Zack Zavatsky and the Hokies claimed their sixth wrestling team title, while the men’s track and field team won its fourth indoor crown.

Three individual gold medal performances and 14 All-ACC honorees carried the program to a seventh ACC team title under the leadership of Dave Cianelli.
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Dear Hokie Nation,

The last three years of my life provided a foundation for who I am and who I will become. I was first impressed with VT with the recruitment by Coach Wiles. He was a great recruiter and told me how badly Virginia Tech wanted and needed me. Coach Wiles, Coach Loeffler, and Coach Beamer all came to Jacksonville for my home visit and even came to my high school basketball game to show how important I was to them even before I committed. This was only the beginning of what will be a lifelong relationship between Virginia Tech, the Hokie Nation, and myself.

For the last three years, Hokie Nation has been one of the best experiences of my life, and I will forever be a VT Hokie. The time I spent in Blacksburg was the most exciting time of my life. From my freshman year through my junior year, being a Hokie shaped me into the young man I am. Having the opportunity to learn from Coach Beamer and his staff for two years developed me into an athlete with a purpose on and off the field by providing me the opportunity to learn from a world-class staff. All that continued under Coach Fuente and his staff, as they continued to push me and instill the true meaning of working hard, smart, and being tough. From the conditioning coaches who helped me get stronger and faster to the position coaches sharpening up my route running, it all formed me into the player I am today. What I will always remember are the relationships I formed with my teammates, coaches, and all of the Hokie Nation fans that made my experience unforgettable.

As I pursue my dream of playing in the NFL, I have to give all credit to God. It is He who continues to provide me with His strength and power, as I promise to represent the Hokie Nation with passion and class. Hokie Nation will always be in my heart, mind and soul, and I will never forget coming out the tunnel to more than 60,000 screaming fans at every home game! Seeing so many VT fans at away games spoke to the sacrifice and passion our fan base has. It was those fans that made away games feel just as comfortable to me as home games. My hopes and dreams are coming true because of Virginia Tech, and I am forever grateful to call myself a Hokie.

As I look forward to my future, I wish all the best for the Hokie Nation, and I will strive to represent you in a way that will make you proud. I look forward to returning to Blacksburg to complete my degree and again be surrounded by the best fans in the world!

Yours truly,

Isaiah Ford
Virginia Tech Wide Receiver #1

For sure, Virginia Tech’s donors have made an impact on the Hokies’ wrestling program, helping to create champions in every way. For the second time in the past five seasons, the Hokies swept the ACC’s dual meet championship and the tournament championship. The recent tournament title conquest marked the Hokies’ third since joining the league and their sixth overall. Following Ty Walz’s victory at heavyweight that ended the event, he and his teammates took a “selfie” with the ACC’s Twitter Mirror, letting Tech fans know through social media that, thanks largely to their help, the Hokies are the wrestling kings of the ACC.

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J. Pearson and Renae Pearson

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CURRENTLY RESIDES: Florida and Georgia

GRADUATION YEAR: J. (AGEC, class of 1987), Renae (FCD, class of 1990)

FAMILY: Daughter, Anna Kate (VT, class of 2018) and son, Will (VT, class of 2020)

Q&A

Q: A Hokie is...
A: US.

Q: What is your best memory of Virginia Tech athletics?
A: Going to the national championship in New Orleans.

Q: How did you get involved with the Hokie Club?
A: We decided to give back and support the new club seating.

Q: What caused you to become a fan of Virginia Tech?
A: We both are alums, and we love sports.

Q: Describe your perfect day at Virginia Tech.
A: A crisp, fall Saturday, with all the family in for the game and the Blue Ridge Mountains in the background.

Q: Do you have any tailgating traditions? If so, tell us your best.
A: Wings, fries and tailgate Olympics with our tailgate neighbors.

Q: What motivates you to give back to help Virginia Tech athletics?
A: The students.

My favorite Virginia Tech sports are... football and basketball.

My all-time favorite Virginia Tech football player is... Kevin Jones and Danny Coale (and yes, he caught that ball in the Michigan game!)

My all-time favorite Virginia Tech student-athlete from another sport is... Dell Curry.

If you had the opportunity to meet donors who give to the Hokie Club, what would you like to say to them?

“I would just like to thank them from the bottom of my heart. I know I will never be able to repay them or fully express my gratitude, but I want them to know that they have given me the opportunity to attend a school like Virginia Tech, which is the best thing ever to happen to me. My life is forever changed for the better because of their support. They will always be heroes to me, and I will do my best to make the most of the opportunities they have made possible for me.”

— Matt Dauby, baseball, redshirt senior, accounting

How has support from the Hokie Club impacted your experience at Virginia Tech?

“The support from Hokie Club members has made my time here at Virginia Tech amazing. Their generosity and commitment to Virginia Tech has changed my life drastically, and their spirit embodies our motto: Ut Prosim. Their love for Virginia Tech is unmatched, and I strive to give back as they do one day. I appreciate the support of each Hokie Club member."

— Jaila Tolbert, volleyball, sophomore, international business/relations

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WE ARE PROUD TO BE ONE OF YOU!
Coach Buzz Williams is different than anyone I’ve ever met. I could not possibly state that with more admiration. He is not a saint, and he is not perfect. He would be the first to tell you that. He is, however, the perfect patriarch for the basketball family he has tethered together in Blacksburg.

He describes his own mind as chaotic and maniacally pursue improvements—in both himself and those around him. Participation in the pursuit is not a passive exercise, and the buy-in demanded is all encompassing. Most lack that will, and that’s the point. Life is, in fact, intentionally difficult. The method to the madness and the genius in the process isn’t easily identified, but it is there.

The collective investment has led Tech to its best regular season in seven years and into post-season play for a second straight season. I thought I’d take a crack at explaining what makes the family function so fluidly.

Through this column, and I hope our broadcasts, you will notice that I am emotionally invested in this family. I make no apologies for that, as Coach has allowed me to narrate from the inside. I forever will be grateful for the privilege.

“I sweat because I love my guys,” Williams said.

Coach made that statement following a tight contested loss at Louisville. It struck me as the best shorthand explanation of the program’s success and his motivational style. In the business of chaotic slogans, this wasn’t meant to be one. Coach is the first to declare that nothing starts with him.

The stories of his guys are the story, but what gets missed is that those stories have been woven together by him—carefully curated, the culmination bred in his blue-collar image. Start with love of your family, work your butt off, and never let either wane.

During the battle with the Cardinals, Coach had perspired through his dress shirt in the first half. He came back for the second half in a t-shirt. In this moment, his apparel didn’t matter. He was busy digesting—sweating for his guys. This team was doing the same for him. That reciprocation is absolute. It has to be.

Coach doesn’t have the basketball bloodlines that most of his adversaries possess. Neither do the people around him. That isn’t an accident. He operates with a motivating chip on his shoulder, firmly in place from years of winding his way into the picture, while others insisted he didn’t belong. As a result, he remains fiercely loyal to those who gave him opportunities, and extremely selective as to whom he gives opportunities. Those whom he has are OKGs (Our Kind of Guys/Gals).

As Coach says, it starts with the kids. The senior leaders are Zach LeDay and Seth Allen. Each committed when “there was no evidence of getting better, and Greg Donlon is a model of physical discipline if not basketball basketball.” The coaching staff reflects the team itself—an eclectic mix. Coach likes to have the significant others, parents, children and extended family needs this family. Need trumps want, as evidenced in Tech’s success in tight games.

Coach lovingly refers to the family as the “folk band,” which seems appropriate. And the folk band, which began with a Buzz, has found a mainstream sound. So grab an instrument, Hokies, the band is about to head out on its March Madness Tour. And as Coach would say, “this time of year, it all starts with one more.”

Final days of our winter clearance! Come in and check out all of the amazing deals before they’re gone!
On Feb. 20, more than 100 upperclassmen student-athletes gathered at Lane Stadium to get a head start on their futures. They weren’t tackling opponents on Worsham Field, but instead sported suits and polished resumes, as they prepared to connect with professionals at the seventh annual Student-Athlete Career Jumpstart. This event, coordinated by the Office of Student-Athlete Development, provides opportunities for Hokie student-athletes to enhance career development skills, while interacting with alumni and professionals to make connections, learn about specific career fields and enhance their networking skills.

The format of the event has varied over the years, including an etiquette dinner and a speed networking session, but the opportunity for student-athletes to interact with industry leaders while enhancing their networking skills remains as the one central element. Athletics department officials hold the event on the evening prior to a campus career fair, and this year’s event took place before the spring Connection Job Fair sponsored by Career and Professional Development. Business attire was required and student-athletes were encouraged to take advantage of Career Outfitters, a service which provides new and gently used business attire to Virginia Tech students planning to attend career-related events.

The evening started off with insight from a career expert panel that included Union Bank & Trust CEO John Ashby, Director of Marketing for Pamplin College of Business Donna Wertalik, and former Hokie men’s basketball standout Bimbo Cooe. The panelists shared their unique perspectives on the importance of marketing the unique skillset developed through intercollegiate athletics and using it to their advantage, as they prepared to transition into the professional world.

Ashby’s wealth of experience in management allowed him to disclose the qualities that top candidates possessed during interviews—skills like communication, teamwork and time management that student-athletes master daily.

“Being told that student-athletes have critical advantages in places that can’t be taught was such a motivation to use the skills I possessed but didn’t know how impactful they would be,” said Gino Rossi, a redshirt sophomore member of the men’s soccer team.

“Beginning the night with such a high-caliber panel electrified the evening to a great kickoff,” Wertalik said. “I was impressed by the caliber of students and their areas of expertise.”

Following the panel, student-athletes participated in the Industry Info Session, where they met in small groups with professionals from 11 different industries, including banking, education, sales, real estate and athletics administration, to gain first-hand knowledge about the industry.

Student-athletes interested in attending graduate school could dialogue with James Anderson, director of distance and graduate education for the Department of Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education. Carol Robertson, Virginia Tech’s head women’s golf coach, talked to students about careers in coaching, and IMG General Manager Brandon Forbis discussed careers in sports marketing.

Several former Tech student-athletes were in attendance, including football alumni Dr. Abraham Hardke and Kevin Jones, who headed groups interested in careers in medical field and design, respectively. Hardke, a graduate of the Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine, currently serves as chief medical officer of the Community Health Center of the New River Valley, and Jones is the co-founder and CEO of JORDA Design, a local multidisciplinary design firm headquartered at the Corporate Research Center.

“The Career Jumpstart was the first opportunity I have had as a young adult to interact with recruiters in a business professional setting, and it allowed me to gain valuable insight into the professional world,” said MJ Ulrich, a junior and a member of the Tech women’s swimming and diving team who is pursuing a degree in human nutrition, foods and exercise. “Overall, the Career Jumpstart was a very positive experience and made me more confident for my transition out of college.”

The evening concluded with the Connect VT Networking Reception presented by Union Bank & Trust. Several members of the executive management team from Union attended, as well as representatives from TEKsystems, MassMutual, Red Ventures, Enterprise Rent-A-Car, Rossignol Fensway Racing and PepsiCo. Executives from Kohl’s and Carilion Clinic also attended and made financial contributions to the event. Athletics department photographer Dave Knachel took professional headshots for those who wanted one.

“The Career Jumpstart is a great way for student-athletes to “practice before they compete” and enhance their confidence and networking skills, as they position themselves for success beyond graduation.”
Elizabeth Birle is a senior on the Virginia Tech softball team and graduates in May with a degree in public relations. She currently is going through the interview process, but plans on pursuing a career in sales with a major company following her graduation.

Q: Why did you decide to pursue a degree in public relations?
EB: “I decided to pursue a degree in communications because I love talking to people, forming relationships and writing, so communications would be my thing. I originally came in as a multimedia journalism major with the aspirations of becoming the next ESPN broadcaster. I quickly came to the realization that, although I love sports, I wanted to stray away from broadcasting and journalism. During my junior year, I switched my major to public relations and never looked back. I love what PR entails and all the opportunities that come with it.”

Q: Have you worked any internships related to your degree? If so, what did you do?
EB: “I have been the ad sales manager for The Black Sheep, a media company based on college campuses, going on three semesters now. At first, I was very unsure of how I would do in sales. It didn’t take long for me to fall in love with the competitive and relationship-building nature of sales. I found I was pretty good at it, too, so that was nice. Ever since that first semester of interning for The Black Sheep, I have been pursuing a career in sales.”

Q: What are your plans after graduation this spring?
EB: “Currently, I am interviewing with multiple companies in hopes of landing a job in sales and leadership roles, so it really depends on what happens from here. I am very open to relocating, so who knows where I will be. All I know is I am very excited for any opportunity ahead, and I am ready to take on whatever challenges lay ahead.”

Q: What is your long-term “dream” job?
EB: “My “dream job” definitely would be to be a very successful saleswoman of a product that I fully believe in, maybe even my own product. I don’t think you can get far in the sales industry without believing in yourself or what you’re selling. So if I can make a good amount of money from something that I truly believe in and something that can help other people, I’m very happy with that.”

David Bergida is a redshirt senior on the Virginia Tech wrestling team who will graduate in May with a degree in finance. He has an interesting job lined up with CelebzDirect, Inc., a sports marketing agency based in Tampa, Florida, following his graduation.

Q: Why did you decide to pursue a finance degree?
DB: “My dad is in the finance industry. He and his partner run their own securities firm. He used to work on Wall Street for 20 years, but now he works in Princeton, which is only about 90 minutes from where I live. I know there are a lot of jobs related to finance—everyone has to deal with money. Business in general, and finance—there are lots of jobs. People are always looking for grads coming out, so I didn’t think it would be too difficult to find a job.”

Q: You have an interesting job lined up after graduation, starting in July at CelebzDirect. Tell us about it.
DB: “I’m going to be the licensing and marketing coordinator for CelebzDirect. The easiest way to explain it is that the company is a sports agency for athlete memorabilia. We create relationships with former and current athletes in various sports, and they sell us their memorabilia, or we set up a signing/appearance for them [in return for a fee]. I’ll be reaching out to potential clients. It’s not really a finance job, but I will be responsible for some financial aspects within the business.”

Q: Have you been able to work any internships?
DB: “I’ve actually interned at the place I’m going to be working for the past two years. This past summer, there was a convention in Atlantic City, which wasn’t far from where I live. They not only connect with athletes, but with trading card companies like Topps and Panini. We take the athletes and get them to sign deals with the card companies. I met a bunch of people that were with the card companies. I was able to make some connections. The previous summer, I was in Tampa, and when I’d go down there, I was working in merchandising and doing a lot of inventory—not the most fun stuff. I’d reach out to clients, athletes, to see if they had any stuff they’d want to sell because people would want to buy stuff like that, and it’s cash in their [the athlete’s] pocket.”

Q: Where do you see yourself long term?
DB: “That’s the one thing I don’t know. I’m very fortunate that I can do something and see how I like it. It depends on where it takes me. I can see it taking me to a bunch of different places. I’ve thought about, if it helps the business, getting a law degree. When you get a law degree, you can negotiate contracts and become an agent. The business is still coming up, and I think I can take it high. If it doesn’t go anywhere, maybe I think it’s not for me, but I really think we can expand. If it expands, I’ll definitely stay for a while.”

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Virginia Tech’s defense closed the 2016 season by shutting out Arkansas in the second half of the Hokies’ 35-24 victory over the Razorbacks in the Belk Bowl. The Hokies finished 18th nationally in total defense (340.7 ypg), marking the 13th time in defensive coordinator Bud Foster’s tenure that the Hokies have finished in the top 20 of that category. Tech also ranked third nationally in third-down defense (47.5 percent), tied for seventh in tackles for a loss per game (8.1), led for 24th in interceptions (16) and tied for 24th in turnovers gained (25).

The Hokies, though, lost four starters on that side of the ball, including three defensive linemen and free safety Chuck Clark. Foster sat down and answered some questions about replacing those players and what he hopes to accomplish this spring, as the Hokies get set to open practice March 21.

**Q:** When you look back at last season, how did you think the defense played?

**BF:** “I thought we played really well early, and then we had some injuries up front. I thought we played hard each and every week, and we were consistent each and every week. We had some big-time games where we stepped up and were dominant, and then down the stretch, we stepped up when we needed to and played good team football. You saw us do some really good things, you saw us make some plays when we needed to, and that’s the sign of a team that showed a lot of character and willingness to give of themselves to each other.”

**Q:** Your defense last season was a top-20 defense yet again, but you weren’t particularly pleased with that. Why was that?

**BF:** “You’ve been around me long enough. You know my expectations. I don’t want to be one of the best. I want to be the best. That’s what we’re working toward every day. Did we accomplish that? No. Was I pleased? Yes. I couldn’t have asked any more from our kids. We had great senior leadership. Our kids bought into the transition, but the expectations didn’t change from what they were previously. We came up a couple of games short the past couple of years. There were a lot of close football games that we lost, and there were a lot of close games that we won last year, and we were able to get over the hump. That’s the mark of some really good leadership from our players. Our goals and expectations aren’t going to change, but sometimes the players change. That’s where development comes in, and we’ll continue to grow and develop our team throughout the spring, the summer and fall camps.”

**Q:** The area where you took a big hit from graduation was the defensive line, with tackles Nigel Williams and Woody Baron and defensive end Ken Ekanem departing. The end position is the biggest concern with Nigel Williams and Emmanuel Belmar are going to be guys that are going to get a lot of reps, and we need that position to come into the fold, so to speak. We’re also going to look at Ray Minor there.

Then at defensive tackle, we need to develop some depth behind our front-line guys. We graduated two starters there [Williams and Baron]. Ricky Walker started them quite a bit when Nigel went down. You saw the abilities of Tim Settle and Ricky stepping up and being impact players. We need for those two guys to continue to develop, and then we need to develop some guys behind them. I see Terrell Edmunds and Darius Fullerwood as two guys that come to mind. We need for them to take that next step.

**Q:** How do you go about replacing Chuck Clark, who was a three-year starter and such a great leader?

**BF:** “We’re going to look at Terrell Edmunds at safety, and we’ve got to develop a rover. I like what we have coming back. We’ve got to develop some young players. We have to develop all our young players because, as you’ve heard me say many times, you’re only a play away. So we want them to have a good foundation and a good understanding of their position in our defense and the expectation of our defense. We’ll let that carry over to the summer and work toward what we need for them to do to be ready for the fall.”

**Q:** So with Terrell Edmunds getting reps at free safety, who enters into the mix at the rover position?

**BF:** “Reggie Floyd is a guy that we’re going to look at, and that potentially will be a spot for Devon Hunter to be an impact guy. We’ve got Divine Deablo playing on that side of the ball. We’re probably going to start him at safety and see where that develops. If he can step forward, who knows? We may move Terrell back.”

“Jalyn horme probably take another one of those corners and move them to rover. I’m not sure which one yet, as I don’t want to say without having talked to those guys. There will be two or three guys competing, I do think we have some numbers, so there should be some good competition, and I’m looking forward to watching those guys compete and develop and grow.”

**Q:** There had been some talk of moving Mook Reynolds to free safety, but he’s out for spring practice with an injury. Did that enter into your decision to move Terrell Edmunds to free safety?

**BF:** “We had talked about that, but I like Mook’s playmaking ability at the nickel spot. What he can do coverage-wise and what he can do in the blitz game … I think he’s got a knack at that spot.”

**Q:** You lacked depth at your linebacker spots last season. How are things looking at backer and mike linebacker heading into spring practice?

**BF:** “We’re a little thin at linebacker, so I’m looking forward to the young guys coming in, but obviously we return everyone there. Mook is going to be out this spring, and we’re looking at playing Anthony Shegog at backer this spring. That’s just to give us a little security [behind Tremaine Edmunds].

“I know Anthony can play whip, but if something were to happen [to Edmunds], then the next guy would be a freshman because we’re going to look at Tavante Beckett at mike linebacker to build him for the future. Anthony helps us in certain packages, and in those packages, he’s more of a backer anyway. There is going to be some cross training there.”

**Q:** How important is it to have Brandon Facyson returning for his senior season?

**BF:** “Well, I think he needed to come back and grow and develop as a football player. The past couple of years, because of injuries, he hasn’t been able to spend time in the weight room and to work on things. Continued on page 18

Continued on page 18
Brandon Facyson was the only Tech cornerback to start all 14 games last season, and his return helps to solidify the Hokies’ pass defense.

needed to for personal development. For him, that’s important, and then for us, it’s obviously nice to have a guy that’s been in some battles and has leadership qualities. It’s nice to have a guy that’s a seasoned veteran, and one that’s going to be a leader on your football team.”

Q: You also lacked depth at the cornerback positions last season. Who are some young guys in the mix at those two spots?

BF: “You’ve got Tyrree Rodgers, and I’m anxious to see him compete. We’re probably going to start Caleb Farley at corner. We’ve got Jovonn Quillen. All those guys are going to get long looks, and I think they’ve got a lot of abilities. Who knows? Deablo could be a corner. We’re going to find out. Khalil Ladler has shown some things. We’ve got a core group of guys, and we’re going to find out if they’re corners or safeties, but I like their movements and abilities.”

Q: So having lost four starters and with several others out with injuries, is this spring one in which you focus on development as opposed to schemes?

BF: “We’re technique and fundamental driven, but we’re going to install our packages. We’re going to introduce them to what we do. We’re not going to hold back because we may be young at some spots. We’re going to expose them to what we do because I want to be able to do what we do. That makes us who we are.

“When we’re able to do what we do, we’re pretty good, and we can be disruptive, like we were last year. Our final numbers were a lot better than the year before, but they’re still not where our expectations are. We’re always going to work hard to develop our guys, and the development comes from understanding their positions, evaluating their strengths and liabilities, continuing to improve, and then ultimately finding the right spot where they maximize their assets and limit their liabilities. At the same time, they need to be exposed to what the position entails, so we’ll throw a little bit of everything at them.”

Continued from page 17

Terrell Edmunds, who ranked fourth on the team with 88 tackles as a rover in 2016, will be working at free safety this spring, as Tech’s staff searches for a replacement for three-year starter Chuck Clark.

Brandon Facyson was the only Tech cornerback to start all 14 games last season, and his return helps to solidify the Hokies’ pass defense.

Brandon Facyson was the only Tech cornerback to start all 14 games last season, and his return helps to solidify the Hokies’ pass defense.

Brandon Facyson was the only Tech cornerback to start all 14 games last season, and his return helps to solidify the Hokies’ pass defense.

Terrell Edmunds, who ranked fourth on the team with 88 tackles as a rover in 2016, will be working at free safety this spring, as Tech’s staff searches for a replacement for three-year starter Chuck Clark.
Cornelsen sat down and answered questions about last season, specific players and what he hopes the Hokies can accomplish this spring.

Q: When you look back at last season, how would you assess the unit’s play?
BC: “The funny thing is I felt worse after we won the first game than after we lost the second game. The second game, we beat ourselves with turnovers, but we played harder, made some plays and won some matchups. After the first game, I wasn’t sure. After that Tennessee game, everyone knew that, if we could clean those mistakes up, we’d have a chance to make plays against anyone we played. It’s well known how that worked, but our guys made improvements. We continued to get better and better, and that’s always the key.

Q: Travon McMillian will be one of many tailbacks in the spotlight this spring, as Tech’s staff seeks to improve its rushing offense.

As the season went on, we kind of figured out what we were and what we could do the best. We settled into those types of schemes that fit our guys the best. We were able to be productive at times and had a nice balance of run and pass. The quarterback run was a big part of the run game. For us going into the season, we knew Jerod was a big, strong kid, but I don’t think we envisioned him being as durable and consistent running the ball, especially up inside, as he was. That became a big weapon for us in a lot of different situations. To me, those were a couple of things that were key for us.”

Q: How do you go about replacing Evans’ production?
BC: “I don’t think you worry about that part of it right now. You try to develop the guys that you have, as you’re evaluating and trying to figure out who is your best guy. Whoever it is will be a little bit different than Jerod. That’s part of the evaluation process. Before we hit that first game next year, we’d like to feel like we know what they’re all about and what they can do. Sometimes, you don’t know even in that first game because it is different when those guys can tackle you.

Our focus has been, whatever style or scheme it is, let’s get our quarterback to play well. Whether that means he throws it five times a game or 50 times, or he has to run the ball a ton or not, we’re more focused on him playing well, which comes back to taking care of the ball and making the easy plays, the easy throws that are there, and doing what he’s supposed to do.”

Q: You find yourself in a similar situation to last spring with relatively unknown or unproven guys like Josh Jackson, Jack Chick, Hendon Hooker and A.J. Bush. Do you go about the process the same way?
BC: “It’s going to be real similar. It was obvious pretty early on last year that Josh was worthy of being in that mix from the beginning with the two older guys [Evans and Brenden Motley]. I think it’s going to be a similar situation and a similar process. It always plays out differently each year, but I think it will be, as far as reps and trying to evaluate those guys each and every day, a similar spring for us.”

Tech’s offense put up big numbers this past fall, but coordinator Brad Cornelsen finds himself in a similar situation as last spring – searching for a quarterback and developing players at the positions where the Hokies lost starters.

by Jimmy Robertson

Virginia Tech’s offense set school single-season records for total yards, passing yards, completions, touchdown passes and points this past fall under coordinator Brad Cornelsen. Much of that could be attributed to quarterback Jerod Evans, who broke the school’s single-season records for passing touchdowns, passing offense and total offense.

Evans decided to forgo his senior season and make himself available for the NFL Draft, along with receivers Isaiah Ford and Bucky Hodges – the two main recipients of Evans’ passes. In all, Tech’s offense lost six starters. So Cornelsen and the rest of Tech’s staff go into this spring practice looking to develop replacements to bolster a unit that ranked a respectable 29th nationally in scoring offense (35.0 ppg) and 39th nationally in total offense (444.9 ypg) in 2016.

Continued on page 22
and get another chunk play. When it gets blocked up, and he gets some space, he can get around the edge, and he’s a guy that can take it all the way. I think he can take that next step with all those other plays that don’t show up on the highlights, but are critical to your offensive production.”

Q: Will Cam Phillips’ role change without Hodges or Ford in the lineup?

BC: “I think it will a little bit. What we get out of those younger, less experienced guys is going to determine how we have to use Cam and where it all fits. The beautiful thing with Cam is that he can play any position. Physically and mentally, he can play anywhere he needs to, and he is a team-first guy, so whatever we feel is the best spot for him … it’s probably going to be a different spot every few plays.”

Q: Who are a couple of young receivers expected to get a lot of attention this spring?

BC: “It certainly helped Eric Kumah getting in the mix last year, getting on to some special teams and traveling. It always helps for that next year when guys don’t redshirt. Kumah is one of those guys that has to grow up quickly.

“Phil Patterson redshirted last year, but did, in my opinion, an incredible job of staying involved. We brought him up a couple of times off the scout team and traveled him just because he had done such a great job. There was a certain time when we thought he could be ready to play. If we got banged up at receiver, we were ready to play him, and that’s a credit to him. He’s got a chance to be a guy that can step in there and help pick up the slack.”

Q: You lost the entire right side of the offensive line to graduation. Do you have guys for those spots, or will you have to move guys around to find the right combination?

BC: “I don’t think we’re going to have to move anyone. I like our left side. I like those guys there, and those guys working together for another year is good. But yes, those spots on the right side are going to be like the tailback spot. There are a number of different guys that are going to be competing for those two spots, and it’s wide open. Whoever wants to go earn it, go and be a consistent guy. We have plenty of capable candidates for that.”

Q: I’m guessing another point of emphasis this spring will be turnovers. You guys lost 26 turnovers last season, including 18 fumbles. How do you go about correcting that?

BC: “We’ve already done extensive study on it — what was the problem and how can we fix it. There are certainly some things that we can emphasize in practice that we feel like can help. At the end of the day, it’s just awareness and willingness for whoever has the ball to protect it.

“We did a poor job of conveying that to those guys touching the ball last year, and we’ve got to make sure they’re equipped with the right techniques. We need to coach them up to know how to do it, and do a good job of emphasizing the importance of it, so that they will feel the same way.”

Q: Coming out of spring practice, what would make you feel most optimistic about this group?

BC: “I think just having the development of those spots where we’ve got to replace people — the right side of the line and quarterback. At the end of spring ball, whether you’ve found a starter or not, is not the important part, but the development of those positions and being able to see that there is a guy or a couple of guys that you feel like are going to replace or step up in those spots would be huge.

“Hopefully, you have the guys there at those spots, and they’ll continue to get better over the summer and into the fall. Or are we sitting there feeling like we still have a lot of work to do to find a couple of guys? That’s what we’ll focus on when we look back at spring practice.”

Cam Phillips caught 76 passes for 983 yards this past fall and may have to do more this upcoming season after the Hokies saw both Bucky Hodges and Isaiah Ford depart with eligibility remaining to pursue their NFL dreams.
32nd Annual Hokie Celebration
The Blacksburg Hokie Club and Virginia Tech Athletic Fund

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Several weeks ago, members of the Virginia Tech wrestling team adopted a hashtag for their Twitter accounts entitled — #AllAboutUs.

Well, the ACC Wrestling Championships certainly was all about the Hokies.

Seven Tech wrestlers qualified for the finals in their respective weight classes and six of them won championships, lifting the No. 4-ranked Hokies to the team title at the league tournament, which was held at Reynolds Coliseum in Raleigh, North Carolina on March 4.

Joey Dance (125 pounds), Solomon Chiashio (149), Zach Epperly (174), Zack Zavatsky (184), Jared Haught (197) and Ty Walz (heavyweight) all claimed gold medals. Sal Mastriani (137) won a silver medal and Dennis Gustafson (191) took a bronze, giving the Hokies eight medalists in the 10 weight classes. As a result, the program won its sixth ACC title — three tournament titles and three dual meet titles.

The Hokies, who saw coach Kevin Dresser and all that stuff, we didn’t let that happen a long time ago, to be honest,” Walz said. “It feels good, and it feels better to do it with this group of teammates.”

Mastriani lost in the finals to Pittsburgh’s Taleb Rahmani to finish second, while Gustafson lost to top seed Dom Forys of Pittsburgh in the semifinals. He won two matches in the consolation round, including one over UVa’s Will Mason, the No. 2 seed in the weight class, to come in third.

In the end, Tech’s depth, talent and toughness was too much for the ACC to overcome.

“I think this shows how great we are from 125 up to heavyweight,” Chiashio said. “All the guys who are training with us and who aren’t on the podium, and the coaches, too … it shows how great we can be when we work together.”

The seven finalists all qualified for the NCAA Wrestling Championships, which were held March 16-18 in St. Louis, Missouri.

Meanwhile, the ACC championships also meant a lot to ACC Commissioner John Swofford.

“I think this shows how great we are from 125 up to heavyweight,” Chiashio said. “All the guys who are training with us and who aren’t on the podium, and the coaches, too … it shows how great we can be when we work together.”

The seven finalists all qualified for the NCAA Wrestling Championships, which were held March 16-18 in St. Louis, Missouri.

Joey Dance, who won by major decision over Pittsburgh’s LJ Bentley in the semifinals at 125 pounds, went on to capture his third ACC title, becoming the fifth Tech wrestler to accomplish that feat.
The Hokies, who won the ACC’s team title once again in track and field, Tek Men Come in Fourth, Women Fifth at ACC Swimming and Diving Championships

Brandon Fiala caps ACC competition with two gold medals, giving him a program-best five in his career by Jimmy Robertson

The Virginia Tech men’s track and field and cross country program claimed its seventh Atlantic Coast Conference team championship and its fourth indoor track and field crown when it pulled away on the final day to best the competition at the ACC Indoor Track and Field Championships held at Notre Dame on Feb. 23-25.

Behind three individual gold medal performances and a gold medal from the distance medley relay team, the Hokies scored 100 points, outlasting Virginia by 11 points. Florida State came in third with 86 points. It’s never easy,” said Dave Cianelli, Tech’s director of track and field and cross country who has overseen 11 ACC team championships between the men’s and women’s programs. “This conference is so good, and it’s getting better every year. To bring a group together and be able to perform and win a championship is special. Whether it’s your first or your 10th, it doesn’t really matter. Every one of them is very special.”

Tech won this crown with balance and depth. Fourteen men’s athletes earned All-ACC honors, led by Vincent Ciatti, Torben Laidig, and Patrick Joseph—the three gold medalists.

Ciatti, a redshirt junior, stunned everyone when he won the mile, beating top-25 NCAA champion Henry Wynne of Virginia by 22-hundredths of a second with a time of 4:04.10, 1.04 seconds. The medal marked the first of Ciatti’s career.

Laidig won the 3,000-meter steeplechase with a meet record vault of 5.55 meters (18 feet, 2.5 inches)—the second gold medal of his career. Laidig was one of four vaulters to score points for the Hokies, with Deakin Volz coming in second and Travis Shaw and James Steck tying for fourth.

Joseph and teammate Drew Piazza went 1-2 in the 800-meter race. Piazza set a personal-best time of 1:49.23—a time that also marked an ACC Championships record.

The other gold medal came from the distance medley relay team of Daniel Jaskowski, Brandon Thomas, Kevin Clancarini and Neal Gouley, who won the event in a time of 9:31.05. Tech won the event for just the second time in school history (2013) and recorded the fourth-best time in school history.

Other podium finishes for the Hokies included Daniel Jaskowski (silver, 3,000), Diego Zarate (bronze, mile) and Greg Chiles (bronze, 1,650), 2010. The medals were the first of all their careers.

On the women’s side, Hanna Green led the Hokies to an eighth-place finish in the team race. Green continued her dominance in the 800, winning the gold medal in the event at the ACC’s indoor meet for the third consecutive time. Her time of 2:02.28 marked a career best for her and also was a school- and ACC Championships indoor meet record. She broke her own previous school record of 2:03.18, which she set last year at the NCAA’s indoor meet.

Teammates Courtney Blanden and Rachel Pocztaka also earned spots on the podium. Blanden took home a bronze in the 200, running the event in a school-record time of 23.60 seconds. Pocztaka came in third in the 800, recording a personal-best time of 2:04.60.

Also, Tech’s Easter Bujok came in fourth in the triple jump. Bujok tied a school record with a jump of 12.60 meters (41 feet, 4.25 inches)—equaling the mark set by April Byrd in 2000.

A select group of Tech athletes who qualify next will head to the NCAA Indoor Championships, which will be held March 9-11 in College Station, Texas.

Brandon Fiala graduates in May with degrees in finance and accounting, but if he wanted to pursue a career in mining, he’d probably be very successful.

After all, he’s collected a lot of gold and silver over the past four years. Fiala won two gold medals and a silver medal at the ACC Men’s Swimming and Diving Championships held in Atlanta on Feb. 27-March 2, lifting the Hokies to a fourth-place finish in the team competition—Tech’s eighth straight top-four finish.

NC State won the team title, with Louisville finishing second and Notre Dame coming in third just 49 points ahead of the Hokies.

“I am proud of this men’s team, and everything they represented in track and field this year,” head coach Ned Skinner said. “They gave us 100 percent, and we have no regrets. That team race for third was tight, and even though we ended up in fourth, we have so much in which to be proud. We are very proud of our seniors and what they mean to our program.”

Fiala capped his final ACC meet by winning the 200-yard breaststroke on the final day of a school- and ACC-record time of 1 minute, 59.29 seconds. The gold medal marked the fifth of his career—the most ever by a Tech swimmer or diver.

Fiala also won a gold medal in the 200 breaststroke with a time of 1:51.53, and he claimed a silver medal in the 200 individual medley with a time of 1:42.90—the fifth-fastest time in the nation this season.

Robert Owen also enjoyed a tremendous championship meet in his final ACC competition. He won a gold medal in the 400 IM with a time of 3:38.43. That time set a school and ACC Championships record and also ranks as one of the top five times in the nation. Owen came fourth in the 200 breaststroke and sixth in the 200 IM as well.

Other strong performances came from Michael Craddock (fifth, 1:60.49, freestyle), Norbert Szabo (seventh, 400 IM and 200 breaststroke), Zach Switzer (eighth, 400 IM and 200 breaststroke). In the relay, Tech’s 200 medley team of Jacob Lamparella, Fiala, Harrison Pierce and Ian Ho led the way, finishing fourth.

Three Tech divers recorded top-eight finishes. Brandon Fiala won two gold medals and a silver medal at the ACC Men’s Swimming and Diving Championships in mid-to-late March.

Brandon Fiala won the 10-meter platform with a score of 452.85 while Juan Sacksburg recorded his career-best score of 431.85. Fiala’s efforts earned him a program-best five in his career.

Fiala also won a gold medal in the 10-meter platform with a score of 423.40, and he claimed a silver medal in the 10-meter individual medley with a time of 1:42.90—the fifth-fastest time in the nation this season.

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Fiala also won a gold medal in the 200 breaststroke with a time of 1:51.53, and he claimed a silver medal in the 200 individual medley with a time of 1:42.90—the fifth-fastest time in the nation this season.

Robert Owen also enjoyed a tremendous championship meet in his final ACC competition. He won a gold medal in the 400 IM with a time of 3:38.43. That time set a school and ACC Championships record and also ranks as one of the top five times in the nation. Owen came fourth in the 200 breaststroke and sixth in the 200 IM as well.

Other strong performances came from Michael Craddock (fifth, 1:60.49, freestyle), Norbert Szabo (seventh, 400 IM and 200 breaststroke). In the relay, Tech’s 200 medley team of Jacob Lamparella, Fiala, Harrison Pierce and Ian Ho led the way, finishing fourth.

Three Tech divers recorded top-eight finishes. Brandon Fiala won two gold medals and a silver medal at the ACC Men’s Swimming and Diving Championships in mid-to-late March.

Brandon Fiala won the 10-meter platform with a score of 452.85 while Juan Sacksburg recorded his career-best score of 431.85. Fiala’s efforts earned him a program-best five in his career.
John Sung

sits behind a nice desk cluttered with a computer and stacks of paper. A dry-erase board with tough job in the Tech athletics department. The Hokies' Olympic sports annually find tough, ultimately, rebuilding the program.

Tech women's lacrosse coach keeps his focus on a more pressing matter — coaching his team, and he once coached the boys and girls teams at Seaholm High School in Birmingham, Michigan. He once coached the boys and girls teams in a state championship game — on the same day (the girls won the title).

He went on to coach at the club level at the University of Michigan before starting the women's lacrosse program at Adrian College, a Division III school in Adrian, Michigan. In 2011, he led the squad to the NCAA Division III tournament and left after the season, taking the job at Winthrop, where he started that program in 2008 to two Big South championships and two NCAA tournament appearances in four seasons.

"I don't know what it is, I guess everyone has to have their own niche," Sung said of starting women's lacrosse. "Most college coaches don't take the path I take. They don't work themselves into a corner. I feel like you see that more in the mainstream sports. I had to make my own path, but I guess if I was going to make my own path, I may as well start from scratch. It's fun building teams, and we want to build a program that lasts."

"Coming up here and feeling the energy and seeing the excitement was pretty amazing to the point of, I want to work here. I want to be a part of the change. Who doesn't want to be a part of the momentum?" Winning is contagious. Everyone wants to be around winners. I know I can win wherever I go, but I feel like key people (coaches and administrators) sure makes my job easier. It makes it contagious for the kids because they want to win because their peers are winning.

Sung's debut as Tech's head coach took place Feb. 8, and the Hokies routed past Gardner-Webb 21-5 at the Indoor Practice Facility. Most of the people in attendance were highly ebullient, widely day were athletics department personnel — many of whom knew little about lacrosse. They simply came to support Sung, whose outgoing personality is infectious. He encourages athletes from other sports to watch practices, who love the training, who love the practices, who love that atmosphere as opposed to being in the spotlight.

Sung’s style of play also figures to help in the recruiting process. "We [Virginia Tech] weren't recruiting from other top teams or top high schools … they could change your program. There were so many times that kids I recruited said, 'Coach Sung, we love what you do, we love your energy, we love your passion, but we really want football. We want 50,000 students.' I just couldn't do that. Now, we can."

Sung’s style of play also figures to help in the recruiting process. He wants to score goals—lots of them! — and he wants football. "We want 50,000 students!" He never came to Tech to be a part of that, he said. His Winthrop teams set Big South single-season records for goals, assists, shots on goal. The Hokies’ first game gave Tech fans a glimpse of what he wants from his team. The Hokies took 41 shots, scoring 21 goals — just two short of the school’s single-game record. Tech surely could have set the record, but toward the end of the game, Sung told his players to bleed the shot clock and pitch the ball to the corner instead of continuing to score on each possession.

"We want it to be fun to watch," Sung said. "No one wants to watch a 24-0 game. That's not fun. We want to get it to where it's exciting.

Megan Burker resigned as the head coach at the end of last season after a 5-25 campaign and moved into an administrative role within the department. That created an opportunity for someone with a vision of what Virginia Tech women's lacrosse could be and someone willing to accept — even embrace — the challenge of getting it to that point.

Winning isn't everything — it's the only thing. Whit Babcock, Tech's director of athletics, and Desiree Reed-Francois, Tech's deputy AD, chose Sung, who came to Tech after building the Winthrop program from scratch into an NCAA tournament participant.

Few people outside of lacrosse circles knew of Sung, but the 40-year-old Troy, Michigan native has won at every level. After his playing career at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan ended, he got into coaching, and he's now coaching both the boys and girls teams at Seaholm High School in Birmingham, Michigan. He once coached the boys and girls teams in a state championship game — on the same day (the girls won the title).

"I just want to know," he continued. "You walk into a building, and you're like, 'Wow, this is amazing. I don't know how many times I say that in a week. You walk into these places, and you see these, kids are achieving. You're like, 'Man, this kid is going to be a rocket scientist or an engineer.' They're doing all these amazing things, and you really start to see what makes Virginia Tech extremely special."

"Most college coaches don't take the path I take. They don't work themselves into a corner. I feel like you see that more in the mainstream sports. I had to make my own path, but I guess if I was going to make my own path, I may as well start from scratch. It’s fun building teams, and we want to build a program that lasts."

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Continued on page 32
championships and make NCAA tournament appearances. His teams displayed the horsepower needed to win conference success began to manifest itself in year No. 3. In that third year, Tech followed the victory over Gardner-Webb with a win over Davidson. Perhaps in an indication that the times are changing, the Hokies opened the season with a 7-2 record, two ACC wins and earned a spot in a national poll for just the second time in program history.

There will be hiccups, though, as a 9-6 loss to James Madison University attests. Sung loves his players, their resiliency and their desire to learn, but he also knows his team’s deficiencies. After all, this group of seniors had won 18 games in three previous seasons. In contrast, his team at Winthrop went 20-3 last year.

He wants the players to get better each day, similar to the Buzz Williams approach. In Williams’ second year, he turned a losing team into a win-now team. “Year three is the magic,” he admitted. “We’ll know where we are.” sung said. “You skip a step, and it’s like you have to take it all apart and rebuild it. That’s how I look at it. Trust me, I’m the most impatient person, but if you build it too fast, you have to take it all apart and rebuild it. That’s how I look at it. Right now, Sung’s current crop of players is getting the land prepped for the foundation of the program. That involves digging dirt and working hard, an unglamorous, but necessary step.

That idea once was a dream. Now, for obvious reasons, it doesn’t seem so far-fetched.

For now, the goal is a winning season. The other day, Sung asked his players what the tradition of Virginia Tech women’s lacrosse was. They struggled to come up with an answer. That may be a good thing. Now they get to establish their own tradition. They get to write their own legacy. More importantly, they get to do so with a coach who knows exactly how to help them do that. Sung’s visits to various buildings on Virginia Tech’s campus have been mostly about him getting to know the university. He accomplishes what he hopes, he’ll find just the opposite — people wanting to come to Thompson Field and learning about what he and his young women are accomplishing and how.

That idea once was a dream. Now, for obvious reasons, it doesn’t seem so far-fetched.

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Francesca Fusinato grew up in a small town in northern Italy, but has adjusted nicely to life in the United States, becoming a big-time player for the Virginia Tech women’s tennis team.

Taking down the No. 1 team or player in the country isn’t an easy task. Just ask Virginia Tech women’s tennis player Francesca Fusinato. It took her three tries to defeat Joana Eidukonyte of Clemson.

Her game finally came together on Jan. 28 of last year in Blacksburg. The Italian defeated the nation’s No. 1 player in straight sets. After a hard-fought first set, Fusinato closed it out, winning 7-5, 6-2. Her victory marked the first win ever by a Tech player over a top-ranked opponent in the program’s history.

Fusinato’s matches with Eidukonyte have embodied her overall career to this point. The road in tennis hasn’t been easy for Fusinato, who grew up in Feltre Belluno, Italy, a town north of Venice and not too far from the Austrian border. The road to Virginia Tech and a new life has been even harder.

“Feltre is a really small town, so it’s kind of like Blacksburg,” Fusinato said. “Here, even though Blacksburg is a small reality, it’s a big reality student-wise. In Europe, we don’t have a big facility for a university. It’s just one building. This was a big reality compared to my town.”

Growing up in a small town, the multi-sport athlete didn’t set out on tennis until she was a teenager. Similar to a lot of American kids, she tried several different sports before settling on the one that ultimately led her to the United States.

“It was never about tennis until I was 16,” she said. “Before that, I played basketball. I was actually on the regional team. I played volleyball, and I was pretty good at skiing. For fun, I played soccer because that’s what’s it’s like in Italy.”

Perhaps, though, she was destined to become a tennis player. After all, her dad serves as a tennis coach. Behind his gentle prodding, she picked up a racket when she was just 3 years old.

Fusinato didn’t get the same training that most girls or guys receive in the U.S. Living in a small town meant limited opportunities to play against girls her age — but that didn’t stop her from pursuing competition and excelling against it.

“Since Feltre is a small town, there were no girls to play with,” she said. “I was just playing with guys. There was one tennis club that was close. There wasn’t much opportunity. I had to travel a lot to play in the tournaments I wanted to play in.”

Those tournaments were all over Europe. Whether it was traveling to Croatia, Austria or Slovenia, Fusinato knew that she had to make the long trips to get to where she wanted to be as a player. She often drove up to six hours to play in tournaments and get exposure.

“That exposure wasn’t easy to get, and the idea of college wasn’t exactly in the plans,” she said. “In Italy and Europe four or five years ago, it wasn’t common to come to college like it is now,” she said. “I had no clue this thing was coming to college in the U.S. existed. School was always the priority, so I had to buy time to play tennis. Once I was done with high school, I thought I could train seriously and play in pro tournaments.”

That all changed when an assistant coach at Virginia Tech named Freddy Gomez heard about a talented tennis player in Italy. Gomez, who now serves as the director of tennis at Hidden Valley Country Club in Roanoke, Virginia, once worked for Tech head coach Terry Ann Zawacki-Woods, and he talked about Fusinato and what stood out to him.

“I first heard of Fusin from a friend of mine who saw her play with a lot of character during a summer tournament in Italy,” he said. “Then, when I started researching her, I noticed that she had a respectable record and ranking for playing in very few tournaments. She actually only played most of her tennis in the summer.”

Gomez ultimately came to the conclusion that Fusinato would be a great prospect. He still had to convince her into coming to Virginia Tech. With other schools trying to recruit her, she talked about what made her comfortable with committing to Blacksburg.

“That didn’t really know what to expect,” she said. “That was the toughest decision ever. You’re 18, so in Europe, you’re an adult. What made me come was the assistant coach, Freddy Gomez. He was really patient with my English, and we had a good human relationship.”

Gomez knew he had the player he wanted to help build the program at Virginia Tech.

“There was good chemistry between us possibly because of our cultures,” Gomez said, a reference to his being an international player in Venezuela during his younger days. “I thought she was a great person and player. She was just what I was looking for in a player.”

Fusinato said the transition was tough on her. There were language barriers, social barriers and even food barriers to overcome. But the transition was tougher on her parents.

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“For them, it was harder,” she admitted. “They always supported me, even though I am an only child. They thought that the worse case is you learn a second language perfectly. Even though it’s a jump in the dark, it’s (coming to Virginia Tech) going to be okay.”

While she adjusted to a new lifestyle and new language, Fusinato also noticed a drastic difference in regards to the style of tennis. At its core, tennis is an individual sport, but Fusinato found herself on a team with different objectives — winning for the sake of the group and not the individual.

“It was very much an individual sport in Italy, especially since I was the only girl,” she said. “Here, it is more structured as a team sport. A lot of times, it’s about how the team can improve. It’s great to have the motivation from the other girls.”

Fast forward four years later, and Fusinato has posted a correct dual match record of 45-27 in singles matches (as of March 1). She is 27-35 when playing at the No. 1 spot and has knocked off multiple ranked opponents, including the No. 6-ranked player from Miami a few years ago.

However, there is no victory more special than the win she earned a year ago against Eidukonyte. Gomez talked about that day, which he still remembers well.

“I was coaching her that day,” he said. “I remember that I didn’t have to say much to her at all. She was playing her usual good, focused tennis and played a great match. She won, and I was very happy for her. That win says that she can beat anyone in this league. The most surprising thing was that it seemed very routine for Fusi.”

Interesting thing was that it seemed very routine for Fusi.”

Despite her charming personality, Fusinato possesses a competitive streak. Perhaps that comes from playing with and against the boys in Feltre, or from her father, who may have instilled it in her.

“When asked, Fusinato said that match still stands as her biggest accomplishment in tennis.

“I’ve beaten WTA [Women’s Tennis Association] players, but because of the importance that the result had in this environment, I would say so,” she said.

Fusinato currently is focused on this season and the goals the team has set. Tech wrapped up non-conference play with a respectable 7-2 mark, which included wins over Clemson, Purdue and West Virginia.

One of the Hokies’ losses came against then-No. 9 Vanderbilt — one of the best teams in the country.

Now, the goal for her and Santhita Nandakumar — the lone two seniors on a young squad — is to keep things moving in the right direction.

“The No. 1 goal is to make it to the Sweet 16 of the NCAAs,” she said. She has the same personal goal as well.

While the life of an athlete can be hectic and busy, Fusinato still finds time to play her guitar — a favorite hobby — and watch the NBA’s San Antonio Spurs.

“Her hobbies include cooking, according to those around her.

That skill makes her a popular teammate, as she often cooks for her teammates and friends. One dish, in particular, gets rave reviews.

“It’s made with egg sauce and bacon. I guess that’s why it’s so good to Americans. If you go to Rome, that’s the main dish.”

While Fusinato’s time at Virginia Tech is winding down, the journey for her is just beginning. She plans to go to work for a non-profit organization called “TEDS” — think, eat, do and serve. The group teaches people how to do those things. She also hopes to attempt professional tennis, if the opportunity presents itself.

The coach who found her in Feltre knows that she is ready for whatever life throws at her.

“Getting to know Fusi, I noticed something special about her that goes beyond the tennis courts,” Gomez said. “She is strong in mind, spirit and body, and I look forward to seeing what she does in the upcoming chapters of her life.”

Fusinato expressed her feelings for the people of Blacksburg and what the community has meant to her. The kindness of the people stands out, particularly when compared to those in her home country.

She also expressed gratitude toward Virginia Tech and the women’s tennis program. Tennis not only has given Fusinato a chance to gain national recognition, but it also has helped her grow as a person.

“If you go to Rome, that’s the main dish.”

Every time you’re about to play a match, you are facing yourself and your fears,” she said. “That’s what made me grow the most.”

Fusinato has left her impact on the tennis program at Virginia Tech. Like most international student-athletes, she arrived in this country with certain set of fears. Now, she leaves with confidence, and more importantly, hope.
A quick Google search of “leadership training” reveals any number of workshops, events, symposiums, seminars and classes available for one to attend and theoretically learn how to be an effective and dynamic leader.

Those in the Virginia Tech Athletics Department want the Hokies’ student-athletes to succeed on the field or court, but they also want that same group to be leaders in society. That has led to the creation of the Leadership Institute, a unique, broad-based initiative of the Virginia Tech Athletics Department designed to prepare student-athletes to become better leaders and be able to serve efficiently and productively in society once they graduate from the university.

Most athletics departments focus on leadership in various ways, but Tech’s Institute is one of the few of its kind nationwide.

“It’s really a story of progress,” said Danny White, associate AD for student-athlete development and one of the main founders and the director of the Leadership Institute.

INSTITUTE’S BACKGROUND

The genesis of the Institute came about in 2011 when a small group of department administrators, including White and Dr. Gary Bennett, Tech’s clinical and sport psychologist, started talking about ways to help Virginia Tech’s student-athletes become better leaders. They found a curriculum called Habitudes designed by Tim Elmore that focused on teaching practical life and leadership skills. Both White and Bennett started teaching the course to the volleyball, women’s soccer and men’s soccer teams.

Roughly a year later, White designed a summer study abroad course centered on the application of global leadership skills. Gradually, he and Bennett implemented strategies and plans and tweaked others. They also added a staff person to help with their mission. Shelby Miller, coordinator of student-athlete development, came aboard the staff last year, bringing her background in student-athlete development — she worked in a similar capacity at Northern Illinois — with her.

The end result of their work and commitment has been the formation of the Leadership Institute, which came about last year and encompasses all that has been established to date.

“You see all the NCAA advertisements and commercials about how sports breed leadership,” White said. “Even the Olympic charter states that sports breed moral values, excellence, or certain other character traits. We decided that we wanted to be intentional about that. Let’s talk about what these principles are and how they impact you as an athlete—and just as importantly, how they resonate for the rest of your life.”

The department’s Leadership Institute consists of four components—leadership culture, the leadership advisory team, the opportunity to participate in a study abroad course, and a leadership program for coaches.

LEADERSHIP CULTURE

The leadership culture component represents the department’s belief that team leaders can influence a team’s culture. White and his staff bring in speakers each semester—three times in the fall for freshmen and three times in the spring for upperclassmen. Each speaker focuses on an aspect of leadership in which he/she excels.

Tech’s approach, though, differs from most schools, which pour up tens of thousands of dollars to bring in a speaker to speak about leadership. Instead, White, Dr. Bennett and Miller focus internally and have brought in AD Whit Babcock, Deputy AD Desiree Reed-Francois, former football player Jarrett Ferguson, a senior director in strength and conditioning, and others to speak to student-athletes.

“What can those people [from the outside] add that Jarrett Ferguson or Angela O’Brien [former softball player Angela Tincher, who is now a Tech assistant coach] couldn’t add?” White said. “We do things in-house. We have incredible people internally, and it helps our athletes connect all the dots with all the sports. It connects a broader vision for what it means to be a Hokie and to be here. I think, long term, we’re going to keep it that way.”

LEADERSHIP ADVISORY TEAM

The second component—the Leadership Advisory Team (LAT)—consists of 15 student-athletes from different sports who volunteer and serve multiple purposes within the Leadership Institute. These are upperclassmen with an interest in leadership, and they promote the speaker series, encouraging their teammates on their squads to come to the events.

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More importantly, they take on supervisory roles, overseeing the small group discussions that take place following a speaker’s presentation. This gives them hands-on experience in a leadership role.

“Leadership culture allows me to just touch many sports and many individuals, and that helps me grow as a leader, just to see different people and understand their positions and their struggles and how I can help,” said MJ Ulrich, a women’s swimmer and a member of LAT. “I also try to help with my insight and give them different perspectives on other people’s difficulties and how they’ve overcome.”

Ulrich, a McLean, Virginia, native, is one of several Tech student-athletes who have taken advantage of the opportunity to enroll in a study abroad course—another component of the Institute. The course is entitled Sport, Policy & Society and focuses on how sport and policy affects athletes who have taken advantage of the opportunity to enroll in a study abroad course, cover costs for any staff seminars/symposiums that difficulties and how they’ve overcome.”

An added benefit of the study abroad course, and the Leadership Institute as a whole, has been the allowing of interaction among the student-athletes from different sports. Most consume themselves with their sports and the teammates within those sports. Leadership culture small group sessions also include athletes from all sports and allow for more interaction. They all share their daily experiences with each other, and that type of information could be beneficial to each going forward.

The administrative staff within the athletics department not only wants to promote leadership among its student-athletes, but also its assistant and associate coaches. Thus, a component of the Leadership Institute centers on the professional growth and preparation for future advancement in the profession.

Chris Helms, Tech’s senior associate AD for administration and sports programs, oversees this piece. He and Jeff Kinney, a men’s soccer assistant coach, came up with a curriculum, which is based on identifying and enhancing professional competencies, with goals to promote professional growth, improve self-awareness, develop coaching competencies, and guide career development.

The sessions cover a range of topics, including leadership style, communications (media and social media), organization development (hire, fire, recruiting, fiscal responsibility and culture of excellence).

Starting last September (and running through this May), Helms held a monthly session for any assistant or associate coach who wanted to take part. Interested coaches first needed to complete a short application and also receive the endorsement of his/her head coach. He invites a speaker—either internally or from across campus—to speak on a specific competency, and then the group discusses the presentation before being assigned a short homework assignment.

Approximately 15 assistant or associate coaches attend the monthly sessions.

“We hope the outcome is to grow personally and professionally,” Helms said. “Ultimately, we want to equip them with the concepts and competencies, so that, should they aspire to be a head coach, they’ll be better prepared to sit in front of someone who may be interviewing them for a job and be able to articulate what their coaching philosophy is.”

“This is the pilot year. It’s not a done deal, but we’ve got a framework, and we’re learning as much as they are as to how to effectively have an impact for those coaches. If they stay here, they’re better in their roles, and should they want to keep growing professionally, we’ve given them the skillset to do that, too.”

“I have a vision, but we’ll need some help to attain that vision,” White said. “If we were able to secure some more resources, the impact on our student-athletes would be immeasurable.”

In many ways, the impact already is. Ulrich originally wanted to use her future degree in human nutrition, foods and exercise to get into the medical field. Now, she’s contemplating a career in global development or perhaps working for a non-profit organization.

“I’ve [the Leadership Institute] not about athletics,” Ulrich said. “It’s not like, ‘Oh, you’re going to be better at your sport.’ That’s not the purpose.

“It’s about being a better teammate and being a better person. It’s about you going out into the world and realizing it’s not about yourself. In a sense, it better you, and if you’re a better person, you’ll make other people better.”

“Learning about leadership doesn’t necessarily require attending expensive events or shelling out for speakers with expertise on the topics. On the contrary, a creative staff, a commitment to student-athlete betterment, an innovative educational model, and a vision for the future can accomplish all of that and so much more.”

The athletics department’s Leadership Institute is tangible proof of that.

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A list of pet peeves can be rather lengthy and include many things in which most people agree—people who talk over others constantly, driving too slow in the fast lane, cutting in line, parking a car across two spaces, the use of “you” instead of “you’re,” not picking up after one’s dog, Facebook users who constantly give their political/moral opinions, among numerous others.

Brandon Fiala’s top pet peeve probably wouldn’t make many lists. And unfortunately for him, he expects to get a healthy dose of it in the coming weeks.

“The biggest pet peeve of mine is sitting around with nothing to do,” he said. “I’m going to have to find new and creative ways to spend my free time in April.”

Over the past four years, Fiala made a name for himself as one of the best swimmers in the history of men’s swimming and diving at Virginia Tech, and his career concludes at the NCAA Championships later in March. Out of the pool, he served on Tech’s Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC), read to elementary school children and recently wrapped up his tenure as the school’s first ACC representative at the NCAA Convention, which took place in mid-January at the Gaylord Opryland Resort and Convention Center in Nashville, Tennessee.

The latter accomplishment puts Fiala in a category of his own within Virginia Tech Athletics. Named one of three ACC student-athlete representatives back in January of 2016, Fiala served as one of 80 members of the voting delegation, meaning he became the first Tech athlete to vote on legislation at an NCAA Convention.

“It’s an accomplishment that may be just as important, if not more so, than anything he accomplished in the pool—a place where he holds three school records. "To be perfectly honest, I knew very little about it [being a student-athlete representative] going in,” Fiala said. “They [ACC officials] said you would have power, but you don’t realize it until you get into those conversations, and you’re standing up with 300 people—300 of the most powerful people in college athletics—that are realistically shaping the lives of thousands of student-athletes. Nothing prepared me for that.

"It was forceful grow-up. It taught me a lot of life lessons. It taught me that I needed to be comfortable around these types of people. Your opinion matters, and that's something that I hadn't been exposed to at that level.”

Fiala and the two other student-athlete representatives from the ACC—Duke track and field standout Madison Granger and Florida State football player Wilson Bell—spent much of 2016 working in conjunction with Brad Hostetter, ACC executive commissioner for internal affairs; Matt Burgemeister, ACC associate commissioner for compliance and governance; and Shamaree Brown, director of student-athlete programs and compliance. They gathered information from student-athletes throughout the ACC about an array of issues. Most of the athletes to whom they talked to served in leadership roles on their respective school’s SAAC or as a member of the ACC’s SAAC.

At the convention, Fiala, Granger and Bell met with other Power 5 conferences’ student-athlete representatives to get their perspectives and then ultimately to convey a consensus to NCAA officials. When it came to voting on legislation, the 80-member panel consisted of 15 student-athlete representatives from the Power 5 conferences—the largest bloc of the voters.

“That’s just as much as any conference had,” Fiala said. “The ACC is the largest conference in terms of the number of schools. They had 15, and student-athletes had 15. So the student-athlete bloc of voting is just as powerful as the ACC’s. It’s kind of unique to see that. That’s something I wouldn’t have realized without being a part of it.”

Most of the legislation centered on the time demands of student-athletes. Examples of legislation that passed included giving student-athletes an additional 14 days off, banning athletics activities other than competition over an eight-hour period (for example, 9 p.m. until 6 a.m.), and requiring a seven-day break without athletics activities once a team’s season ends.

The student-athlete representatives didn’t always agree on matters. An amendment to allow participation in life-skill activities, such as community service events, on days off passed—but there wasn’t a consensus on this topic.

“There were people that, based on principle, didn’t want anything to be allowed on days off,” Fiala said. “ACC student-athletes felt differently. A lot of us felt that you should be able to do things that would be beneficial to you as a person, so life skills events and stuff like that because that’s not really, to us, athletics-related. That’s more you growing as a person.

“So the things we do for the One Love Foundation [a foundation that raises awareness of abuse], for example, those are allowed on your days off. But that issue was
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the crossroads for the student-athletes. Where would the line be drawn? So it was kind of interesting.

Another interesting piece of legislation that passed now requires schools to develop a time-management plan for each sport that outlines team activities. Student-athletes want more transparency and written schedules to avoid last-minute changes by their coaches. At the end of the season, each school’s AD, the faculty athletics representative, the head coach and at least one member of the team would review the plan. The school’s president or chancellor then is required to go over each of these reviews.

In theory, this sounds like a great idea. Student-athletes get a say on practice schedules. But it only works if the student-athletes follow up and demand a say, as opposed to caving to a coach’s wishes—and that concerns Fiala.

“Are student-athletes going to take advantage of that? I hope so,” he said. “Are people going to jump in with two feet, or are they going to be intimidated and skirt around the edges because it’s a big change? That would be the biggest thing I’d worry about over the next two or three years.

“By no means do I think all this is perfect. The next year or year and a half will be a big telling point. A lot of this was laying groundwork, and we left a lot of things up to institutional discretion. A lot of it is on the student-athlete and taking ownership.”

Fiala said he expects Virginia Tech to do a good job implementing these changes. He expressed confidence in Whit Babcock, Tech’s athletics director, and his staff because of their ongoing emphasis on the student-athlete experience. He also thinks that Tech’s coaches want the best for their players, even if it means making some sacrifices.

But Fiala expects some potholes will need to be navigated nationwide, as colleges and student-athletes find the sweet spot between over-regulation and under-regulation.

“Finding that area has been the biggest challenge,” he said. “It’s going to take time, and we’re going to find it when people start implementing these changes. That’s when we’re going to start solving those kinks—and there are going to be kinks.”

Fiala performed his role in building the foundation for student-athlete betterment and plans on keeping tabs on what transpires over the coming months and years. Of course, he will do that not as a student-athlete, but as an alumnus of Virginia Tech building a career in the professional world.

He graduates in May with dual degrees in accounting and finance, and he accepted a job offer from Baker Tilly, an accounting firm with a regional office in Tysons Corner, Virginia, not far from his hometown of Centreville.

He starts that job in late August, which theoretically leaves him with his pet peeve—free time on his hands. Not to worry, a six-country trip to Europe, a beach trip, assisting his brother in coaching a local swim team, and helping his mom to host a local swim meet in Northern Virginia will eat into some of that.

“I’ll find ways to keep myself busy this summer,” he laughed.

Athletics appears to be in his rearview mirror now. But this swimmer could do a flip turn rather easily and sprint toward a career in athletics administration.

His roles outside the pool have him off the blocks in good shape for that possibility.

“I could very well see myself coming back to this,” Fiala admitted. “The work didn’t feel like work to me. When you’re trying to help people and help shape the lives of people and see what their future brings, that’s interesting to me. So we’ll see.”

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