DB	6-0	178	Abington, PA	Archbishop Wood	Brian Mitchell
Oscar Shadley	LS	6-0	230	Naples, FL	Golden Gate	James Shibest
Darryle Simmons	WR	6-3	200	Philadelphia, PA	St. Joe's Prep	Brian Mitchell
Kaleb Smith	WR	6-2	180	Bumpass, VA	Louisa	Galen Scott
Caleb Steward	RB	5-11	203	Jacksonville, FL	Ed White	Charley Wiles
Luke Tenuta	OL	6-7	275	Crozet, VA	Western Albemarle	Vance Vice
Nadir Thompson	DB	5-10	170	Elm City, NC	Southern Nash	Charley Wiles
Alan Tisdale	LB	6-3	208	Greensboro, NC	Page	Charley Wiles
Tré Turner	WR	6-2	177	Oak Ridge, NC	Northwest Guilford	Charley Wiles
Jermaine Waller	DB	6-1	178	Washington, D.C.	The Avalon School	Holmon Wiggins
Jeremy Webb	DB	6-3	190	East Mims, FL	ASA College/Adlai Stevenson	Brian Mitchell

Continued on page 22

Caleb Steward



Eli Adams



Quincy Patterson





Early national signing period *Continued from page 21*

“You know, I’m really excited about Jeremy for a couple of reasons,” Foster said. “No. 1 is his ability. No. 2 is his maturity. We’re losing two corners to graduation. We’re young there, [and] we’re bringing in some young guys this winter. Being a guy that’s mature, knows how to work, knows how to compete ... I know Coach [Brian] Mitchell [Tech’s cornerbacks coach] went out to watch him practice and watch him play and was really impressed with his work ethic and his demeanor in practice and how he approached practice—and that’s what we’re going to need.”

Fuente compared Tech’s situation at the defensive backs positions, specifically cornerback, to the situation at the wide receiver spots—thus explaining the rationale for signing so many.

“We had some really good players, [but] we just didn’t have great depth,” Fuente said. “We’ve been really good in the secondary, just don’t have great depth.”

“When you play with five guys in the secondary, essentially three safeties and two corners, I just think it is going to take some time to catch up on some depth. I think that is the biggest reason we signed so many guys. We are trying to have three-deep at each position in the secondary. I do feel good about the amount of defensive backs and the type of players that are coming in.”

The other defense signees include defensive lineman Eli Adams from Rock Hill, South Carolina; defensive lineman Joe Kane from Wake Forest, North Carolina; and linebacker Keshon Artis from Chesapeake, Virginia. Foster compared the 5-11, 236-pound Adams to former Tech great Corey Moore.

“Eli is the guy who is the closest thing I’ve really seen to that kind of guy, as far as his explosiveness, his ability to make plays on the other side of the line of scrimmage, and as far as a guy that was tough to block one-

on-one, a guy that played with tremendous effort and can bend his body and redirect and can be very disruptive,” Foster said. “He’s probably a little bigger, as far as his weight and that type of thing, but he has similar characteristics, and I hope that he will continue to develop that way because Corey was pretty special.”

Last, but certainly not least, the staff signed three players listed as “athletes”—those versatile enough to play any number of positions. That group includes Blacksburg native Cole Beck; Armani Chatman from Virginia Beach, Virginia; and Alan Tisdale from Greensboro, North Carolina.


The 6-0, 185-pound Beck, also a phenomenal track and field athlete, rushed for 4,723 yards and 81 touchdowns in his career at Blacksburg High, while Chatman worked mostly at receiver at Bishop Sullivan Catholic. Tisdale played mostly defense at Page High, racking up 112 tackles, including 17.5 for a loss.

The final member of the class is Oscar Shadley, a long snapper from Naples, Florida. One service considered Shadley the best long snapper in the nation, and he figures to move into the starting lineup quickly considering Colton Taylor’s departure.

Tech’s staff will get to work with many of these young men right away, as several plan to enroll for the spring semester—a group that includes Adams, Crossen, Darrisaw, Kane, Shadley, Steward, Tisdale, Turner, Smith and Waller.

National pundits, and even some local ones, questioned how much recruiting would be a distraction from bowl preparations, but Fuente didn’t feel that the December signing period was that big of a deal in that regard.

“I don’t know if the early signing day has been a distraction,” he said. “You are always dealing with finals, the holidays and bowl prep, so I don’t think it was a huge issue.”

The traditional signing period in February remains intact. Any additions to this class would be able to sign a letter of intent starting Feb. 7. 

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# EYE TOWARD THE FUTURE.

*Devin Wilson's career has been filled with twists and turns, but the Virginia Tech guard will depart the university having played two sports, received two degrees and positioned himself for an even brighter future*

by Jimmy Robertson

# FOR THE PAST

# GRATEFUL,



# “

*Obviously, I've had my ups and down — minutes have gone down, playing a different sport and I didn't even play in that sport, all that. Trust me, I'm in tune with all the realities that have happened, but I wouldn't change it because it's made me who I am. I think that's going to benefit me 10 years down the road.*

Devin Wilson on his college career

# ”

Occasionally, hard-working, selfless administrative assistants across Virginia Tech's campus find that the candy sitting in the jars on their desks mysteriously goes missing in large quantities, leaving them to wonder as to the identity of the mischievous thief.

A campus-wide search of backpacks might lead to the culprit, but to narrow the scope of possibilities, investigators would do well to start in the Hahn Hurst Basketball Practice Center. Rumors keep floating around that a worthy suspect spends a lot of his time there.

Actually, Devin Wilson plans some day to go to law school, but the future counselor is willing to save everyone a lot of time in this particular case.

In other words, guilty as charged.

“I love to eat candy,” he once revealed in a “5 Things You Didn't Know About Me” video. “I eat it for breakfast, lunch and dinner.”

Wilson's candy of choice is the Sour Patch soft and chewy variety, preferably watermelon flavored, but he rarely discriminates.

Yet Virginia Tech fans hardly seem willing to hold this minor vice against their hard-working backup point guard/shooting guard/forward and one of a trio of seniors on the men's basketball team. After all, how does one serve as judge and jury and throw the book at this fine young man when he has played two sports at this university during his career and plans on graduating with two degrees, and most importantly, possesses a future filled with possibilities?

One really can't, especially after the sacrifices made by the “glue” guy on Tech's squad and a former wide receiver on the Hokies' football squad. Most know his story, or at least are familiar with it, and many categorize it as a rollercoaster ride, but Wilson refuses to use that term.

In his mind, the word “rollercoaster” insinuates ups and downs — and there haven't been any downs.

“It's been a great ride,” he said shortly before the Hokies departed for a recent road trip. “So I wouldn't say it was a rollercoaster. It's just been a lot of different turns that I didn't expect to happen coming into college, that's for sure.”

Like most at the prep level, Wilson dominated — in two sports — and as a senior, he expected to play basketball at a mid-major school. But his life took its first drastic turn when James Johnson offered him a scholarship in the spring of 2013. The Virginia Tech men's basketball coach at the time, Johnson needed another guard after the university declined to admit Donte Clark, who wound up at UMass. Wilson, who starred at Montour High in McKees Rock, Pennsylvania, represented an intriguing option.

As a senior at Montour, Wilson received interest from football coaches, too, which probably hindered his basketball recruitment, as many wondered which sport he really wanted to play at the collegiate level. He said he probably would have signed with George Mason to play basketball, but Tech's offer — his lone Power 5 offer — forced him to reconsider.

“When I came to visit, I loved it,” he said. “I loved the campus. I loved the people. I even saw a couple of people that I knew from back home. The guys, I met a couple of guys. Jarell Eddie was here. Adam [Smith] was here. They just took me all over the campus, and I ended up falling in love with all of it.”

Johnson expected to redshirt Wilson, but injuries forced his hand, and Wilson surprisingly burst on the scene as a freshman, starting all 31 games and making the ACC's All-Freshman Team after averaging 9.2 points and 4.8 assists per game. The Hokies, though, struggled badly, going 9-22 and winning just two conference games. They finished in last place in the ACC, which precipitated a coaching change, as then-new AD Whit Babcock brought in Buzz Williams to run the program. Numerous players left, and Wilson himself gave it some thought.

It only made sense, too. Johnson gave Wilson his big opportunity, and now he was leaving. Would Williams give him the same fair shot?

Williams brands his roster as “OKG's” — “Our Kind of Guys.” Could Wilson be one of those?

He met with Williams and decided that he wanted to find out.

“I always knew I was his [Williams'] type of guy,” Wilson said. “The way I grew up, the way I played, it kind of matches his style, like diving on the floor, not really worrying about if someone is yelling at me, playing hard at all times ... I kind of played like that my freshman year, too.”

*Continued on page 26*

## DEVIN WILSON'S TOP PERFORMANCES

**Jan. 19, 2014** — Wilson scored 20 points and handed out seven assists in Tech's 70-63 loss at Notre Dame. He hit 7 of 10 from the floor, including a 3-pointer and grabbed four rebounds in the effort.

**Jan. 22, 2014** — Wilson scored 25 of his career-high 26 points in the second half of Tech's 83-77 loss to Wake Forest. He hit 6 of 10 from the floor, including three 3-pointers, as Tech sliced a 19-point deficit to single digits before succumbing to the Demon Deacons.

**Feb. 15, 2014** — Wilson hit 3 of 4 from the free-throw line in the final 34 seconds to carry the Hokies to a 52-45 upset Miami. He scored 12 points and dished out nine assists in the win.

**Jan. 27, 2015** — Wilson scored five points, grabbed five rebounds and handed out seven assists in the Hokies' 70-67 overtime upset of Pittsburgh. He played a season-high 41 minutes in the game.

**Feb. 25, 2015** — Wilson scored 10 points and dished out a career-high 11 assists in the Hokies' 91-86 defeat at home against then-No. 4 Duke. He missed tying the school record by an assist, but still holds the program record for assists in an ACC game.



# EYE TOWARD THE FUTURE

Continued  
from  
page 25

“I always knew I was his kind of guy. There was never really a thought process behind that. It was just a matter of where the program was going and if it was the right fit for me. I felt that it was, and that’s why I stayed.”

Wilson started 28 games in Williams’ first season as the coach, averaging 6.5 points and 4.2 assists per game. But his playing time diminished during his junior season, as Williams brought in more talent, including guards Seth Allen and Justin Robinson. His playing time dipped from more than 30 minutes per game to 21.

He refused to complain, however, in large part because he respected Williams and because the Hokies started winning. They won seven of their final 10 regular-season games to end the 2015-16 season and received an NIT berth, where they knocked off Princeton in the first round before succumbing to BYU to end the season.

“It’s frustrating because I’m a competitor,” Wilson said of the decreased playing time. “I want to be out there, and I want to be in the mix as much as possible, but what I’ve learned and as I’ve grown up, it’s not about kind of your individuals. That’ll only satisfy you for a short amount of time. It’s really about the team.

“If I can go in and play 37 minutes and we’re only winning nine games, then something’s wrong. But if I can go in and play 15-20 minutes a game, and we’re making it to the NCAA Tournament, then something is right. I wholeheartedly believe that. When I was younger, I didn’t believe that as much, but as I’ve gotten older, I’ve learned to believe in that and trust in that wholeheartedly.”



In his final year with the men's basketball program, Devin Wilson is mostly a key contributor off the bench for the Hokies, having played in every game and started three of them.

Wilson received yet another curve shortly after his junior season ended. A football staff member told him that new head coach Justin Fuente was going to approach him about playing receiver during spring practice. The news caught Wilson by surprise, but he thought little of it, chalking it up to departmental rumors.

Except two days after the game at BYU, he received the call from the coaching staff, which extended him the offer. He thought about it for a day, talked it over with Williams and said, “Yes” to the opportunity. The next day, he reported for spring practice.

Williams caught Wilson by surprise — he was all for the idea.

“He wasn’t really thinking about not having me for the year in basketball, but later down in life,” Wilson said. “Just all the connections I’d make playing football and to be able to say I played football ... he just thought it would be an overall great experience for me as a person, and I think that’s why he was all for it.”

Wilson’s football experience consisted of six games in 2016. A backup receiver, he played a little on special teams, and for the season, he caught two passes for 13 yards.

Yet he appreciated the opportunity. After all, he got to be a part of a 52-10 win over Virginia, and he went to both the ACC Championship Game and the Belk Bowl.

“I loved it,” he said. “Obviously, as you get older, you realize that it’s unrealistic [to play two sports], so being able to do both was really, really fun. I wouldn’t take it back for anything.”

Wilson returned to the basketball team after the bowl game, but by then, the Hokies were 12 games into the season, and he needed at least a few weeks to get into basketball shape. So Williams and Wilson agreed to a redshirt season.

The consequences wound up being that Wilson missed the Hokies’ on-court success. Yes, he helped in practices, with game-day preparations and by serving as a sideline leader, but he missed out on participating in the NCAA Tournament, as the program won 22 games and received an NCAA Tournament bid for the first time in a decade.

“I thought it was an awesome run,” he said. “I wish I’d have been able to be a part of the on-court success that we had, making it to the NCAA Tournament. It was hard not to be out there, but I was still trying to help guys in practice and helping off the court as much as I could.”

Wilson hopes to be on the court for an NCAA Tournament game this March. Tech fared quite well during non-conference action, with nice wins over Washington, Iowa and Ole Miss, and hopefully that success continues throughout ACC play. Bullish about the Hokies’ chances, Wilson astutely pointed out that the Hokies possess a nice blend of youth and experience and a lot of interchangeable parts, which makes them tough to defend and attack.


Then again, “astute” is the perfect word to describe Wilson, who already holds his bachelor’s degree in political science and remains on track for a second undergraduate degree, with this one in English. Like most, he wants to continue playing basketball in some fashion once he departs Virginia Tech, but he also knows the value of a plan B.

Law school may be in his future, though not to defend himself against any candy-stealing charges.

“I ultimately want to be an athletic director or an NBA GM [general manager],” he said.

Whatever his future ends up becoming, he feels a deep sense of appreciation for Virginia Tech despite the twists and turns along his college life’s path. Not many get to play basketball in the ACC, not many get to play two sports while in college, and not many earn two degrees — without having to pay a dime for them.

This is a young man who simply gets it.

“Obviously, I’ve had my ups and down — minutes have gone down, playing a different sport and I didn’t even play in that sport, all that,” he said. “Trust me, I’m in tune with all the realities that have happened, but I wouldn’t change it because it’s made me who I am. I think that’s going to benefit me 10 years down the road. Not thinking about it now, but 10 years down the road, I’m going to look back and say, ‘I’m glad I stuck with it. I’m glad I went through that because now I’m here.’” 







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# Tech athletics *ahead of game* when it comes to mental health care

*A collaborative approach by Tech's sports medicine staff and sport psychologists has the department meeting student-athlete needs on mental health issues, handling NCAA priority areas, and looking for ways to do more*

by Jimmy Robertson

Billy Joel. Oprah Winfrey.

Martin Luther King Jr. Elton John. Ken Griffey Jr.

Given his relative youth, Austin Cannon would not seem to have a lot in common with such a distinguished group of immensely successful people. Yet like all these celebrities, the backup right guard on Virginia Tech's football team squared off in a battle against depression and anxiety — and attempted to take his own life to win.

Fortunately, Cannon survived, and these days, he continues to take steps toward prosperity, with trained professionals in the sports medicine and sport psychology areas of the Virginia Tech Athletics Department helping and guiding him along the way.

Cannon's backstory resembles those of many others heard by Dr. Gary Bennett, the department's full-time sport psychologist, and Dr. Paul Knackstedt, who splits his time between the athletics department and the Cook Counseling Center on Tech's campus. Cannon struggled with a series of devastating events in his life within a relatively short period of time — his grandmother's passing, his father's cancer diagnosis, and a relationship breakup — and a concussion suffered in a football practice on Aug. 9, 2016 put him over the top.

While sitting in his dorm room later that evening, he grabbed a knife out of a drawer, and the Mechanicsville, Virginia product stuck it in his leg. Blood poured forth, as Cannon sat there. Fortunately, one of the football team trainers already was on the way to the dorm room to check on Cannon, and that probably led to the saving of his life.

"I think the concussion kind of topped it off," Cannon said. "It was the last straw. I immediately regretted doing it. I thought it was selfish of me to do what I did."

Tech's sports medicine staff, along with rescue personnel on campus, ultimately stabilized the leg, and Cannon then spent a week at New Horizons Crisis Stabilization in Radford, Virginia for a week of treatment to get to the root of his issues.

Head coach Justin Fuente, offensive line coach Vance Vice and team chaplain Dave Gittings visited him, and Danielle Bartelstein, the senior director for football operations, stopped by every day.

Today, Cannon meets regularly with Bennett as part of his ongoing recovery. He is one of an ever-growing number of Tech student-athletes using the resources available within the little known, but extremely important Tech sport psychology office.

In the mid-1990s, the Tech athletics department became one of the first in the country to bring a sport psychologist onboard to work with student-athletes. To review incidents involving poor student-athlete behavior at the time, then-university president Dr. Paul Torgersen formed a committee, and one of the recommendations was to have a psychologist available. Thus, Bennett, who was working at the Cook Counseling Center then, became the liaison between the center and the athletics department.

Bennett later moved into a part-time role, splitting time between Cook and the athletics department, and then in 2007, he became the first full-time sport psychologist within an athletics department in the ACC, with an office inside the Merryman Athletics Center.

Today, numerous schools are trying to emulate Tech's model, wanting to protect student-athletes in light of the epidemic of mental health issues occurring within the United States.

"The numbers increase every year, and there is a huge push by the NCAA to have resources available for student-athletes who are having mental health issues," Bennett said. "We were one of the first schools to have a position in house, but I think now about 10 of the ACC schools have similar positions, and nationwide, the number continues to increase."

In 2016, Brian Hainline, the NCAA's chief medical officer, outlined nine strategic health-related priorities for the NCAA, and mental health was one of those. He put forth a series of guidelines, including the calling for financial support for sport psychologists, a physical location for their offices within athletics departments, and updated screenings and procedures for at-risk student-athletes, among others.

Fortunately, the Virginia Tech Athletics Department has been ahead of the game. Way ahead.

Bennett, Knackstedt and the sports medicine staff members have taken a team approach, implementing programs and educating Tech's student-athletes. More importantly, though, Bennett and Knackstedt serve as counselors, inviting student-athletes to come to their offices at the Merryman Athletics Center — havens for student-athletes in dark places.

Their own backgrounds give them additional credibility, as both Bennett and Knackstedt were student-athletes at their respective colleges. Both played baseball, with Bennett at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky and Knackstedt at William & Mary. They help Tech's student-athletes cope with any number of issues over the course of a given year, including those ranging from ADD/ADHD (attention deficit disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) to anxiety and stress to severe depression to simply wanting to perform better in their respective sports.

Student-athletes, more than any other constituency on a campus, are at risk of mental health problems.

Their daily schedules include combinations of classes, weight-lifting sessions, film sessions, practices, study halls and homework, leaving them little time to decompress or to take care of all their responsibilities.

"The biggest thing that I see is anxiety or stress," Bennett said. "They say that their lives are so stressful, and I don't know that people outside of here would appreciate what they have to go through, but to me, it's [being a student-athlete] like having two full-time jobs.

"Depression is probably the second. Every year, we have a handful of student-athletes that we have to hospitalize because they're so depressed that they're having thoughts of hurting themselves. You don't know what would have happened if we didn't have this resource available, but we've seen what would have happened at other schools that don't have a psychologist available. I think too often that's the impetus for an athletics department to start a program — after something tragic has happened."

Preventing those tragedies from occurring, or at least reducing the risk, requires student-athletes to seek help, and therein lays the biggest challenge for Bennett, Knackstedt and the entire athletics department. Student-athletes fear being seen as weak, or soft, especially among their teammates and coaches.

*Continued  
on page  
30*

**“**  
*I don't want to be remembered as Austin Cannon, the football player. I want to be remembered as Austin Cannon, the guy who helped me prevent my taking my own life, the guy who cares about others ... the guy who wants to change the world one life at a time.*  
**”**  
— Austin Cannon



# Tech athletics ahead of game when it comes to mental health care

Continued from page 29

So they often keep things bottled up, which can lead to destructive consequences.

M.J. Ulrich knows all about this struggle. A member of the Tech women’s swimming and diving team and the current president of Tech’s Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC), Ulrich struggled with the adjustment to college life as a freshman in 2014. She also waged a battle within herself as to whether to seek help, as she fell into depression.

Ultimately, the good side won. She decided to visit with Bennett, and he counseled her and worked with Tech’s sports medicine staff members on the proper medication for her depression. They made sure she did not violate any NCAA drug policy rules, all the while protecting her privacy.

“In the eyes of society, you never want to admit that you have a problem or need help, especially as a student-athlete because you want to be seen as that strong figure and that role model for people,” Ulrich said. “You don’t want it to ruin your image and what people might think of you. The last thing I wanted people to think was that I was needy or wasn’t

able to support myself, therefore, unable to support my teammates.

“That was the most difficult part — admitting to myself that I had a problem. Once I overcame that, it’s been much better and very easy to manage.”

The good news is that more student-athletes are conquering those fears. The numbers say so.

In Bennett’s first year in a part-time role within the athletics department, he saw approximately 30-40 student-athletes. This past year, he and Knackstedt teamed to see 282. That number represents roughly half of the student-athlete population at Tech.

Some probably view that number as disturbing. Yet the sport psychologists view it differently.

“At the end of the day, Dr. Bennett and I see that as a good thing that they are coming forward,” Knackstedt said. “Are there more things that could be addressed before the individuals come in to give some education and provide some skills that they could practice before they get to us? I think so. We haven’t quite found the method to get the information and deliver these group services often to big chunks of the student-athlete population. We’re working on that and doing our best to get more information to more people, but ultimately, Dr. Bennett and I don’t see the high numbers as something that we need to continually address.”

Knackstedt brings up a second challenge

facing he, Bennett and those in sports medicine—finding a way to be proactive to alleviate future issues. They want to get on the front end of those issues, but how?

They do meet with teams and educate student-athletes on the services offered. They attend athletics events to develop the relationships with the student-athletes. Each semester, they conduct a “Mindfulness Workshop” designed to alleviate stress and anxiety, but that isn’t overly well attended. Student-athletes just simply lack the time to fit a session like this into their schedules.

“It’s a work in progress, I’ll be honest with you,” Knackstedt said. “I think our goal is to continue to offer unique and dynamic services that can meet the needs of people.

“Part of what we’re looking at is how we can get the information to student-athletes without adding another big obligation to their weekly schedules. That’s what we’re up against in terms of disseminating the information to the appropriate people—the time crunch and going up against other obligations that student-athletes take on when they do have the time.”

Ultimately, they work with the sports medicine staff to continue to treat Tech’s student-athletes, while trying to figure out the future for mental health services among that group. All staff members collect information, form opinions and then try to create a long-term vision for care.

Fortunately, Tech AD Whit Babcock understands the importance of sport psychology and continues to be proactive, while many AD’s continue to play catch-up on the topic. The Virginia Tech Athletics Department plans to continue devoting more resources to the sport psychology area.

“We need more staffing, and we’re working on that,” Bennett said. “Cook and our administration have a good relationship, and I’m still part of the Cook staff, so I get lots of benefits from being a part of that center in terms of psychiatric resources. So at this level, we need more staffing.

“At a larger level [nationwide], we need to keep getting the word out there that student-athletes aren’t immune from having mental health issues. They have a lot of the same issues that non-student-athletes have, and on top of that, the stress of being a student-athlete ... So getting the word out there and making sure that schools have the resources in place, hopefully within departments, is key.”

Meanwhile, they can take some comfort in seeing their work pay dividends. Ulrich, for example, continues to pursue a degree in human nutrition, foods and exercise, while swimming for the Hokies, serving as the president of SAAC and participating as a member of the Leadership Advisory Team within the department’s Leadership Institute.

Perhaps more importantly, she shares her story with those around her—a brave step

in the recovery process.

“I wouldn’t go as far as to say I wouldn’t be at Virginia Tech, but I would go as far as saying that I wouldn’t be living my full potential,” she said when asked about the impact of Tech’s sport psychology area on her.

Cannon may be the biggest success story. He continues to meet periodically with Bennett, but a year after stabbing himself, he had one of his better semesters academically. He also worked his way up the depth chart in his sport, and he even started the “Speak Up” movement, a Twitter-inspired undertaking that implores others to speak up about mental health issues.

And he, too, shares his story. He recently told it to several hundred people at an event at the German Club, with many teammates there to support him.


“The positive feedback I’ve gotten back is pretty neat,” Cannon said. “I don’t want to be



Dr. Gary Bennett oversees Virginia Tech athletics' sport psychology area and has been helping student-athletes since the mid-1990s.

remembered as Austin Cannon, the football player. I want to be remembered as Austin Cannon, the guy who helped me prevent my taking my own life, the guy who cares about others ... the guy who wants to change the world one life at a time.”

There is a lot of *Ut Prosim* in that statement, and credit him, Ulrich and so many other Tech student-athletes for seeking assistance from the sport psychology area within the athletics department.

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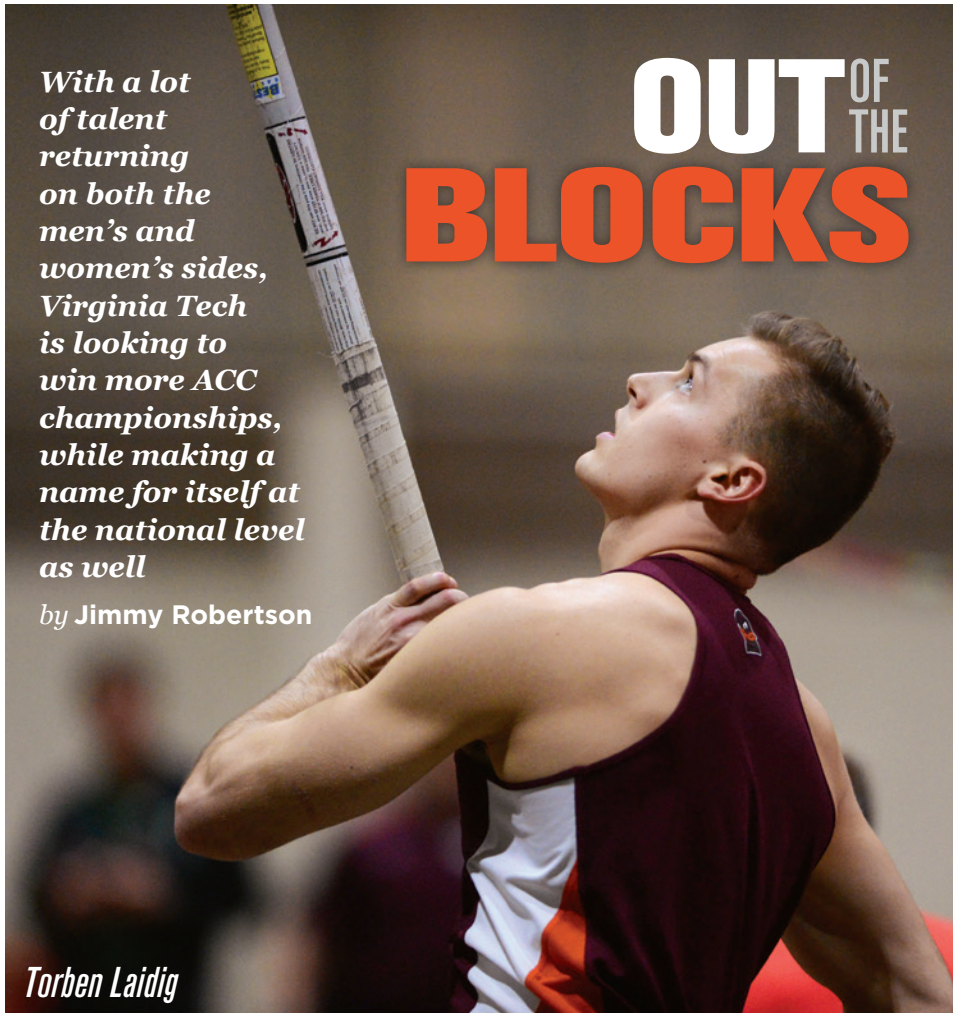
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*With a lot of talent returning on both the men’s and women’s sides, Virginia Tech is looking to win more ACC championships, while making a name for itself at the national level as well*

*by Jimmy Robertson*

In 2000, Warner Brothers released The Perfect Storm, a movie starring George Clooney and Mark Wahlberg and based on a real-life storm that devastated the East Coast in 1991.

For Dave Cianelli, the perfect storm occurred last spring and was a much more pleasant experience.

Cianelli, the director of Virginia Tech’s track and field programs, saw his and his staff’s recent recruiting efforts pay off in a big way, as both the men’s and women’s teams combined to win three ACC championships, with both of them winning ACC outdoor crowns. On the national level, Irena Sediva won her second national title and the program’s 16th overall. The men’s team finished seventh at the NCAA indoor meet—the program’s highest finish ever at the national indoor meet—and the women’s team came in 11th at the NCAA outdoor meet, which was the program’s second-best finish at that meet.

Cianelli wound up winning his 12th and 13th ACC Coach of the Year honors.

“Well yeah, it was sort of a perfect storm, the way everything came together with indoors and outdoors for the men and outdoors for the women,” Cianelli admitted. “And then the cross country team had an excellent fall as well [the men were second at the ACC meet

this past October, the women third]. So it was a very, very good year for us, and now it is sort of time to turn the page.”

The Tech men and women hope to repeat their success on the track this winter and spring, as the two squads opened the 2018 indoor season at the Nittany Lion Challenge held Jan. 13 in State College, Pennsylvania. Both teams lost key contributors from last season, with the women seeing both Sediva and two-time NCAA silver medalist Hanna Green depart and the men bidding farewell to two-time All-American Drew Piazza.

Yet of the 12 Hokies who earned All-America honors during the outdoor season, eight of them return. Of the 10 who earned All-America honors during the indoor season, seven return.

So the Hokies certainly have the goods to add to their ACC title collection this winter and spring.

“I think, collectively, I’m excited for all of the groups because, looking at our men’s and women’s teams, I believe this collection of student-athletes is probably as talented as we have ever had since I’ve been here,” Cianelli said. “That doesn’t guarantee anything, but it gives you the opportunity to have a lot of success. If we keep them healthy and develop them, we really have a good collection of

returnees and newcomers that I think will keep both the men’s and women’s teams at a high level.

“I think both teams will be in the mix at the ACC meets, and also I think we have a very good chance to place very high at the NCAA Championships. I’m very excited to get things going and see what we can do. I’m ready to go.”

Here is a look at each of the disciplines, as the Hokies start the 2018 track and field seasons:

## MEN’S DISTANCE

### TOP RETURNERS

Daniel Jaskowak, Patrick Joseph, Neil Gourley, Peter Seufer, Vincent Ciattei, Diego Zarate, Jack Joyce

### NEWCOMERS

Ben Fleming, Osman Humeida, Bashir Mosavel-Lo, Dave Whitfield, Will Griffen, Thierry Siewe Yanga

### OVERVIEW

The men’s distance and mid-distance crew represents arguably the strongest part of the men’s team and led the way for the Hokies to claim both the ACC’s indoor and outdoor team titles in 2017. Tech lost Piazza, an indoor and outdoor All-American, to graduation, but much of the talent returns.

Gourley (1,500) and Seufer (10,000) both won ACC crowns during the outdoor season, while Ciattei (mile) and Joseph (800) claimed ACC gold during the indoor campaign. They continued their success at the NCAA level, too, as Jaskowak and Ciattei, along with Greg Chiles and Kevin Cianfarini, nearly guided the Hokies to an indoor national title in the distance medley relay, finishing second. Gourley and Joseph earned All-America honors during both the indoor season and outdoor seasons, while Ciattei and Seufer earned second-team All-America honors during the outdoor season.

Unfortunately, Jaskowak, Gourley and Joseph only have indoor eligibility remaining, but Seufer and Ciattei provide plenty of experience and talent, and a group of talented newcomers should help the squad overcome those losses.

### DISTANCE COACH BEN THOMAS’ TAKE

“We had a talk with our seniors, kind of the beginning of the last with such a great group of seniors. We started with cross country, and it was like you didn’t want the season to end because they have just been so clutch. They have been such great ambassadors for our program and school. So I’m going to enjoy it. Yes, I’m going to take, not just the meets, but enjoying the last hard cycle of practices with these guys, and hopefully we get them to the [starting] line about to run the best races of their lives. That would be something pretty special if we could do that.”

## WOMEN’S DISTANCE

### TOP RETURNERS

Katie Kennedy, Lauren Berman, Laurie Barton, Sarah Edwards, Sara Freix, Kayla Richardson, Rachel Pocratsky

### NEWCOMERS

Ellie Brush, Katy Lobeda, Emily Schiesl

### OVERVIEW

The biggest loss on either the men’s or women’s teams came when Green graduated after one of the greatest careers in Tech track and field history. She departed as a six-time ACC gold medalist and a six-time All-American, and she holds or shares five school records.

So can the Tech women’s team replace her? Well, Tech’s cupboard certainly isn’t bare.

Edwards returns after an outstanding freshman season in which she won the ACC title in the 3,000-meter steeplechase during the outdoor season, and she also earned All-America honors at the NCAA’s outdoor meet. She carried that success into the summer, winning the gold medal in the same event at the Pan American Junior Championships.

Barton also enjoyed a nice freshman campaign. She came in fifth in the 800 at the ACC’s outdoor meet, and then she won a silver in the 800 at the USA Outdoor Championships, qualifying for the Pan American Junior Championships, where she came in fifth.

In addition, Kennedy and Pocratsky earned All-ACC recognition last season in the 1,500 and 800, respectively. As the lone senior in the distance crew, Kennedy serves as the leader, and she enjoyed a fantastic cross country season this past fall, earning All-ACC and All-Southeast Region honors.

So the Hokies do return some talent. Each member just needs to do a little more to make up for Green’s production. If that happens, the Hokies could win yet another ACC crown, following up on their 2017 outdoor title.

### DISTANCE COACH BEN THOMAS’ TAKE

“The girls, with them winning the [ACC] outdoor title last spring, it’s just always fun to have more people on the same mission, and I think the girls see it is obviously attainable now to win a title as well. So I’m just really excited to have more people in it to win it, not just physically, but mentally, and I think we’ve got a real chance to do that. It should be a fun season.”

## MEN’S JUMPS/ MULTI-EVENTS

### TOP RETURNERS

Mackenzie Muldoon, James Carver, James Holt, Will Kendall

### NEWCOMER

Matthew Manilli

### OVERVIEW

Muldoon, who competes mostly in the heptathlon and decathlon, headlines the group after enjoying a terrific junior season in which he scored points at both the ACC indoor and outdoor championship meets. During the indoor season, he finished seventh in the heptathlon at the league meet, scoring 5,166 points—the second-best total in school history. He continued his strong work during the outdoor season, finishing sixth in the decathlon at the ACC meet with a personal-best 6,758 points. Carver, Holt and Kendall are high jumpers, with Kendall leading the way. He recorded a top-10 finish in the high jump at the ACC’s outdoor meet, just missing out on earning All-ACC honors. His career best of 2.06 meters (6 feet, 9 inches) during the indoor season ranks as one of the top five



## season preview track & field

marks in school history. Tech’s plans call for Manilli to compete in the heptathlon and decathlon, and the staff thinks that he could make an impact right away.

### JUMPS/MULTI-EVENTS COACH PAUL ZALEWSKI’S TAKE

“I was really proud to see the growth and development of Mackenzie Muldoon in the combined events, not only as an athlete and the improvement of his marks, but as a competitor. To see that young man step up on a consistent basis when the team needs him at his best really impresses me and makes me proud of him. And the best part, he’s even better now than he was last year.

“Matt’s [Manilli] certainly got a lot to learn, but, if what I’ve seen this fall is any indication, this guy is going to do some great things for the program in his career. And just having him around and training with Muldoon, you can see the balance that they bring each other. Mack has a lot of experience that Matt is learning from, and Matt gives Mack someone to compete with every day in practice. They feed off each other really well, and I think it’s going to do wonders for them both this year.”



WOMEN'S JUMPS/  
MULTI-EVENTS

TOP RETURNERS

Eszter Bajnok, Emily Miller

NEWCOMERS

Stefanie Aeschlimann, Cecilia Marenick

OVERVIEW

Bajnok enjoyed an impressive freshman campaign last winter and spring, earning All-ACC honors in the triple jump during both the indoor and outdoor seasons. At the league’s indoor meet, she came in fourth in the triple jump and tied the school record in the event (12.60 meters; 41 feet, 4.25 inches). Then at the league’s outdoor meet, she earned a bronze medal after breaking the school record (13.05 meters; 42 feet, 9.75 inches). Tech’s staff expects her to be even better this season. She figures to get some help from two freshmen—Marenick and Aeschlimann. Aeschlimann, in particular, brings international experience in the triple jump, as she has competed in four U20 German National Championships and in the U23 German National Championships.

JUMPS/MULTI-EVENTS COACH PAUL ZALEWSKI'S TAKE

“It was a good season for Eszter, with her adjusting from her home country of Hungary to life in the U.S. Just like with [Mackenzie] Muldoon, she’s training really well now, and I’m looking forward to seeing what 2018 has in store for her.

“Stefanie Aeschlimann is a triple jumper joining the team from Germany, and I couldn’t be happier with the fall season she had. She’s an amazing young woman to work with, very hard working, great personality, tireless work ethic, and has consistently improved on all her training metrics through the fall. I’ve seen a great relationship form between her and Eszter, both on and off the track, and that friendly competition is really helping both of them push harder and harder every day. That’s really fun to watch.”

MEN'S POLE VAULT

TOP RETURNERS

Torben Laidig, Deakin Volz, James Steck, Jaelyn Demory

NEWCOMER

Joel Leon Benitez

OVERVIEW

The men’s squad saw steady performers Brad Johnson and Jeffrey Linta depart after last season, but the group includes plenty of talent led by school record holders Laidig and Volz — both of whom figure to contend for ACC titles this upcoming season. Laidig, a two-time ACC champion and a four-time All-American, is coming off a shortened outdoor season because of a broken bone in his hand, but should be in the hunt for national title honors this season. The 2016 NCAA outdoor silver medalist holds Tech’s outdoor mark of 18 feet, 8.25 inches (5.70 meters). Volz, a two-time All-American and a bronze medalist at the 2016 NCAA indoor meet, holds the Tech indoor record of 18 feet, 6.75 inches. Laidig, Volz and Steck have combined for 11 All-ACC honors, while Demory, who took a redshirt year last season, and Benitez, the No. 1-ranked U20 pole vaulter in the United Kingdom, will be making their collegiate debuts.

POLE VAULT COACH BOB PHILLIPS' TAKE

“We are not as deep as we have been in the past—we are a little smaller [in terms of numbers]. Although by some teams’ standards, we’re not small. But the quality of the group is the highest we’ve ever had. Expectations-wise, records and medals and those sorts of things as it is, my expectations for those kids is that they give me consistent effort in practice, consistent performances in meets, and if they do that and pay attention to the details, the other things will come.”



WOMEN'S POLE VAULT

TOP RETURNERS

Hannah Meador, Olivia Privitera

NEWCOMERS

Rachel Baxter, Lisa Gunnarsson, Paige Ritter

OVERVIEW

The women’s group lacked the depth of its male counterparts a year ago and saw Erica Hjerpe depart after she twice earned All-ACC honors in her career. Meador and Privitera, though, return to lead a young group that features 2017 European U20 Championships gold medalist Gunnarsson. Meador has twice earned All-ACC honors, and Privitera enjoyed her best outdoor season this past spring when she qualified for the NCAA East Preliminaries with a career-best height of 13 feet, 5.25 inches. She tied for 14th there, just missing the NCAA Championships by two spots. Tech’s success in this event, however, probably hinges on the performances of Gunnarsson and Baxter, a California native rated the No. 1 girls pole vault prospect in the nation by Track & Field News magazine.

POLE VAULT COACH BOB PHILLIPS' TAKE

“We were lucky to get two girls [Gunnarsson and Baxter] that talented signed in the same year. Their technical fundamentals are good, which helps a lot, and their speed is good, which is something that I haven’t always had in the past. Right now, those two, Olivia [Privitera] and Paige [Ritter], who won’t jump this year, all four of them have really good speed, which is really helpful. Practices are going well. They all have set PRs [personal records] of one sort

or another in poles and grips and things like that. The signs are good. We just have to stay healthy and keep focused.”

MEN'S SPRINTS/  
HURDLES

TOP RETURNERS

Greg Chiles, Michael Davenport, Brandon Thomas, Darius Watkins

NEWCOMER

Keishaun Limehouse

OVERVIEW

The men’s sprinters and hurdlers enjoyed a terrific 2017 season, as sprints and hurdles coach Tim Vaught continues to rebuild in these areas. Chiles, Davenport, Thomas and Watkins combined for 14 All-ACC honors last winter and spring. Chiles headlines the group after setting the Tech indoor record in the 400 and earning All-America honors as a member of the distance medley relay team that finished second at the NCAA Indoor Championships. He also set the school record and qualified for the NCAA Outdoor Championships in the 400-meter hurdles. Davenport was the ACC Men’s Track and Field Freshman of the Year during the indoor season—the Hokies’ first sprinter to be named as such—after finishing fifth in the 200 at the league’s indoor meet. Limehouse will be one to watch, as the Coastal Carolina transfer excels in the 110-meter hurdles. Overall, this group has depth and talent, and it figures to be a key component of any Tech repeat at the ACC Championships.

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Courtney Blanden

**SPRINTS/HURDLES COACH  
TIM VAUGHT'S TAKE**

“When you are on top, I always tell the student-athletes, it is harder to stay on top than to try to get to the top. You know, you have got to stay hungry and understand why you are here. It’s the reason why we won the conference championships last year. We worked hard and wanted to be No. 1, and if you can keep that mentality all the time, you

can only be the best.

“As a mentality as an athlete, you always want to be the best at what you do, and you always want to be the hunter, not the hunted. If you keep that mindset, things will go well. Every time you step on the track, you’re the hunter. You’re not waiting for someone to catch you because you want to hunt and continue to be the best. For the athletes that did not win their respected individual events

last spring, that’s what they are chasing now. For the athletes that did not make it to nationals last year, that’s what they are chasing after as well.”

**WOMEN’S SPRINTS/  
HURDLES**

**TOP RETURNERS**

Courtney Blanden, Shanel Burr, Arlicia Bush, Nora McKiver, Ama-Selina Tchume

**NEWCOMERS**

Kennedy Dennis, Caitlin Tate, Adiah Gholston

**OVERVIEW**

The Tech women’s sprinters and hurdlers continue to get better, as Blanden, Bush, McKiver and Tchume got NCAA experience after qualifying for the NCAA Outdoor Championships in the 4x400 relay last spring. All four also earned All-ACC honors during the outdoor season in the 4x400 and 4x100 relays. Blanden headlines the group after coming in second in the 200 at the ACC Indoor Championships, and she earned All-ACC recognition in the 400 during the outdoor season after she finished fourth at the ACC’s outdoor meet with a school-record time of 52.24 seconds. McKiver also brings experience and talent, as she ran the third-fastest time in school history in the 60 (8.34 seconds) while running unattached during the indoor season last winter. Fans also should keep an eye on freshmen Dennis and Tate,

both of whom possess the potential to earn All-ACC honors.

**SPRINTS/HURDLES COACH  
TIM VAUGHT'S TAKE**

“The newcomers this year ... we got a young group, but a very talented group that is here. I’m looking for Caitlin Tate to be an outstanding short sprinter. I think her ability is untapped, but I’ve seen some bright things from her this fall. She’s been training hard and is very, very dedicated. The key on this level is staying healthy, and if everything goes as planned, she is going to be a big impact in the ACC this year. Kennedy Dennis is going to be a major impact as well. She is a tremendous starter. They go head-to-head at practice all the time, and I love it because it is bringing out the best of them.”

**MEN’S THROWS**

**TOP RETURNERS**

Marek Barta, Collin McKenny, Matija Muhar, Matthew Reinhart

**NEWCOMERS**

N/A

**OVERVIEW**

This small group of men’s throwers may not provide a lot in the way of scoring during the indoor season for new throws coach Andrew Dubs—none of these young men specialize in any indoor event—but the group figures to help the Hokies’ chances during the outdoor season.

Barta leads the way after winning a silver medal in the discus at the ACC Outdoor Track and Field Championships last May and earning second-team All-America honors at the NCAA Championships. The senior, who holds the school record in the event (201 feet, 4 inches), is a two-time ACC silver medalist and a two-time All-American. Muhar, coming off a redshirt season because of a shoulder injury, won the ACC crown in the javelin in 2016 and hopes to return to that form this spring. Reinhart finished fourth in the javelin last spring at the ACC outdoor meet, so he, too, is a threat. McKenny competes in the discus, along with Barta.

**THROWS COACH ANDREW DUB'S TAKE**

“The throws group here at Virginia Tech is no secret—the history that is here and the success the group had last year and before. Coming into it, I was excited because of the talent that’s here and the opportunities I would have to work with each of the student-athletes. It has just been fantastic and has lived up to the expectations that I thought it would be. I think we are setting up really well so far from what they have done last year to what I think we can do this year.”

**WOMEN’S THROWS**

**TOP RETURNERS**

Pavla Kuklova, Emma Thor, Kajsa Wennberg

**NEWCOMER**

Lindsay Herra

**season preview track & field**

**OVERVIEW**

Tech’s staff expects big things out of this group after both Thor and Kuklova earned All-America honors in the hammer throw during the outdoor season in 2017. Thor was a first-team-All-American as a freshman who also finished third at the ACC Championships. Kuklova earned second-team All-America honors as a sophomore after setting a personal best with a toss of 63.45 meters (208 feet, 2 inches), and she won a silver medal at the ACC outdoor meet. Wennberg possesses potential as well, as she came in eighth in the hammer throw at the ACC meet as a freshman. Herra transferred to Tech from Iowa, where Dubs used to coach. She competes in the discus and javelin and could score points for the Hokies in the weight throw during the indoor season as well.

**THROWS COACH ANDREW DUB'S TAKE**

“There are several returners who went to the national championships last year and got All-America honors. So obviously, the expectation for those student-athletes is to get back and try to finish higher than they did last year. But we have some other student-athletes on the team as well who have a lot of potential. We have had a lot of conversations about what some of their goals are individually, and they have set a high bar. I think the work they have put in so far has shown that they are going to achieve those goals.”

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wrestling spotlight  
brooks wilding



“For me, it shows how blessed I am to go to school at Virginia Tech, where you have these opportunities. I didn’t really know what being an engineering major in college was going to look like.”

Being able to be a part of a solid team like Hyperloop, it really shows how strong our academic prowess really is.

Brooks Wilding on being a part of Tech’s Hyperloop project

# GRAPPLING WITH MORE THAN HIS SPORT

Brooks Wilding is trying to make a name for himself on the mat and in the classroom, and the aerospace engineering major is a part of a Virginia Tech team working on a rather cool project

by Nathan Loprete  
Special to Inside Hokie Sports

Athletes at Virginia Tech have rigorous schedules that call for the ability to multitask their academic requirements and athletics commitments. For junior Brooks Wilding, that usually means only four to five hours of sleep on certain nights.

Wilding not only wrestles for the Virginia Tech wrestling program, but he also is pursuing a degree in aerospace engineering, which includes being a part of the Hyperloop project at Virginia Tech. His commitment to all this hard work and dedication comes from his parents.

“My parents are the two biggest motivators in my life,” Wilding said. “From a really young age, they instilled the importance of hard work and not giving up. Whether it’s walking onto the wrestling team, or balancing a really busy schedule, that’s one of the things they taught me.”

Wilding grew up in Upper St. Clair, Pennsylvania, which sits just south of Pittsburgh. Growing up, he watched his two older brothers get involved with the sport of wrestling, and Wilding followed suit. Sports played an important role in his childhood, as Wilding also participated in baseball, football, swimming, track and field and even golf.

Not only did he find success on the playing fields, but he also excelled in school from an early age.

“I was always good at school,” Wilding said. “My mom would make us do homework in the summer growing up. From a young age, I just developed a like for learning.”

Such a desire for learning has fueled Wilding’s interest in one of the more intriguing projects happening on Virginia Tech’s campus today. Not too long after arriving in Blacksburg, Wilding became involved with a project designed to create a fifth mode of transportation for the world.

The Hyperloop project, started by businessman Elon Musk, calls for getting people from places such as Washington D.C. to New York City in 30 minutes. The project incorporates reduced-pressure tubes in which pressurized capsules ride on air bearings propelled by linear induction motors and air compressors.

In other words, this is some heady stuff – only for the smartest and most creative of Tech students.

Musk founded SpaceX, an aerospace manufacturer and space transport services company, and he announced a design competition in 2015 – and Virginia Tech went to work. The team placed fourth, which allowed it to start the build phase. In January of 2017, the team competed in the first full-pod competition at SpaceX headquarters in Los Angeles, California, and again, the group finished fourth.

Wilding joined the team in February to help prepare for the next competition in August. The team finished seventh after some early struggles, but looks to bounce back moving forward. For Wilding, the opportunity to work on such an elite project makes the time commitment worthwhile.

“For me, it shows how blessed I am to go to school at Virginia Tech, where you have these opportunities,” Wilding said. “I didn’t really know what being an engineering major in college was going to look like. Being able to be a part of a solid team like Hyperloop, it really shows how strong our academic prowess really is.”

Wilding’s work ethic, fostered at a young age, led him to take harder math and science classes in high school, and ultimately, created his current passion in engineering. However, originally Virginia Tech wasn’t the school on his radar when it came time to choosing a college, even though both of his parents went to Tech.

Continued on page 40



# GRAPPLING WITH MORE THAN HIS SPORT

Continued from page 39

"I didn't have that much interest in coming here until I had the opportunity to wrestle," Wilding said. "I knew I wanted to do engineering, but I wasn't sure I wanted to wrestle. I was pretty set on Georgia Tech, and in February of my senior year, Coach [Kevin] Dresser reached out

about walking on to the team. That's what led me here."

In wrestling, Wilding had no Division I offers, but he knew the Virginia Tech coaching staff. As a kid, he attended wrestling camps held during the year, ones that helped the coaching staff to get familiar with him and vice versa.

Current Virginia Tech wrestling head coach Tony Robie, who replaced Dresser when the latter went to Iowa State, joined the Hokies' staff in 2006 and played a large role in starting the summer wrestling camps. Robie saw that Wilding had lots of work to do, but he also saw a young wrestler willing to put the time in to be better.

"It was obvious the kind of character he had, the kind of people in his family and what they're all about," Robie said. "We got to see how hard he worked. He wasn't a great wrestler at that time, but the dude worked incredibly hard. The fact that he's a brilliant kid adds a lot to the culture of our team."

Obviously, life isn't slowing down for Wilding in the academic arena, but his wrestling career sits in a tough spot at the moment. The junior has been injured the past few months, which has slowed his progression. He also took a redshirt year in 2016, which forced him to compete unattached from the university.

It's been a struggle for Wilding to work himself into the starting lineup, but according to him, the struggle remains a part of a bigger plan.

"Working into the starting lineup and being successful is very important," he said. "What I care about even more is the impact I can have on my teammates. I have a really strong faith in Jesus Christ, so I think that He placed me on this team for a reason. Being someone who isn't necessarily the most successful on the mat ... it becomes more apparent that you're on a team like this for a lot more."

The positive attitude that Wilding brings to the team separates him from the normal person. That attitude stands out to his coaches and peers as well.

"He'll do whatever it takes to get the job done," Robie said. "If that means he sleeps four or five hours a night, I wouldn't really know because he never complains about it. There are not a lot of kids that can do what he does and do them as well as he does in both areas. His drive to be successful is what separates him."

Robie also has seen improvement in the wrestler whom he first met years ago at a summer camp. That progress comes from Wilding's ability to attack every practice with a strong work ethic.

"It's been a product of getting in a good environment and getting around some good workout partners," Robie said. "I've always said that wrestling rewards hard work more than any other sport. He has come a long way with his wrestling since he's been here. A lot of that is just due to his diligence to his craft, making an effort to get better and picking the coaches' brains and picking good partners every day at practice and wrestling with guys like Jared Haught and Ty Walz."


For now, Wilding continues to work his way back to the mat. He also is preparing for an internship opportunity this summer when he plans on working with Boeing as a loads and dynamics intern. Part of his job centers on working on NASA's Space Launch System, which is a new rocket designed for deep space travel.

It seems as if Wilding remains on the road to pursuing his dreams, and he also holds hopes of one day being a high school math teacher or a wrestling coach.

Wilding still has plenty of time left at Virginia Tech to make his impact. Between his support system back home, his faith, and his ability to handle almost anything that comes his way, he exemplifies what it means to be a student-athlete. His road to wrestling in Blacksburg wasn't necessarily clear-cut, but looking back, he harbors no regrets about his decision.

"One thing that I love about Coach [Frank] Molinaro, Coach Robie, Coach [Jared] Frayer and Coach [Tyler] Graff is that they're very uplifting people," he said. "It's something that's not new to my life, but kind of new to my career as a wrestler. We have the best coaching staff in the country."

"I love the slogan 'This is Home.' There's a sense of belonging and caring that people in positions of power really want to extend to athletes."

Between wrestling and his academic pursuits, Wilding doesn't necessarily have a lot of free time. But it certainly didn't take him long while in Blacksburg to realize that this, indeed, is home. 

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After spending four, and sometimes five, years competing at the highest level of intercollegiate athletics, many student-athletes struggle after graduation to find something to replace that “competitive fix.” After all, less than 1 percent of college student-athletes go on to play professionally in their respective sports, thus leaving unanticipated free time for other pursuits.

Some take up other sports on a recreational basis. Others simply work out to remain in shape. Yet two former Virginia Tech student-athletes found the utmost of challenges to satisfy their athletics urges.

Former women’s swimmer Holly Harper and former football player Greg Jones recently graduated from the United States Marine Corps Officer Candidates School held at Marine Corps Base Quantico outside of Washington, D.C. The grueling 10-week course, which started Sept. 9 and concluded Nov. 18, tests a candidate in every way, especially physically, academically and from a leadership perspective.

Harper and Jones—who once lived across the hall from each other in Cochrane Hall—graduated as second lieutenants. This step served as the first one for both toward a career in the Marines, arguably the most prestigious of the four branches of the military.

“While I was at Tech, I was really looking forward to being pushed and pushed beyond what I was capable of—and they [Tech’s coaches] definitely did it,” Harper said via phone shortly after the graduation ceremony. “But once I was done, I was like, ‘Well, I’m not done being pushed.’”

Of course, there are many ways for one to push oneself. Harper and Jones chose arguably the toughest. They navigated the undeniable difficulties placed in front of them only to face a future that potentially puts each in harm’s way.

So why? For starters, both come from military families. Harper’s father and grandfather served in the Marines, and her brother currently attends West Point. She contemplated accepting an appointment to the Naval Academy coming out of Albemarle High School near Charlottesville,

but decided to become a Division I athlete at Virginia Tech when Dr. Ned Skinner, the head men’s and women’s swimming coach at Tech, offered her that opportunity.

As for Jones, who grew up in Lorton, Virginia—just 30 minutes from Marine Corps Base Quantico—his father served in the Army for nearly three decades. So both Harper and Jones understand the commitment, work and sacrifice that it takes to be in the military.

Plus, both wanted to test themselves much in the way that they tested themselves as student-athletes at Tech. They both are competitive, driven people who enjoy—and actually thrive—on competition.

Yet mostly, they felt an unexplainable call to serve their country in the most admirable of ways.

“I always knew I wanted to do something greater than myself,” Jones said, also via phone not long after the graduation ceremony. “The 9-to-5 job didn’t seem like something I wanted to do. Just serving my country was the main thing that struck home for me when going through this process of Officer Candidates School.”

So what does Officer Candidates School—known as OCS—entail? As one probably expects, it features a physical fitness component, with an array of hiking exercises and completion of various obstacle courses. It also features classroom work in which candidates are taught tactics, operations, land navigation and other military-related subjects. In addition, the school focuses on leadership, with candidates being evaluated on command presence, communication skills, decision making and in leading subordinates.

Interestingly, leadership comprises 50 percent of a candidate’s grade. Physical fitness and academics each are 25 percent of the grade.

Candidates get a feel of the challenges that they will face right from the beginning. Instructors force them to stand still, stand in line for six hours and/or to be quiet. They yell at them, and they only allow them to refer to themselves in the third person. In other words, a candidate must say “This candidate” and not “I.”

“You lose the idea that it’s about you,” Harper explained. “Ultimately, you’re trying to get rid of any selfishness that might be there and realize that what we’re doing at Officer Candidates School is to learn that it’s not about us. It’s about learning how to work as a team, learning how to follow directions, take directions and about instant willing obedience. That was pretty much the purpose of it. If they tell us to do something, we don’t have to think. We pretty much do it.”

Being a former Division I student-athlete, Harper basically breezed through the physical challenges. She admitted, though, that she struggled with the academic part mainly because of the conditions surrounding the classes.

Class sessions represented the only time that the candidates could sit. Plus, the room was quiet and warm.

“So for those of us who were struggling because we got four to five hours of sleep every night, it was hard to stay awake when they were teaching you the material,” she said. “And during the tests, it was always silent. No one was allowed to talk, so I found myself falling asleep in the middle of the tests.”

Jones, too, excelled in the physical fitness tests, but he and Harper admitted they faced a serious challenge toward the end of Officer Candidates School. Instructors woke the candidates at 1 in the morning

and made them hike in formation 10 miles through the woods in the rain—while carrying 75-pound packs.

Once they reached their destination, they found themselves going through small unit leadership evaluations, or SULE. Instructors test candidates on their abilities to lead a squad through a mission. The candidates rotate being a squad leader in which he or she receives an order, develops a plan, delivers the order to the squad and executes the mission.

The day runs long. They didn’t finish until around 8 p.m. “It turned out to be about 25-26 miles [of hiking] just that day,” Jones said. “It’s kind of the culminating event at OCS, and I’m sure other candidates would tell you the exact same thing—it’s a butt kicker. It was one of the tougher things we had to do. In football, we had the 5 a.m. workouts, and it kind of reminds me of doing that, but just doing that on repeat. That was the toughest event we had.”

Tech athletics played at least a small role in helping both Jones and Harper get through Officer Candidates School. For sure, they learned discipline, focus and unselfishness while competing as a student-athlete for the school.

As a swimmer, Harper often got up at 5 a.m. to head to the Christiansburg Aquatic Center to train in a cold pool, and then after classes, she often returned to the pool for more training.

*Continued on page 44*

# SALUTING

## two former TECH STUDENT-ATHLETES

*Former football player Greg Jones and former women’s swimmer Holly Harper recently graduated from the United States Marine Corps Officer Candidates School and are excited about serving their country as part of their future careers*

*by Jimmy Robertson*

*“While I was at Tech, I was really looking forward to being pushed and pushed beyond what I was capable of – and they [Tech’s coaches] definitely did it. But once I was done, I was like, ‘Well, I’m not done being pushed.’”*

Former Tech women’s swimmer **Holly Harper**

*“This was a no brainer. The minute I stepped into training at OCS, I knew this was definitely where I needed to be. I can see myself really making a career and taking this the distance and serving my country to the best of my abilities.”*

Former Tech football player **Greg Jones**





# SALUTING two former TECH *Continued from page 43* STUDENT-ATHLETES

Jones, too, balanced the rigors of playing a sport—football—while also maintaining a focus on his academic work.

Perhaps more importantly, though, they witnessed the various leadership styles of their coaches and their team captains and have carried those with them so far on this journey.

“I think football was a huge, huge, asset in just overall giving me that leadership and confidence in talking to different people and having the confidence to lead a group of individuals through different exercises and events that I’ve gone through in my career,” Jones said. “I’d say football has definitely paid off, and I’m forever grateful of having that opportunity to play for Virginia Tech.”

Jones played in 22 games in his Tech career as a free safety, while Harper scored points for the Hokies in the backstroke and individual medley events at the ACC Championships in each of her four years. Also, both left with degrees, as Jones graduated with a degree in human development, while Harper departed with two degrees—a bachelor’s in English and a master’s in education.

Now, they’re preparing for the next step in their careers. Harper and Jones both have moved on to TBS—The Basic School—there at Quantico, where they will receive more

training over the course of the next six months. The training includes fitness tests, field exercises, and academic courses. Once they pass TBS, they receive their MOS, which stands for military occupational specialty.

In short, their MOS is what they will be doing for the rest of their careers as Marines. Harper expressed interests in public affairs and ground intelligence, the latter of which would require her to pass a 13-week infantry officers course—a brutal course passed by just one female since the Corps implemented it.

“I’m considering whether or not that’s something I’ll shoot for,” she said. “Ideally, I would like to, if my body were able to hold together, but we’ll see.”

Such a path ultimately could put her in combat situations. Jones, too, finds himself on a similar road. He wants to be in the infantry, or work as a combat engineer.


“I’m definitely looking forward to it,” he said. “It’s been a goal of mine for a while. I have a couple of buddies that have gone down the route of being a Navy SEAL or have done something along the lines of combat arms. It’s just been an honor to serve in the United States Marine Corps and have the opportunity to pursue my dreams.”

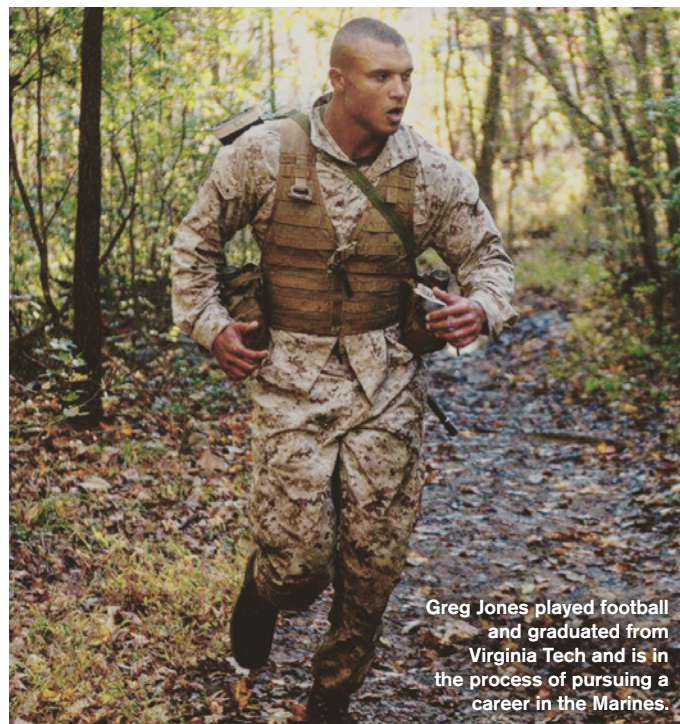
Both of them speak confidently about their decisions and futures. They made this choice, and now that they’ve moved on to the next stage, they harbor no shred of regret.

As former Tech student-athletes in the ACC, they know what it means to be in intense and demanding situations, and certainly being a Marine is a rather ambitious way of satisfying their competitive urges. After all, the stakes are so much higher.

Yet neither would have it any other way.

“This was a no brainer,” Jones said. “The minute I stepped into training at OCS, I knew this was definitely where I needed to be. I can see myself really making a career and taking this the distance and serving my country to the best of my abilities.”

“Every day, I look down at my ‘cammies’—our service uniforms—and I get to see my last name right next to the U.S. Marines,” Harper said. “And I’m so proud and so honored to get to wear the uniform.” 



Greg Jones played football and graduated from Virginia Tech and is in the process of pursuing a career in the Marines.

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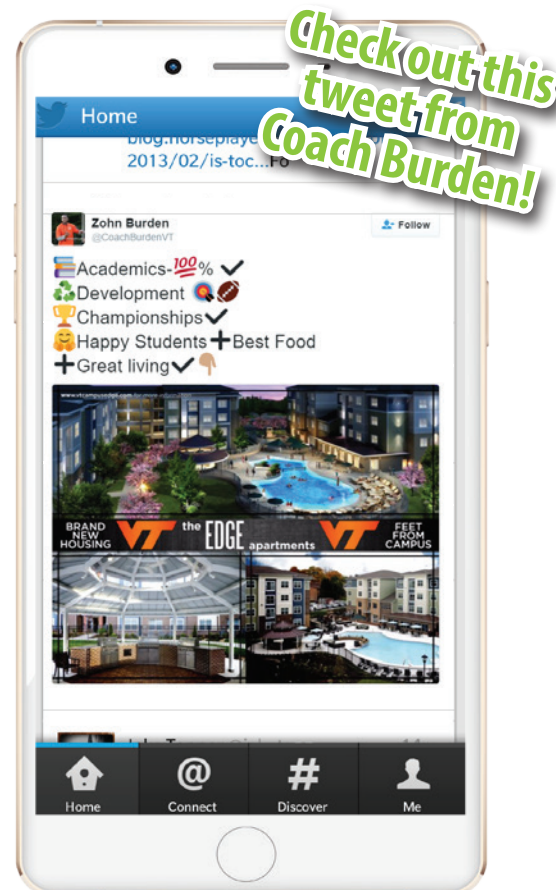
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