

inside

HOKIE SPORTS

Vol. 9 No. 4, March 2017

The Official Publication of Virginia Tech Athletics

REMINDER



Giving deadline
is March 31.

ACC CHAMPS!

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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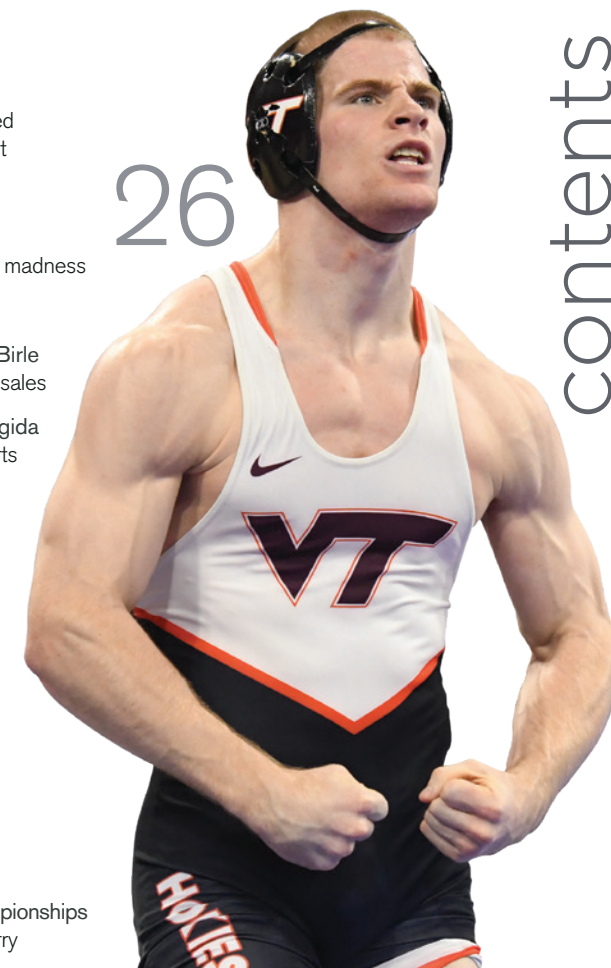


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Jimmy Robertson Editor
John Sours Designer
Dave Knachel Photographer
Contributors
Carly Northup—Hokie Club
Laura Bauer—IMG

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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!

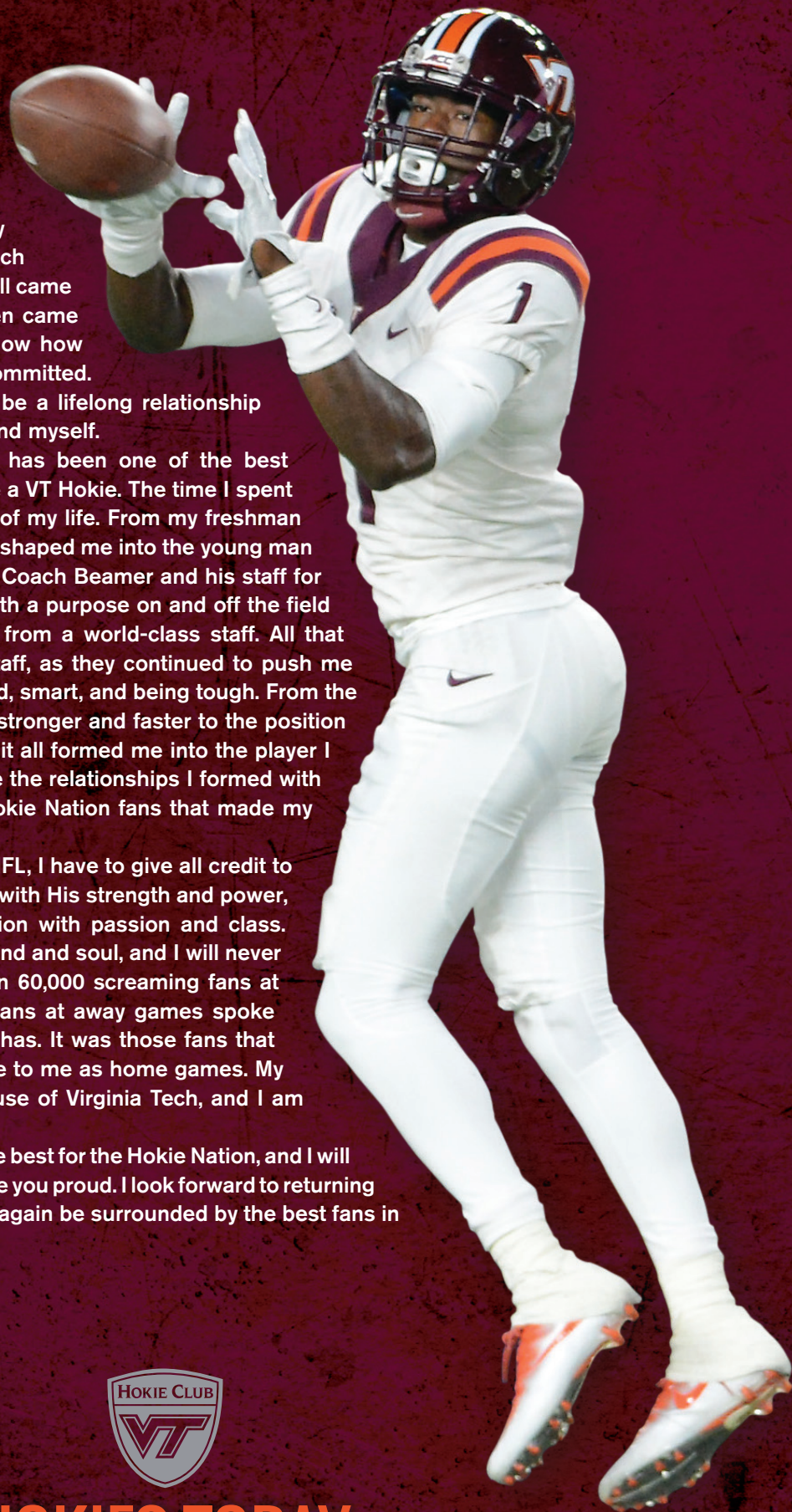
Yours truly,

Isiah Ford #1

Isaiah Ford
Virginia Tech Wide Receiver #1



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CELEBRATING
A SWEEP

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.



The Donor File



J. Pearson and Renae Pearson

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CURRENTLY RESIDES:
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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.
- I'm a Hokie Club member because ...** it is the right thing to do.
- 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.



TECH STUDENT-ATHLETES APPRECIATIVE OF YOUR SUPPORT!



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

"The Hokie Club helps support a great family of student-athletes on an individual and team basis. It is a great opportunity to come to Virginia Tech, and the Rector Field House renovations made possible by support of Hokie Club members will allow us to continue to compete at a high level!"

— Olivia Privitera, track and field, redshirt junior, human nutrition, foods, and exercise

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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Coles, Davis named to positions in athletics department

The Virginia Tech Athletics Department hired former Virginia Tech student-athletes Bimbo Coles and André Davis to one-year appointments within the department. Both will serve as the directors of student-athlete support and community engagement.

The community engagement responsibilities call for them to be representatives at various Hokie Club and athletics department functions, Monogram Club events, game-related events and on other special occasions both in Blacksburg and in other locations as designated by Director of Athletics Whit Babcock and his senior staff members. In addition, both will work with Tech’s Office of Student-Athlete Development, which helps the Hokies’ student-athletes prepare for life after graduation. Both will serve as mentors, attending various events, including those surrounding the spring game, the new student-athlete orientation, the Senior Transition Seminar, and workshops related to time management, life skills, media training, financial planning and agent selection (when applicable).

“André and Bimbo set very high standards in so many facets of their careers at Virginia Tech, both academically and athletically,” Babcock said. “They have both served as fabulous representatives of Virginia Tech over the years and also have been very generous in their support.

“We are extremely thankful that André and Bimbo will be serving in important roles that will help make a positive impact on the lives of our current student-athletes, as well as the greater Virginia Tech community.”

Davis serves as a capital partner for Carolina Holdings Group, a real estate development firm based in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, while Coles is a co-owner of Country Roads CrossFit in his hometown of Lewisburg, West Virginia. Both also are involved various charitable endeavors.

Coles and Davis will remain with their families while serving in their capacities within the athletics department—Coles in Lewisburg, and Davis in Delaware. Both will travel back and forth to events as scheduled.

Hokies make ACC All-Academic Teams

Virginia Tech guard Justin Robinson was named to the 2017 All-Atlantic Coast Conference Academic Men’s Basketball Team, as announced by Commissioner John Swofford.

To be eligible for consideration, a student-athlete must have earned a 3.00 grade-point average for the previous semester and maintained a 3.00 cumulative average during his/her academic career.

Robinson, a sophomore from Manassas, Virginia, made the team for the first time. He is pursuing a degree in communications.

Robinson was the latest of several Tech athletes to make an ACC All-Academic Team. Here is a list of the following:

Women’s basketball

- Vanessa Panousis, senior (human development)
- Samantha Hill, senior (human nutrition, foods and exercise)
- Ragan Magarity, redshirt sophomore (communications)

Men’s cross country

- Andrew Gaiser, redshirt junior (mechanical engineering)
- Daniel Jaskowak, redshirt junior (human nutrition, foods and exercise)
- Vincent Ciattei, redshirt sophomore (engineering science and mechanics)
- Brent Musselman, junior (human nutrition, foods and exercise)
- Diego Zarate, sophomore (criminology)
- Jack Joyce, redshirt freshman (economics)

Women’s cross country

- Katie Kennedy, junior (public relations)
- Abigail Motley, senior (international studies)

Football

- Chuck Clark, senior (human development)
- Tremaine Edmunds, sophomore (communications)
- Brandon Facyson, redshirt junior (biology)
- Eric Gallo, junior (finance)
- Sam Rogers, senior (human nutrition, foods and exercise)

Women’s soccer

- Murielle Tiernan, senior (residential environments and design)
- Candace Cephers, senior (biology)

Volleyball

- Lindsey Owens, senior (biology)
- Rhegan Mitchell, sophomore (human nutrition, foods and exercise)



Spring a time to start finding answers about Hokies’ future fall fortunes

On the evening of March 11, most folks observed an annual rite of spring, setting their clocks forward one hour and losing an hour of sleep, yet gaining extra hours of sunlight each day in return.

In Blacksburg, the second rite of the season—and arguably the more important one—started 10 days later when Virginia Tech’s football program commenced its spring practice. The staff already planted the seeds for next season’s success with rugged winter workouts. Now, the coaches hope this team blooms in the NCAA’s 15 allotted practices over the course of the next month.

The Hokies concluded 2016 with a 10-4 record and a No. 16 ranking in the final Associated Press poll. They lost a lot of firepower off that team, however, including six starters on an offense that set several school records and four starters on defense, mostly on the line.

Tech has several candidates to fill these spots. The question is which ones emerge? That said, here are five to watch:

Josh Jackson

Jack Click, Hendon Hooker and A.J. Bush will split reps with Jackson at the quarterback spot this spring, and they all possess a lot of quality attributes. But Jackson was the one in the battle for the starting job last fall with Jerod Evans and Brenden Motley. He arguably possesses the best combination of physical skills, experience and knowledge of the Hokies’ scheme out of the group. This is the most important position on the field, so all eyes will be on all these guys, especially Jackson.

Reggie Floyd

Floyd played in 12 games last season as a true freshman, though most of his action came on special teams. Yet he enters this spring as a frontrunner at the rover position. Tech’s staff moved Terrell Edmunds to free safety, and given Edmunds’ smarts and his skills, he figures to make that adjustment rather easily. Someone, though, needs to replace Edmunds at the important rover spot—a position that demands a playmaker. That someone may be Floyd, who has a nice combination of size and speed.

Phil Patterson

Patterson took a redshirt year last fall, as Tech’s staff elected to play Divine Deablo and Eric Kumah as true freshmen since both enrolled for the spring semester and knew the system. But midway through the season, the staff prepared Patterson to play in the event of an injury. They thought that highly of his progress. Bucky Hodges and Isaiah Ford headed off to pursue NFL dreams, and Deablo shifted to defense, leaving playing time in their wake. Patterson, with his long frame and good hands, could be one to grab a lot of those reps at either of the receiver spots.

Houshun Gaines

Tech lost standout Ken Ekanem at one defensive end spot, and backup Seth Dooley elected not to return for his senior season. Both Vinny Mihota and Trevon Hill, projected starters at the defensive end positions, are out this spring with injuries. That leaves plenty of reps for Gaines, a 6-foot-3, 250-pounder who played in 12 games last season. He can

run and is big enough to play against the run. He also shows some ability to rush the passer. The Hokies need that, too—they ranked 50th nationally last fall in sacks per game (2.29).

Parker Osterloh

The Hokies lost the entire right side of their line with the departures of tackle Jonathan McLaughlin and Augie Conte. The roster includes 20 offensive linemen, but only three are seniors—left guard Wyatt Teller, center Eric Gallo and Osterloh. Teller and Gallo already start, and redshirt junior Kyle Chung may move into Conte’s spot at right guard. Can Osterloh, a fifth-year senior, be the right tackle? He’s big and powerful, and with 26 games of experience, he possesses the most experience of those contending for the vacancy.

Others certainly merit watching. Can another cornerback or two emerge? What about depth at linebacker? Who factors into the tailback discussion? Will the Hokies be deeper overall this upcoming season? The staff hopes to find answers to all these questions, or at the very least, a couple of them by the conclusion of spring practice.

The good news is that Tech coach Justin Fuente knows this situation and how to handle it—the Hokies went into last year’s spring practice with similar questions. He and his staff found the answers, as evidenced by the final record, bowl win and final ranking.

The even better news is that there is time to find those answers. Yes, there was a recent time change. But the Hokies aren’t springing forward into fall just yet. There is still plenty of daylight left to accomplish what needs to get done.



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BEHIND THE MIC with
Jon Laaser

The Method Leading to the Madness

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 pursues improvement—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 postseason 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 tightly contested loss at Louisville. It struck me as the best shorthand explanation of the program's success and his motivational style. I'm in the business of catchy slogans, but 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 register in his thought process. He was busy digging—sweating for his guys. His 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 wedging 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 to suggest they should do so." They bought in on faith. Cemented as stars, they remain selfless enough to enter games as reserves, but tough enough to carry the team on their backs when the situation demands.

LeDay, the undersized big, gets characterized as "a Ford F-150 with Cadillac Escalade numbers." That's Coach-speak for

dependability without flash, swagger without conventional style. Allen, a combustible spark plug of a scorer whose magnetic personality dominates the marquee, was deemed "the best closer in college basketball" by ESPN's Anish Shroff and "a turnover machine" by Coach—the latter playfully reminding the player of the need for continued improvement.

Swingmen Ahmed Hill and Justin Bibbs live together. The competition for the top smile on the team goes through their dwelling. They possess enough wattage to illuminate a room, many times after their jump shot has lit up an arena. Vastly different paths led them to Blacksburg, but they toted a similar foundation laid by parental influences. Hill committed to Coach before Tech and stayed true to the path despite a geographical detour from the Midwest to the mountains. Bibbs, a commitment to the previous regime, witnessed the work and grabbed a shovel. Each possesses an artistic soul and a personal flair. "Bibbs is beautiful," Coach says flatly, and "Med is the hardest worker on the team."

Ty Outlaw is a walking life lesson in handling adversity. Waylaid on his journey to the college basketball big-time with stops at UNC Greensboro and junior college, he never wavered. He finally arrived in basketball Oz only to discover his heart wouldn't allow him to play, let alone sweat. He smiled and waited. He recently exploited his opportunity, which came in the least desirable fashion—a season-ending injury to teammate Chris Clarke. Clarke, the most athletically gifted player on the roster, sincerely cheers for Outlaw. Clarke knows he will be an irreplaceable part of the puzzle in the next phase, and Outlaw is grateful to fit perfectly into the adjusted picture.

Justin Robinson, nicknamed "Five" because of his jersey number, has evolved into the team's floor general, as Coach imagined when he made his first recruiting visit as the Head Hokie. He possesses a disarming wit combined with a lethal handle. Freshman Khadim Sy



Tech's basketball family members put the needs of others over themselves, and that trait has led to successes during Buzz Williams' tenure.

Photo courtesy of Christina Wolfe

has unlimited potential and an unintentional comedic timing. The baby brother of the squad, jointly cared for by the group, he continues to learn the game and the culture simultaneously.

The "D-League" is the affectionate title of the team's scout team. A combination of players rehabbing to return and those whose most glorious moments come in testy practice battles, designed to harden the whole. Kerry Blackshear represents the former, a future force. Devin Wilson returned after a dalliance with football. Tyrie "Pig" Jackson hopes to man the point some day. LeDay's younger brother, Seth, nicknamed "Junior," is a leaper, not quite ready to inherit his brother's kingdom. Matt Galloway, the manager turned walk-on, earned a scholarship, a reputation and occasional playing time through his reps. Nick Fullard bangs bodies for the satisfaction of getting better, and Greg Donlon is a model of physical discipline if not basketball ballet.

The coaching staff reflects the team itself—an eclectic mix. Coach likes to have an old guy, a fired guy, a young guy and a star in the making. Some fit multiple bills, but all those roles are represented in Steve Roccaforte, Jamie McNeilly, Christian Webster and Jeff Reynolds. Strength coach David Jackson and twin brother Jim once

served as the backbone of the Hokies in a prior era. A portrait of maximizing physical ability through hustle and heart, "Jax" preaches lessons in toughness. Team trainer Ernest Eugene has the players' respect and admiration—each equally difficult to obtain.

Devin Johnson, Lyle Wolf and Cara Jacobsen keep the trains—and planes—running on time. The job requires patience. Josh Chambers cultivates a new-era image, while graduate assistant Joe Fulce trades his sneakers for a video camera to document the journey. Nick "Lucky" Buchanan stands as the Coach's body man, assuring the efficiency of time in a turbulent existence.

Team chaplain E.L. Smiling is aptly named. A talented pastoral prodigy, he also possesses a nasty crossover. Bruce Garnes manages the program's equipment—and morale. Kendrick Gholston keeps the players academically focused through the rigors of athletics pressure, while Elizabeth Bahret manages Buzz's Bunch—Coach's lifelong passion project to help children, who, in turn, help him.


Student managers Sean "Diddy" McClurg, Justin "Acuff" Ammermann, Francis "Pope" Duggan, Mike "Cocoa" Reutt and Justin "General" Swartz are the lifeblood of the program, and also hold it down on the

managers' game circuit. Watch them snap into action at any given moment.

Coach adores photography and chronology, intent on not leaving any moment left in time. So Christina Wolfe diligently snaps away, Mike Burnop and I provide the soundtrack and Bill Dyer notes the historical perspective.

Incredibly, the largest cultivator of Coach takes a backseat publicly while holding it all together. Coach calls wife Corey "the real head coach of the team," and she is omnipresent in all family endeavors (immediate and extended), along with his four children (Zera, Calvin, Mason and Addyson). In fact, so are all the significant others, parents, children and extended families. And, of course, the tribe has elders to lean on in "Big" Fred Wasson and Coach Robert Orr.

It boils down to this. Everyone has a seat on the bus for a reason, and everyone in those seats 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." 

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at annual



CAREER JUMPSTART

by Reyna Gilbert-Lowry

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 Asbury, Director of Marketing for Pamplin College of Business Donna Wertalik, and former Hokie men's basketball standout Bimbo Coles. 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. Asbury'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 alums Dr. Abraham Hardee and Kevin Jones, who headed groups interested in careers in the medical field and design, respectively. Hardee, 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 JOBA Design, a local multidisciplinary design firm headquartered in 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, Roush Fenway 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. 

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ELIZABETH BIRLE

SOFTBALL
Winter Springs, Florida
by Jimmy Robertson

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: How did this internship reinforce what you want to do in your career?

EB: “Like I said before, I fell in love with sales pretty quickly. I get to meet with people face-to-face, build relationships, and eventually help them with what they need. The competitive nature of sales was also a big sell for me — no pun intended (laughing). This is something very appealing for me simply because I have been competitive in every aspect of my life since I was young. I am definitely not made for a desk job from 9-5. Sales keeps me on my toes, and that keeps it fun.”

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 of the opportunities 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 very own product. I don’t think you can get very 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 10 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.” 



DAVID BERGIDA

WRESTLING
Bell Meade, New Jersey
by Jimmy Robertson



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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 there 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. Jarrod Hewitt and Darius Fullwood are 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 who we have coming back. We've just 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.

"We'll probably take another one of those corners and move them to rover. I'm not sure which one yet, so 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 he

Continued on page 18

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 (27.5 percent), tied for seventh in tackles for a loss per game (8.1), tied for 14th in interceptions (16) and tied for 24th in turnovers gained (25).

The Hokies, though, lose 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 camp."

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 bigger concern with Vinny Mihota and Trevon Hill out with injuries. How do things look at the end spots?

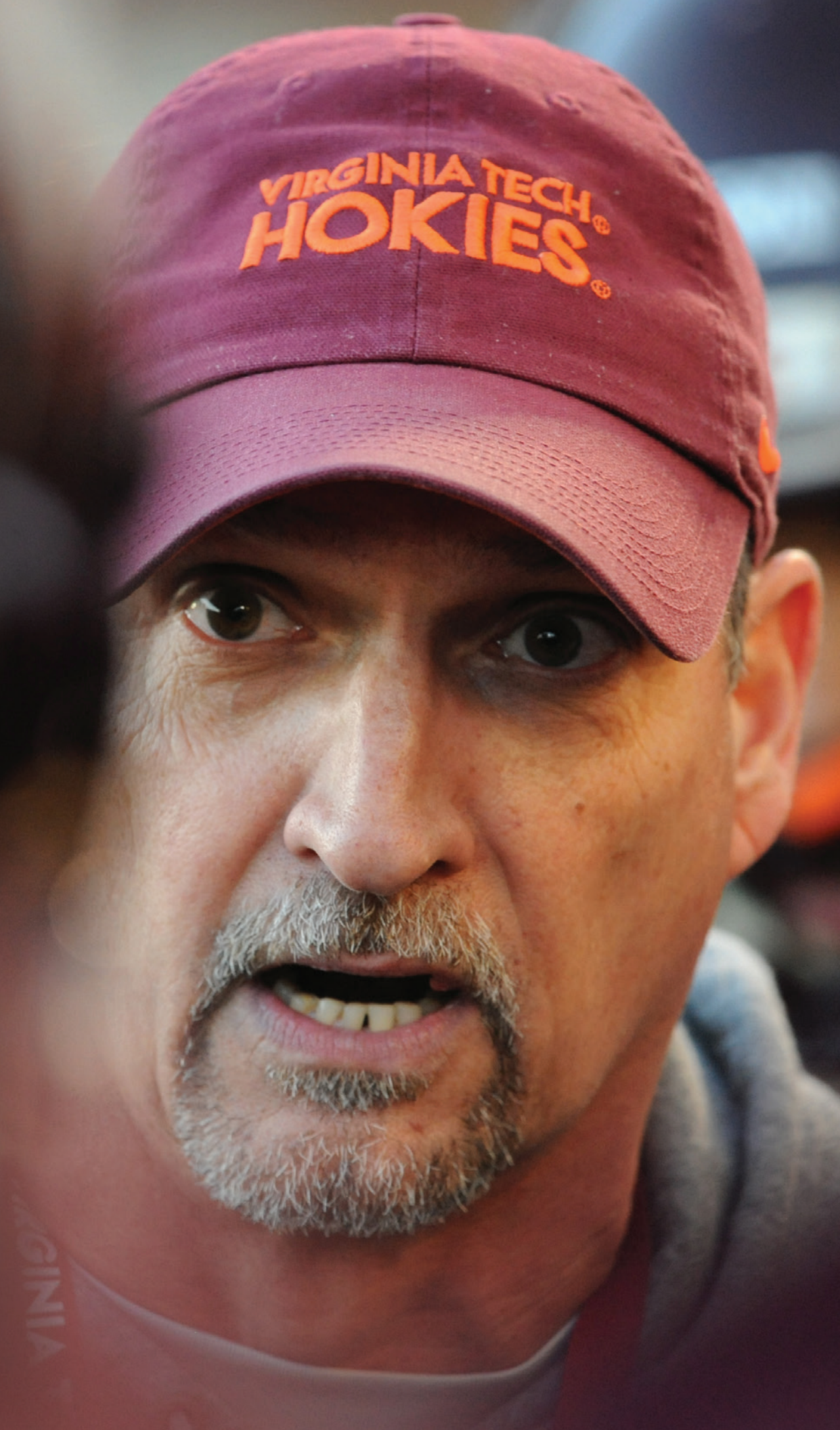
BF: "Well, you're right. We're going to be short at defensive end. There are going to be a couple of guys at defensive end that we need to take the next step in their development, both in their physical maturity and their mental maturity. We need for them to be someone we can count on and depend on. Houshun Gaines and Emmanuel

Virginia Tech's defense played much better in 2016, ranking in the top 20 nationally in total defense, but coordinator Bud Foster wants to see more improvement, and developing the young players will be key

by Jimmy Robertson



MORE WANTING





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 Tyree 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 what 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." **VT**



Terrell Edmunds, who ranked fourth on the team with 89 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.



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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, total 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 33rd nationally in scoring offense (35.0 ppg) and 39th nationally in total offense (444.9 ypg) in 2016.

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 weird how that worked, but our guys made improvements. We continued to get better and better, and that's always the key."

"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 best at 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 Click, 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."

IHS extra

Q: You guys ranked 55th nationally in rushing offense (183.1 ypg). How important will it be to improve the rushing attack?

BC: "I do think we need more production. We take a lot of pride in finding ways to get yardage on the ground. When you hand the ball off and run it inside the tackles, you have to physically dominate people, and that's the area where we need to improve. We can find other ways. When you run your quarterback, you're able to spread the defense a little bit to create some room and create a numbers advantage. Using the jet sweeps and perimeter runs gives you a chance to get the ball out in space and on the edge, and that neutralizes a good defensive front."

"But when you can line up and hand the ball off to the tailback and consistently make four yards up inside, that's when you really have something going. That's a point of emphasis for us this spring. We need to get more production handing the ball off to the tailbacks and getting yardage on more of the inside type of runs."

Q: Travon McMillian is the only returning tailback with experience. Who are some other tailbacks to watch?

BC: "[Deshawn] McClease was a guy that I thought was going to have a good year for us, and he got hurt pretty early in the year. He's a guy that needs to come on and help us. D.J. Reid is a young kid that has a lot of physical tools, and it's time for him to take that next step and be a player for us. We have Terius Wheatley who is a young kid that came here in January, and he's got some tools. It'll be exciting to see what he can do this spring. Hopefully, he can help us. Jalen Holston, as a signee, is someone that we're extremely excited about [Holston enrolls in July]. He's a developed kid physically, and you never know how those guys will handle the transition, but from a pure physical standpoint, he's going to be in a position to make that transition quickly, if he can handle the rest of it and looks good."

"Travon also has to continue to get better. He's got some big-play potential. He's got to get more consistent when there isn't a big play there. He's got to get better at making three yards instead of zero yards. When he breaks one out for seven yards, we want him to break that next tackle

Continued on page 22



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

WORK TO BE DONE Continued from page 21

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.

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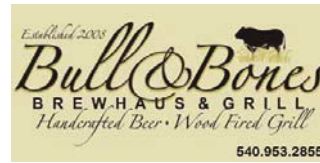
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Several weeks ago, members of the Virginia Tech wrestling team adopted a hashtag for their Twitter accounts entitled — #AllAboutUs.

Well, the ACC Wrestling Championship 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 Chishko (149), Zach Epperly (174), Zack Zavatsky (184), Jared Haught (197) and Ty Walz (heavyweight) all claimed gold medals. Sal Mastriani (157) won a silver medal and Dennis Gustafson (133) won 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 resign to take the Iowa State coaching position Feb. 20, accumulated 93 points, easily beating host NC State by 29 points. The margin of victory marked the largest by an ACC team in a decade.

“I think we showed everyone that it really is all about us,” said Dance, who won his third ACC title. “Whatever happened with [Kevin] Dresser and all that stuff, we didn’t let that

affect us. We were ready to go here at the ACCs, and we’ll be ready to go at nationals. We stayed poised and focused the whole time, and the team looked good today.”

“I think to win the dual meet title and then win the tournament title says a lot about our guys, our team and our program,” interim head coach Tony Robie said. “It says a lot about our coaching staff and the direction that we’re going.

“I think our guys have come together in the last few weeks, and they’re ready to go. They know what this time of year is about. They’re seasoned, and they’re prepared. It’s just a matter of competing and going and taking what we feel like we’ve earned. It was a good day.”

At 125, Dance, the top seed, beat No. 3 seed Sean Fausz of NC State 3-1 in sudden victory. He got a takedown quickly in the extra frame to get the win and beat Fausz in the finals for the second straight year.

At 149 pounds, Chishko won his first ACC title with a 12-7 decision over No. 3 seed Troy Heilmann of North Carolina. He got an early takedown and never trailed, adding a takedown in the second period and three takedowns in the third period to pull away.

Chishko’s win sealed the team title for the Hokies, and the remaining Tech wrestlers set about to getting some payback.

At 174 pounds, Epperly won a tight match against North Carolina’s Ethan Ramos,

avenging last year’s loss to Ramos in the finals and claiming his first ACC title. Epperly, the top seed, got a takedown in the third period to grab a 4-3 lead and then refused to let Ramos escape, riding him for the final 20 seconds of the match.

“This is huge,” Epperly said. “This is something I’ve been working toward the past two years. I had a sour taste my first year getting third and then had a sour taste last year losing in the finals. I felt like I was a small part of us losing last year, so this is huge.”

Zavatsky survived a hard-fought match at 184 against NC State’s Michael Macchiavello to win his second consecutive ACC title. He got a first-period takedown and an escape in the second period and made it stand in a 3-2 win, avenging a loss to Macchiavello in Blacksburg on Feb. 11.

“I know he’s a brawler,” Zavatsky said. “I really wanted to get that first takedown, and after that, I just stayed in solid position. I could have taken more attempts and tried to get more points, but he’s a strong guy and he stays in good positions, so I wanted to hold my ground and control the match.”

At 197, Haught got two takedowns in the first period against North Carolina’s Daniel Chaid to grab a lead that he would not relinquish, beating Chaid 6-3. Walz, Tech’s heavyweight capped a near-perfect ending for the Hokies, getting revenge for an early-

season loss to Duke’s Jacob Kasper. Walz used two first-period takedowns to grab the lead and then finished Kasper with two third-period takedowns in winning 8-2.


Walz has won more than 100 matches in his career, but the two-time All-American hadn’t won an ACC title — until now.

“It feels like something that should have happened 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,” Chishko 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. 



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TECH MEN ARE CHAMPIONS
ONCE AGAIN IN TRACK AND FIELD

The Hokies, who won the ACC’s team title during the outdoor season last spring, brought home the program’s fourth indoor crown behind gold-medal performances from Vincent Ciattei, Torben Laidig, Patrick Joseph and the distance medley relay team
by Jimmy Robertson

Over the past few years, Blacksburg has become known as “Sacksburg” because of the number of sacks recorded by the defense on the Hokies’ football team.

It could be argued, however, that the better nickname is “Tracksburg.”

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 109 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 Ciattei, Torben Laidig and Patrick Joseph — the three gold medalists.

Ciattei, a redshirt junior, stunned everyone when he won the mile, beating 2016 NCAA champion Henry Wynne of Virginia by 22-hundredths of a second with a time of 4 minutes, 1.04 seconds. The medal marked the first of Ciattei’s career.

Laidig won the pole vault 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 Brad Johnson and James Steck tying for fourth.

Joseph and teammate Drew Piazza went 1-2 in the 800-meter race. Piazza had set the school record in the preliminary race the previous day, but Joseph broke it with a time of 1:46.23 — a time that also



marked an ACC Championships record.

The other gold medal came from the distance medley relay team of Daniel Jaskowak, Brandon Thomas, Kevin Cianfarini and Neil Gourley, 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 Jaskowak (silver, 3,000), Diego Zarate (bronze, mile) and Greg Chiles (bronze, 200). 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 Pocratsky 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. Pocratsky came in third in the 800, recording a personal-best time of 2:04.60.

Also, Tech’s Eszter Bajnok came in fourth in the triple jump. Bajnok tied a school record with a top 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.

TECH MEN COME IN FOURTH, WOMEN FIFTH
AT ACC SWIMMING AND DIVING
CHAMPIONSHIPS

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 40 points ahead of the Hokies.

“I am proud of this men’s team, and everything they represent,” Tech 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 in a school- and ACC-record time of 1 minute, 52.39 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 100 breaststroke with a time of 51.51, and he claimed a silver medal in the 200 individual medley with a time of 1:42.09 — 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 in fourth in the 200 backstroke and sixth in the 200 IM as well.

Other strong performances came from Michael Craddock (fifth, 1,650 freestyle), Norbert Szabo (seventh, 200 IM; and eighth, 200 freestyle) and Zach Switzer (eighth, 400 IM and 200 breaststroke). In the relays, 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. Ben Schiesl came in seventh in the 1-meter event with 319.30 points, while Thomas Shinholser and Mauro Castro-Silva were fifth (339.45 points) and eighth (312.85 points), respectively, in the platform event.

On the women’s side, the Hokies, behind gold medal performances from freshman swimmer Reka Gyorgy and sophomore diver Ashlynn Peters, came in fifth — the program’s 13th straight top-five finish since

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



joining the ACC. NC State won the team title, followed by Virginia, Louisville and North Carolina.

“That was a hard fought fifth-place team finish,” Skinner said. “We had to pass three top-25 programs in Duke, Notre Dame and Florida State to do it. Incredible leadership along with very gifted swimmers and divers is why we excelled.”

Gyorgy claimed gold in the 400 IM, setting a school record with a time of 4:04.97. She just missed another medal, finishing fourth in the 200 IM with a time of 1:57.22 — also a school record.

Gyorgy became the first Tech women’s swimmer to win an ACC gold medal since 2013 (Weronika Paluszek, 200 breaststroke and Heather Savage, 100 butterfly) and just the third freshman to do so (Paluszek, 2013 and Sara Smith, 2006).

Peters won the 3-meter diving event with a score of 365.95 points. That marked the second-highest score in program history.

Jessica Hespeler and Klaudia Nazieblo also swam well. Hespeler won a silver medal in the 1,650 freestyle and claimed a bronze in the 200 freestyle, while Nazieblo won a silver medal in the 200 butterfly, came in fourth in the 200 backstroke and fifth in the 100 backstroke. In addition to their strong performances, senior Fiona Donnelly made the finals in three events. Her best finish was sixth in the 200 IM, and she came in eighth in both the 400 IM and the 200 backstroke.

Of Tech’s relay contingents, the 800 freestyle quartet of Hespeler, Donnelly, Adriana Grabski and Nazieblo recorded the best finish, coming in fourth.

Those from both Tech teams who qualify will compete at the NCAA Championships in mid-to-late March.

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John Sung sits behind a nice desk cluttered with a computer and stacks of paper. A dry-erase board with all sorts of writing on it clings to the wall behind him. He certainly looks like a man with a rather large workload. He gives the impression of someone with a lot of business to handle and goals to attain.

Not long into what turned into a 48-minute conversation, Sung revealed one of his bigger goals for 2017.

“My goal is to get into every building on this campus by the end of the year—other than the residence halls,” he said. “I don’t know when I’ll have time, but I’m going to try.”

He paused for a few seconds, as if he knew the next question.

“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 what 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.”

Certainly, there will be time for perusing Cheatham Hall and the Fralin Life Science Institute among other buildings, but for now, the new Virginia Tech women’s lacrosse coach keeps his focus on a more pressing matter—coaching his team, and ultimately, rebuilding the program.

Hired last May, Sung took over arguably the toughest job in the Tech athletics department. The Hokies’ Olympic sports annually find tough competition in the ACC, but none have struggled more than the women’s lacrosse program, which had lost 27 straight conference games dating to 2012 before an 18-12 upset of No. 17 Boston College on Feb. 18.

Megan Burkner resigned as the head coach at the end of last season after a 5-13 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.

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 started at the high school level, 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).

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, too. He led the Eagles 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 varsity programs. “Most college coaches don’t take the path I take. They don’t work themselves up from high school—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 to build programs, and we want to build a program that lasts.”

“Coming up here and feeling the energy and seeing the direction it was going in 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 having those other 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 rolled past Gardner-Webb 21-5 at the Indoor Practice Facility. Most of the people in attendance on this bitterly cold, windy day were athletics department personnel—many of whom knew little about lacrosse. They simply came to support Sung, whose friendly, outgoing personality is infectious.

He encourages athletes from other sports, coaches, administrators and even fans

to stop by his office, if for nothing else, to say hello. He’ll even reward those who do.

“Hey, we’ve got snacks,” he laughed.

Then added, “That’s one of the things I’ve been trying to do for our kids, just push the program as much as I can and be like, ‘Hey, this is going to be different. Just give us a shot.’ My goal is to change the program. No one wants a loser, so I have to make sure I get the winning part involved first.”

Therein lies the challenge. Sung said to get this program headed in the right direction means doing one thing—recruiting. The current roster lacks the size and athleticism to win with regularity in a conference that features the reigning national champion (North Carolina) and seven teams ranked in the preseason Intercollegiate Women’s Lacrosse Coaches Association poll.

Fortunately for Sung, lacrosse is growing rapidly within the state of Virginia, and the Northern Virginia area features a lot of high-quality Division-I prospects. In fact, five of the 13 members of Sung’s first recruiting class come from Northern Virginia. Plus, a lot of alumni from Virginia Tech settle in the Northern Virginia and the surrounding areas of Washington, D.C. and Maryland, giving Sung important name recognition within recruiting circles.

“Buzz [Williams] has—what does he call them?—his kind of guys [OKGs—‘our kind of guys’], and for us, we need to find that same thing,” Sung said. “It’s easy to get caught up in the kids who love recruiting. You either love the process of lacrosse and getting better, or you love the process of recruiting. We need to find the kids who love the process of lacrosse, who love the training, who love the practices, who love that atmosphere as opposed to being in the spotlight.”

“The other thing is opening up our recruiting. We [Virginia Tech] weren’t recruiting from the best club teams in the country. That was one of the biggest things. When I was at Winthrop, I called on them like my life depended on it. If I could get one kid from one of those 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 30,000 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. His Winthrop teams set Big South single-season records for points, goals, shots and shots on goal.

The Hokies’ first game gave Tech fans a glimpse of what he wants from his teams. The Hokies took 41 shots, scoring 21 goals—just two short of the school’s single-game record. Tech easily 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 3-4 lacrosse game. That’s not fun. We want to get it to where it’s exciting.”

Continued on page 32

Seeking SUCCESS

After building two women’s lacrosse programs from scratch into NCAA tournament participants, John Sung is embracing the challenge of turning the fortunes of the Virginia Tech women’s lacrosse program
by Jimmy Robertson

We want to be one of the nation's top scoring teams. People like offense. Offense puts people in the seats, right? And defense wins championships, so we've got to find that right mix."

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 the men's basketball program into a winner.

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.

"You can't rush the process," 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, the foundation may not hold the weight of the structure. We've got to make sure we don't miss a step."

In his previous stops, he needed two full recruiting classes before success began to manifest itself in year No. 3. In that third year, his teams displayed the horsepower needed to win conference championships and make NCAA tournament appearances.

"Year three is the magic," he admitted. "We'll know where we are."




The Tech women's lacrosse team has been celebrating a lot so far this season, particularly after achieving a national ranking for just the second time in the program's history.

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. If 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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Mar 12-19	Texas, "A Whole Other Country"	1,195	May 19-21	New York City / Springtime	995
Mar 17-19	Philadelphia Flower Show	445	May 21-27	Branson, MO / America's Music Capital	1,150
Mar 23-29	Baseball Spring Training / Florida	895	May 22-24	Sands Casino & Resort / Bethlehem, PA	275
Mar 27	Harrah's Casino / Cherokee, NC	40	May 27-29	Nashville, TN / Music City, USA	495
Apr 1	Asheville Outlets / Spring Shopping	50	Jun 3-13	Seattle Northwest - Land / Fly	2,575
Apr 3-7	Charleston & Savannah / Southern Spring	925	Jun 5-9	Florida's NE Shore / Amelia Island	795
Apr 7-8	"Jonah" / Lancaster, PA	325	Jun 7-11	Kentucky Bluegrass	795
Apr 7-9	Washington/ Cherry Blossom Festival	450	Jun 8-10	Lake Lure / Flatrock	525
Apr 8 & 22	Biltmore House / Festival of Flowers	95	Jun 9-11	Washington, D.C. / Our Nation's Capital	395
Apr 9-11	Sands Casino & Resort / Bethlehem, PA	275	Jun 10-13	Baseball / Boston Red Sox / Fenway Park	750
Apr 17	Harrah's Casino / Cherokee, NC	40	Jun 10-19	Nova Scotia & The Atlantic Provinces	1,525
Apr 23-29	Louisiana Cajun Country	995	Jun 11-17	Florida's Walt Disney World	1,325
Apr 23-May 9	Great Southwest / Calif. / Motorcoach	2,625	Jun 11-17	Niagara Falls / Montreal & Quebec	1,150
Apr 29	"Beautiful" / Altria Theater / Richmond	160	Jun 14-18	Hall of Fame / Sports & Music	750
May 1 & 29	Harrah's Casino / Cherokee, NC	40	Jun 16-17	"Jonah" / Lancaster, PA	325
May 5-7	Washington, D.C. / Our Nation's Capital	395	Jun 16-18	SSSHH! It's a Secret	375
May 6	Billy Graham Lib./Stowe Botanical Gardens	60	Jun 16-Jul 1	Alaska & Can. - Fly / Land - Northbound	4,625
May 7-11	Baseball / Marlins / Rays	795	Jun 18-21	Atlantic City / Resorts Casino & Hotel	350
May 8 & 16	Andy Griffith Mayberry / Mt. Airy, NC	65	Jun 18-24	Michigan & The Grand Hotel	1,450
May 8-11	Golden Isles of Georgia	795	Jun 21-24	Creation Museum / Ark Encounter / KY	575
May 8-12	Hudson River / West Point / Culinary Inst	825	Jun 25-Jul 1	Branson, MO / America's Music Capital	1,150
May 9-12	Tulip Festival / Holland, MI	595	Jun 26	Harrah's Casino / Cherokee, NC	40

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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

Small-town GIRL making it BIG on the court

by Nathan Loprete
Special to Inside Hokie Sports

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 settle 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 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. "In Italy and Europe four or five years ago, it wasn't as common to come to college like it is now," she said. "I had no clue this thing [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."



Italy native Francesca Fusinato and her family often drove up to six hours to play in various tennis tournaments in Europe, but the time and effort paid off when she received a scholarship offer from Virginia Tech.

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 Fusi 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.

"I 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 career dual match record of 45-27 in singles matches (as of March 1). She is 27-15 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 court 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 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.

After losing to Eidukonyte in two previous matches, she convinced Zawacki-Woods and Gomez to give her another shot.

“I played that girl twice before, and the first time I lost really easily,” she said. “The second time, I lost after coming back from an injury. I always played No. 2 on the team, and before the match, I asked coach if I could play this girl. She had a game that I liked. Coach said I could play No. 1, and she [Zawacki-Woods] put me there.”

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 Sansitha 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 NAACAs,” she said. She has the same personal goal as well.

While the life of an athlete can be hectic and busy, Fusinato still takes time to play her guitar — a favorite hobby — and watch the NBA’s San Antonio Spurs. Her favorite song to play is “Wonderwall” by Oasis, an English rock band. She also spoke about her fandom for the Spurs.

“I really like Manu Ginobili and the system,” she said.

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



Francesca Fusinato and the Hokies play in a difficult ACC, but they have goals of a third straight appearance at the NCAA Championships and a deep run, both as a team and individuals, in that tournament.

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

“The dish that most people like ... it is called Carbonara,” she said. “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.

“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. 

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Unique model
focuses on various aspects of leadership and is
helping student-athletes and assistant coaches
grow both personally and professionally

by Jimmy Robertson

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 pony 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.”

STUDY ABROAD COURSE

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 impacts society and international development.

During the first four years, the group went to the Dominican Republic, working with non-profit organizations to run sports camps, while also being exposed to the hardships of an under-developed

community. Last May, the group went to Switzerland—the total opposite of the Dominican Republic—visiting the United Nations and International Olympic Committee offices to gain exposure to the entities that develop policies to help under-developed countries.

“My goal is to challenge our student-athletes and expose them to challenges that people in other parts of the world face to deepen their understanding and hopefully light a fire in them to be a part of that,” White said. “Maybe they don’t do much beyond sponsoring a child for the rest of their life, but that’s a great thing. It could be that they get graduate degrees in this area and work for non-profit organizations. Some of our students have done this and gone on to do some pretty cool things.”

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.

LEADERSHIP PROGRAM FOR COACHES

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 (hiring), 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.”

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Much of what the department’s Leadership Institute encompasses is exclusive to Virginia Tech. White and Dr. Bennett have spoken

at Habitudes conferences, and White fields numerous calls from colleagues nationwide about the study abroad opportunities. Miller was chosen to go to an NCAA Leadership Academy Workshop. Helms gets the feeling that there are few programs nationwide that focus on leadership for assistant and associate coaches.

They want to do even more—but more requires funds. Additional financial resources would allow for advance site visits for study abroad courses, cover costs for any staff seminars/symposiums that they themselves want to attend, and allow for additional curriculum purchases.

Also, extra financial resources would provide much-needed help for parts of their bigger vision. Study abroad sites could be expanded to places like Rwanda and South Africa — locations that provide rich cultural and historical stories. In addition, they would like to organize a summer leadership camp locally for elementary and high school students. This would be planned, implemented and run by LAT, giving Tech’s student-athletes another opportunity to put their leadership skills to use.

White, with help from the Hokie Club, hopes to meet with prospective donors this spring and discuss the value of the Leadership Institute.

“We 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.

“It’s [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 betters 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.


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NCAA CONVENTION EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE FOR FIALA

One of the most decorated swimmers in Virginia Tech history, Brandon Fiala offered his input on time demand issues of student-athletes and became the first student-athlete at the school to cast a vote at an NCAA Convention
by Jimmy Robertson

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 “your” 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.



Brandon Fiala owns three school records and has won five ACC gold medals in his career, but his work outside of the pool has been just as important.

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, athletic-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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EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE Continued from page 43

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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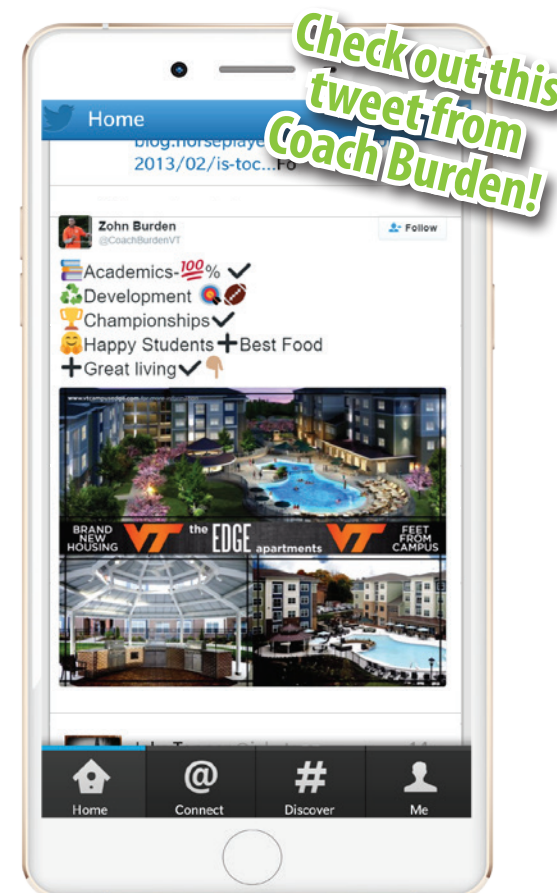
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