

inside

Vol. 10 No. 4, March 2018

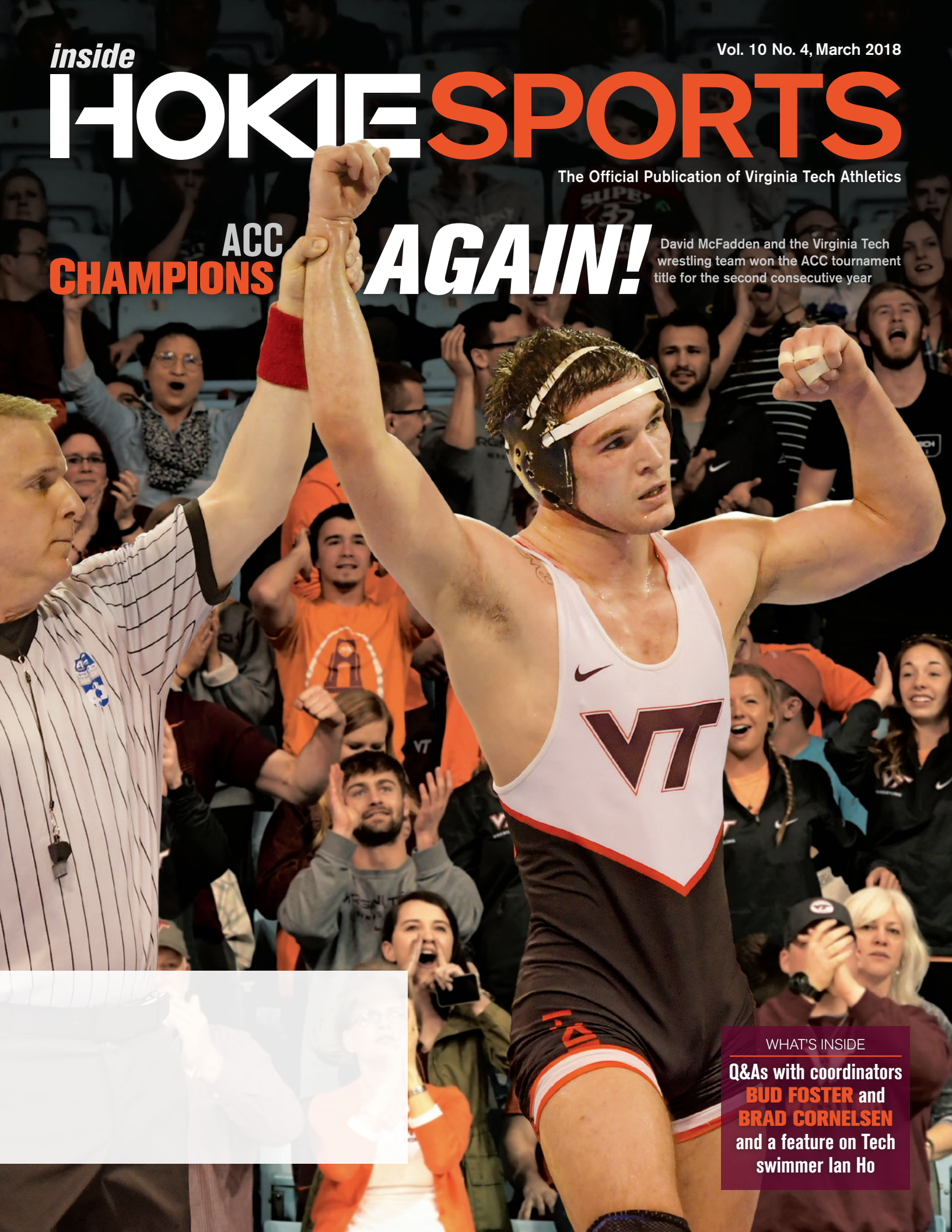
HOKIESPORTS

The Official Publication of Virginia Tech Athletics

ACC
CHAMPIONS

AGAIN!

David McFadden and the Virginia Tech wrestling team won the ACC tournament title for the second consecutive year



WHAT'S INSIDE

Q&As with coordinators
BUD FOSTER and
BRAD CORNELSEN
and a feature on Tech
swimmer Ian Ho





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Jimmy Robertson
Editor

John Sours
Designer

Dave Knachel
Photographer

Contributors
Carly Northup — Hokie Club
Jared Wilson — IMG

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TECH BEDEVILS DUKE ON SENIOR DAY

Chris Clarke is only a junior, but he was a beast down the stretch on Senior Day, as the Virginia Tech men's basketball team shocked then-No. 5 Duke 64-63 at Carilion Clinic Court on Feb. 26 to close out the home portion of the men's basketball schedule. Tech's basketball staff honored seniors Justin Bibbs and Devin Wilson and two managers before the game, but Clarke made the biggest plays in the final 90 seconds. This resounding dunk (see photo) with 1:24 remaining cut the Duke lead to 63-60, and he scored two more baskets, including a stick-back of a Nickeil Alexander-Walker air ball with 4 seconds left that was the game winner. Clarke finished with eight points, while Alexander-Walker added 17 and Bibbs 14 in his final home game, as the Hokies upset the Blue Devils for the second straight year.



THE STUDENT-ATHLETE EXPERIENCE

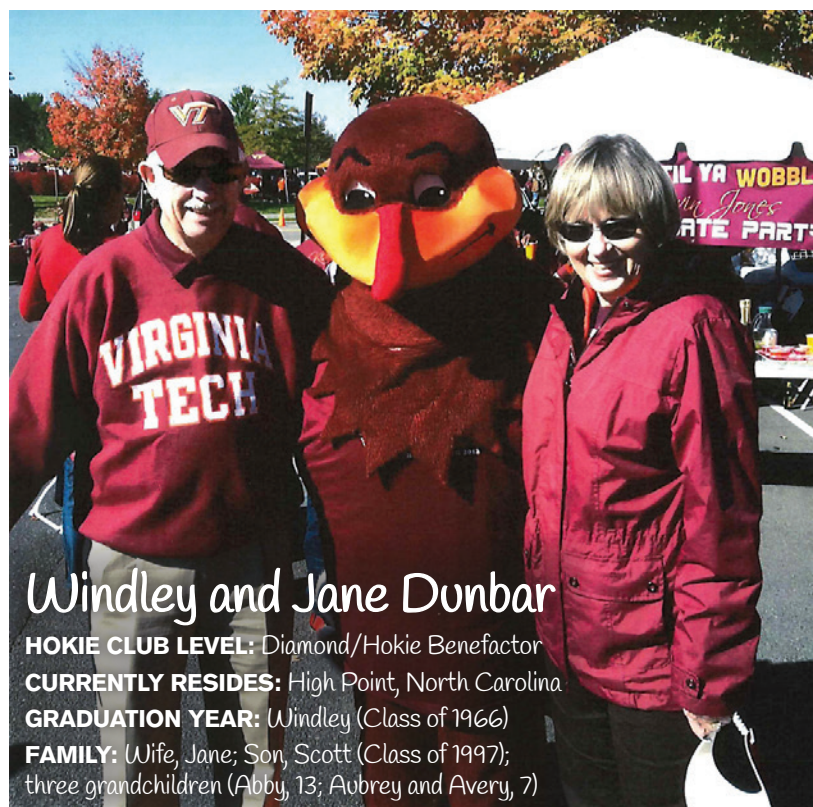
"Having a scholarship to Virginia Tech means everything to me. I get to go to a great school. I'm a little bit away from home, but it's cool because this is home now, and I get to play the game I love."

Kerry Blackshear Jr.
Redshirt Sophomore, Orlando, Florida

"I'm so grateful for my scholarship because coming from not much, my mom couldn't afford for me to go to school, so just being able to come here at this beautiful town and just being able to play in front of all you fans in the Hokie Club, it means a lot. I just want to say thank you for giving me the opportunity, and it means a lot."

Ahmed Hill
Redshirt Junior, Augusta, Georgia

The Donor File



Q&A

Q: A Hokie is ...

A: a loyal fan of Virginia Tech.

Q: The Hokie Nation is real because ...

A: we are all bound by our love for Virginia Tech.

Q: My best memory of Virginia Tech athletics is ...

A: when we beat Boston College to send us to the national championship game in New Orleans. Also, beating Notre Dame in 1973 to win the NIT.

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

A: We became active members when our son, Scott, was a student at Virginia Tech.

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

A: I graduated from Virginia Tech. Also, my brother, Robert, and my son, Scott graduated from Virginia Tech. I have been a fan ever since my days at Virginia Tech.

Q: Describe a perfect day at Virginia Tech.

A: A bright, sunny, fall day watching a victory at Lane Stadium.

Q: Do you have any tailgating traditions?

A: Visiting with fellow alumni and friends and spending time with our family.

Q: What motivates you to give back to Virginia Tech athletics?

A: It is rewarding to know that we are helping Virginia Tech athletes to achieve their goals in sports and life.

Q: I am a Hokie Club member because ...

A: I am proud of what Virginia Tech stands for as a leader in both athletics and academics.

Q: My favorite Virginia Tech sports are ...

A: football, basketball and tennis.

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

A: Bruce Smith.

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

A: Dell Curry. 



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QUICK FACTS

- Launched – December 12, 2016
- Objective – Increase membership in the Hokie Club to 25,000 members
- History – The Hokie Club (formerly known as the Virginia Tech Athletic Fund) was founded in 1949 to fund scholarships for student-athletes at Tech
- ACC Peers – Clemson, Florida State and N.C. State all possess fundraising organizations approaching 25,000 members



"There is no better time to get involved with Virginia Tech Athletics, and there is no better way to impact our success than to join the Hokie Club, no matter where you live. It's about our students and scholarship opportunities, and it's about competing at the highest levels. We will keep working hard to represent Virginia Tech in a first-class manner and make the Hokie Nation proud, but we need our alumni and friends to step up and be a part of it all and to join the Drive for 25."

- Director of Athletics, Whit Babcock

DRIVE FOR 25



The Drive for 25 logo debuted on the Virginia Tech Carilion Court on Feb. 12, 2017 as the Hokies knocked off No. 12 ranked Virginia by a 80-78 margin in double OT at Cassell Coliseum. Tech trailed by a 37-23 margin at halftime, but thanks to a defense that allowed a mere 26 points over the next 20 minutes, a rousing halftime speech to the crowd by Coach Beamer and a raucous Cassell crowd, Coach Buzz Williams and the squad recorded a second straight home win over the Cavaliers.

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OPTION 3 IN OFFICE
Stop by our offices at Lane Stadium, Suite 112 and a Hokie Club representative will be happy to assist you in renewing your gift to the Hokie Scholarship Fund! As a reminder, your gift must be received by the Hokie Club Office on or prior to March 31, 2018. Also, remember that the greatest of your football seating and parking and men's basketball seating gift requirements will determine your minimum gift for 2018 to retain all 2017 benefits.

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NEWS & NOTES by Jimmy Robertson

Emery, Robinson earn second-team All-ACC honors

For just the second time in the past decade, a Virginia Tech women's basketball player earned All-ACC recognition, as Taylor Emery received a second-team All-ACC nod in late January following a regular season in which she averaged nearly 18 points per game. She led the Hokies in scoring, field-goal percentage (49.1), 3-point field goal percentage (39.7) and free-throw shooting percentage (86.6) during the regular season.

The junior from Tampa, Florida became just the fourth Tech women's player to earn All-ACC honors, joining Uju Ugoka (2014), Brittany Cook (2008) and Kerry Gardin (2006).

On the men's side, Justin Robinson earned second-team All-ACC recognition as well. The junior from Manassas, Virginia averaged 13.8 points, 2.8 rebounds and 5.5 assists per game during the regular season. He led the team in both scoring and assists in that span.

Robinson, who averaged 16.2 points per game in ACC games, became the first Tech player to make an All-ACC team since Erick Green in 2013.

Other players who received notice were Devin Wilson and Chris Clarke. Clarke finished second in the voting for the Sixth Man of the Year Award, while Wilson received two votes for the Defensive Player of the Year honor.

ACC announces basketball All-Academic Teams

The Atlantic Coast Conference announced all-academic teams for men's and women's basketball in early March, and three Virginia Tech student-athletes earned a spot on those teams for their respective sports.

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 or her academic career.

Devin Wilson made the men's basketball All-ACC Academic Team for the third time. The redshirt senior from McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania

earned his degree in political science last year and is working toward a second undergraduate degree in English.

Taylor Emery and Regan Magarity each earned a spot on the women's basketball All-Academic Team. Emery is pursuing an undergraduate degree in creative writing, while Magarity, a redshirt junior from Norkopping, Sweden, is working on a degree in multimedia journalism.


Ciattei, Johnson win ACC postgraduate scholarships

Vincent Ciattei, a runner on the Virginia Tech men's track and field and cross country team, and Tech women's soccer standout Alani Johnson both received the 2018 Weaver-James-Corrigan Award from the Atlantic Coast Conference office Feb. 28.

The Weaver-James-Corrigan and Jim and Pat Thacker postgraduate scholarships are awarded to selected student-athletes who intend to pursue a graduate degree following completion of their undergraduate requirements. Each recipient will receive \$6,000 toward his or her graduate education. Those honored have performed with distinction in both the classroom and their respective sport, while demonstrating exemplary conduct in the community.

Ciattei and Johnson were two of 52 student-athletes in the ACC to receive the honor. The student-athletes will be honored at a luncheon held at the Sheraton Four Seasons Hotel Imperial Ballroom in Greensboro, North Carolina in April.

Ciattei, a redshirt senior who just won his second consecutive ACC indoor title in the mile at the ACC Indoor Track and Field Championships, is studying engineering sciences and mechanics. The Maryland native is an eight-time honoree on the Dean's List, and has been on the AD Honor Roll for five straight years and on the ACC Academic Honor Roll for four years.

Johnson, who scored 24 goals in her storied career, will graduate this May with a degree in human nutrition, foods and exercise. The Virginia Beach, Virginia native made the Dean's List three semesters, the AD Honor Roll four consecutive years and was on the ACC Academic Honor Roll last year. 



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EDITORS DESK by Jimmy Robertson

Young players under the spotlight, as Tech's football staff looks for options this spring

It's time for that annual rite of spring. No, not Groundhog Day, or moving the clock forward an hour, or even the family Easter egg hunt.

No, in Hokie Nation, the most important rite of spring is the start of spring football practice, and their beloved Hokies started the first of their 15 allotted practices March 17. For the players, the time marked the end of the first quarter to their season—grueling winter workouts.

Tech finished its 2017 season with a respectable 9-4 record and a No. 24 national ranking in The Associated Press poll, though a bitter loss to Oklahoma State in the Camping World Bowl still lingers. Now, the Hokies look to the 2018 season needing to replace three starters on offense, six on defense and the field-goal/kickoff kicker.

The Hokies will be young—again. So which of those young players can emerge this spring to replace the talent and production lost off last year's team? Well, here is another annual spring right: this column's five players to watch this spring. Here is the list:

Rayshard Ashby

Ashby enters spring practice as the most experienced contender at one of the more critical spots in Tech's defense—mike linebacker. The rising sophomore played in 13 games a season ago, with nearly all of his action coming on special teams. That modest experience gives him an edge on the other

candidates. He resembles departing starter Andrew Motuapuaka in that he is a little short at 5-foot-10, but a powerful 230 pounds. Motuapuaka, though, made a ton of big plays. Can Ashby? Finding out that answer began March 17.

Dylan Rivers

Basically, all the material written about Ashby applies here, as Tech's staff lost potential NFL first-round draft pick Tremaine Edmunds and steady backup Anthony Shegog at the backer position. Rivers played a little more on defense in a mop-up role than Ashby this past season, but outside of that, the similarities are striking. Rivers, at 6-1, 235 pounds, was highly recruited, and the rising sophomore finds himself in the perfect position for a young player—with the edge on a starting role on Tech's defense. Hopefully, he takes advantage of that opportunity over the next month.

Eric Kumah


The Hokies entered spring practice with 13 players listed at the receiver positions. A year ago, they relied extensively on one—Cam Phillips, who took all of his Tech records and departed. Josh Jackson needs for some receivers to emerge this spring, and Kumah may be the best bet. The rising junior caught 28 balls for 324 yards this past fall and needs to take the next step in his development. He provides the best combination of size (6-2, 220 pounds) and hands, which he showed last

season when he made several difficult catches. He just needs to be a little more consistent. Tech's staff, and this team, really need for him to develop into a 70-catch option this fall.

Tyree Rodgers/Bryce Watts

Pairing these two makes the most sense because one of them figures to be the favorite to start at the cornerback position opposite of Adonis Alexander. Which one? Well, Watts, a rising sophomore, played in all 13 games a year ago, mostly on special teams, while Rodgers, a rising redshirt sophomore, played in seven games. Watts certainly brings serious speed, having won the 55-meter state indoor championship as a high school senior in New Jersey. Tech's staff has lacked depth at the cornerback position in part because the Hokies play so many defensive backs at other spots (safety, rover and nickel). The coaches certainly need for another consistent corner to step forward—and this is the time for Watts and Rodgers.

Tyrell Smith/D'Andre Plantin

Tech's staff appears to be leaning toward moving last year's starting right tackle, Kyle Chung, to center to replace Eric Gallo. That leaves an opportunity for Smith or Plantin, both of whom are rising redshirt juniors. Smith nearly won the starting job at right tackle this past season before offensive line coach Vance Vice elected to go with the more experienced Chung. Plantin played quite a bit at left tackle toward the end of the season after an injury to Yosuah Nijman. The time is now for both, but especially the 305-pound Smith, who is in his fourth spring practice since coming to Tech. The Hokies actually possess a lot of depth and talent on the offensive line, and Vice thinks highly of some of his younger tackles, including T.J. Jackson and Silas Dzansi. But Smith and Plantin possess the experience, which usually helps a player win the battle. It's certainly a position worth monitoring. 



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BEHIND THE MIC with
Jon Laaser

Nunc Coepi: Now I Begin

The people had lingered on Carilion Clinic Court in numbers larger than usual and for longer than usual. Tech head men’s basketball coach Buzz Williams had been emotional, and brilliantly candid, on the postgame radio show with Mike Burnop and me. My dad had texted me a handful of “WOWs” and a few exclamation points. The crowd had surged onto the floor where Nickeil Alexander-Walker had seconds before thrown a perfect lob (air ball) to Chris Clarke for the game-winning stick-back. Just before that, Clarke had missed a potential go-ahead layup off a coast-to-coast drive. A minute before that, he had successfully stolen the ball, and in white-knuckling fashion, gone coast to coast to bring the Hokies within a point. The Cassell had rocked, rolled, trembled and shaken.

All of this, and much more, had transpired in less than an hour. The Hokies had slugged it out with Duke, embraced the fight, and prevailed. As I reached my car in the Cassell Coliseum parking lot, my head was spinning, and my heart was still racing. What does this win mean? Did I do the game justice in my call? How did that happen? What is this feeling?

The answers to those questions came relatively quickly, as I reached my apartment. The win meant the Hokies were heading to the NCAA Tournament in back-to-back seasons for the first time since 1985-86. “We’re going, momma,” Coach had exuberantly proclaimed to his wife, Corey. The second one is subjective, but I think so. The third? It happened because this basketball family oozes character and toughness. The last one was unfamiliar, and the answer came more gradually. I have been calling games for the past 15 years. I have been delighted in wins, devastated by losses, indifferent to results, happy with my phrasing and furious with missed opportunities within myself – and, in less glaring moments, everything in between. But never this.

It finally came to me. I was feeling overwhelmed. In a joyful way. Overwhelmed by what that basketball family had endured and accomplished sure, but more overwhelmed by how emotionally connected I felt to it, and how their makeup had infected me.

I couldn’t sleep. My mind was filled with the immediate. Wow, that was done with ESPN’s “Big Monday” crew here. Wow, that was done in front of the seventh, but certainly most exuberant, sellout of the ACC season. Wow, that was done while leading for only a minute of the game and only four seconds of the second half. Wow, that Red Panda sure

is something. Wow, they could set a program record for ACC wins. Wow, I get to call March Madness – again!

An hour passed, and sleep was no closer. The thoughts just kept coming. Eventually, they turned to the process by which Williams and his family had gotten to this moment – and how I had become so emotionally invested. Their literal path extends back well beyond my observation, and I am grateful for their recollections of it, but for the purpose here, I’ll keep it in the relatively recent past.

Hindsight has a way of shaping our memories and our history books, but isn’t always as accurate as we think. Our immediate hindsight would tell us that last year’s tournament appearance was preordained, and in many ways, we already might have taken it for granted. But now, as I lay awake, I started to reflect on some of the moments along the way that were certainly never certain.

One of the first things I remember Williams saying was how hard it is to make up ground in the ACC. That is absolutely true, and it definitely starts long before a team begins posting wins on the court. I remember the first time I met Zach LeDay, Seth Allen, Justin Bibbs, Ahmed Hill, Justin Robinson, Chris Clarke, Devin Wilson, and everyone else in the basketball family. I remember the first time it felt like family. I remember watching practice for the first time. I remember losing to Alabama State in the first game I ever called at Cassell Coliseum. I remember beating Radford at their place and the guys seemingly growing. I remember talking to Phil Martelli (St. Joseph’s head coach) in the cool bus-spinning area of Barclays Center after the Hawks had handled the Hokies in December of 2015.

I remember the Hokies being serenaded with John Denver’s “Country Roads” by West Virginia fans in their own arena after the next game. I remember waiting for Williams after that game. I remember my anger, not at him, but at the feeling. I remember the Hokies beating NC State in overtime to start ACC play in their next game, and I remember the UVA win that followed. I remember the 4-1 start in conference play that season, but I also remember the five-game losing streak that followed. I remember the resolve within the group after that, and the five-game winning streak that closed the regular season.

I remember Tech beating Florida State in the ACC Tournament in D.C., and I remember the joy at the Cinebowl when

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they were selected for the NIT. I remember thinking they had lost to Princeton and the unapologetic celebration when they didn’t. I remember landing in Utah and the walk into the arena at BYU. I remember eating at PF Chang’s with the team and Devin Johnson playing “One Shining Moment” before the film session prior to BYU.

My mind kept racing, and the recollections of last year became even more vivid. I have the shovel in my living room that Williams handed out to family members at the team Christmas party as a reminder to keep digging. I remember LeDay’s mean mugs after dropping his hesitation hooks on ACC bigs who had underestimated him. I can picture Allen’s posture after hitting a dagger 3 at Clemson and the same stature when he did it again to the Tigers at the Cassell. Of course, I have a mental snapshot of London Perrantes’ shot staying on the flange. I remember being crushed when Clarke lay injured on the floor. Not because of our chances to win the game, but because I remember him (at 19) giving me life advice, and how much I was hurt that he was hurt. I’m still a little embarrassed that I unprofessionally threw my arms up in triumph from radio row when the Hokies survived at Pitt.

This year, the moments have been seemingly even more volatile – the lows of Syracuse and UVA at home, the defensive metamorphosis after Miami and before NC State, the stunned silence of John Paul Jones arena in Charlottesville.

The point is, if I can remember those moments, and how stressful some of them have been, imagine what it has been like for the people who really play parts in this story. The reps in the weight room, the lessons in practice and film session. The time spent with Buzz’s Bunch and on a #getBETTER tour. The grind of boot camp. The initial conversations in recruiting that led to these guys being here. Buzz Williams being here. All of them adding up to something that hopefully we won’t take for granted in hindsight because it is undoubtedly hard to make up ground.

Buzz Williams and the Hokies have run to the fight all season – a trait that helped them earn a second straight NCAA Tournament bid.



Harder than you can imagine, and certainly not in a linear line of ascension.

I’m happy for my memories of the journey, but here are a few numbers that I think point out the volatility of it – and the faith necessary to take it. Over the past two seasons (2016-17 and 2017-18), the Hokies are 8-1 in games decided by three points or less (one possession), and 4-0 in games decided in either single or double-overtime. The last time they lost a one-possession game, in fact, was against Texas A&M on Nov. 25, 2016, away from prying eyes at the Wooden Classic in Fullerton, California. Since then, they have won nine such games in a row, including 3-0 this year (Ole Miss, Virginia and Duke). What does that say? It says the journey has hardened the whole. It says this team is defined by its character and heart. It says they run to the fight and embrace the difficult. It says that in the biggest moments they have been first to the floor and trust

their training. It says that if you have been paying close enough attention, that recent night at Cassell was never promised, but also not completely unexpected. It says don’t bet against this team (in a figurative sense) once the madness of March begins.

It says it has been tremendously difficult for the family to get to this position, and that the pursuit should be appreciated. I have no doubt that Hokie Nation shares my pride in the accomplishments of Williams’ family and is eager for the moments that will come. Because every moment, positive or negative, is only another opportunity to say “Nunc Coepi,” a phrase the family has adopted. It’s Latin for, “Now I begin.” Indeed, now they begin again, having climbed confidently through their work to new heights.

A week after that night at Cassell, I had answered my initial questions and had also eventually gotten some sleep. But now Hokies, I have one for you – wanna dance?

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Tech Office of Student-Athlete Development using **ONE LOVE FOUNDATION** as guide to educate on *relationship abuse*

by Natalie Forbes
Senior Director, Student-Athlete Development

In May of 2010, University of Virginia senior women's lacrosse player Yeardley Love lost her life to relationship violence. Her former boyfriend, also a University of Virginia lacrosse player, killed her just three weeks shy of their college graduation. In the wake of this tragedy, Yeardley's mother and sister, Sharon and Lexie, decided to do something to honor Yeardley's memory and to prevent this from happening to other young people. They began to research the data behind relationship violence and what they found startled them.

Today, statistics show that one in three women and one in four men will be in an abusive relationship in their lifetimes. Additionally, young women ages 16-24 are at a three times greater risk for abuse, and each year, more than 1,200 deaths occur as a result of relationship violence — more than three per day. With this new and shocking knowledge, Sharon and Lexie set out to make a change, and thus created the One Love Foundation.

The One Love Foundation works with students all over the country to educate, empower and activate campus communities in a movement to change the statistics surrounding relationship violence.


The goal of the One Love Foundation is to prevent relationship violence by meeting students on campuses and focusing on educating the most at-risk individuals — those between the ages of 16 and 24. The foundation educates students about the signs of abuse, what healthy and unhealthy relationships look like, and the resources available if they or their peers experience relationship abuse. One Love uses a program called the Escalation Workshop as a catalyst for this education. This 90-minute film-based workshop educates about the warning signs of an abusive relationship, creating a safe zone for discussing an all-too-common problem.

Since the creation of the One Love Foundation in 2010, more than 125,000 students from more than 550 schools across the country have participated in the Escalation workshop. Consistently cited as “relatable” and “eye opening,” it has been implemented by various campus departments, including athletics, women's centers, Greek life and other student organizations.

In September of 2015, the Atlantic Coast Conference announced a partnership with the One Love Foundation and became the first collegiate conference to do so. Soon after, the Virginia Tech Office of Student-Athlete Development became aware of the foundation and quickly joined the movement by bringing the One Love programming to Blacksburg. A virtual training session took place that allowed multiple staff members from the athletics department, the Women's Center, and the Office of Student Affairs to become trained One Love facilitators. These offices then bring this workshop to a variety of student groups, including student-athletes.

The student-athlete development staff began to implement this program in September of 2016, and during the 2016-2017 academic year, every Virginia Tech student-athlete participated in the Escalation workshop. Following the success of the inaugural year of implementing the One Love program, the student-athlete development team set a goal that every incoming Virginia Tech student-athlete, including freshmen and transfers, would participate in the Escalation Workshop within their first six weeks on campus — known as the “Red Zone” time period for sexual assault. The student-athlete development team met this goal during the fall 2017 semester, as all 160 incoming student-athletes participated in the workshop.

Following each One Love workshop since the program's implementation in 2016, the student-athlete participants complete a survey detailing their experience, and the data collected speaks volumes as to how significantly this programming impacted these individuals. Ninety-eight percent of those surveyed responded that, because of the workshop, they will speak up if they see unhealthy and abusive relationship behaviors in their own or their friends' relationships. Ninety-eight percent of the student-athletes said that the Escalation Workshop made them aware of the unhealthy relationship behaviors that become abusive, and potentially the most startling response, 92 percent reported that the workshop helped them realize that relationship abuse is present in their or their friends' lives. When asked for feedback on the program, freshman wrestler John Borst said, “The workshop was eye opening and helped me become more aware of what to look for, and how I can help my fellow teammates and my community.”

The One Love Foundation, fueled by tragedy, has created a movement to change the statistics surrounding relationship violence, and in doing so, continues to help the Virginia Tech Department of Athletics provide education and programming to impact positively the lives of student-athletes. 

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The 2017 season served as a banner one for the Virginia Tech defense, as coordinator Bud Foster's group recorded three shutouts and finished in the top 20 nationally in several prominent categories.

In fact, Tech ranked fourth nationally in the most important category — scoring defense (14.8 points per game) — and the Hokies also finished in the top 15 in total defense (13th, 319.3 ypg) and rushing defense (15th, 119.5 ypg). They dominated in the red zone as well, holding opponents to scores on just 72.4 percent of their attempts, which ranked seventh nationally.

Tech's opponents only scored 13 touchdowns on 29 red-zone attempts.

But the Hokies lost several key cogs from that defense, including senior stalwarts Andrew Motuapuaka, Greg Stroman and Brandon Facyson, along with Tremaine Edmunds, Terrell Edmunds and Tim Settle — all three of whom decided to leave school early and make themselves available for the NFL Draft. Thus, there is work to be done this spring to make Tech's defense formidable once again.

Foster, now entering his 32nd year at Tech, stands as one of the nation's best defensive coordinators, so he knows how to mold a defense. He provided some insight as to how recently when he answered an array of questions shortly before the Hokies started spring practice.

Q: Before looking ahead, let's look back. Your defense recorded three shutouts and ranked in the top 20 nationally in several categories. How would you assess that unit's play in 2017?

BF: "During the season, you kind of just go on to the next game, but when we went back and evaluated our scheme — and we're always going to tweak it a little bit — I was really pleased with how we played. We were consistent for the most part. Obviously, I was excited to have eight starters back, but that changed really quickly [laughing]. But it was just a combination. You had some experienced guys that played really well, like Tremaine Edmunds in his second year of starting. He really elevated his game. He was a special guy. You had different guys like that who stepped up.

Graduation and early departures leave the Hokies' defense void of experience, but coordinator Bud Foster is excited about the possibilities of several younger players who hopefully will emerge this spring

by Jimmy Robertson

Tim Settle is another one. Ricky Walker had a big-time year for us. Andrew Motuapuaka played outstanding. I thought our secondary played extremely well.

"It was one of our better seasons, all in all — stopping the run, defending the pass and just being a complete unit. I was pleased for the kids. They put a lot of work and effort into it. Now we're starting all over again."

Q: Let's look at the critical positions right away — the two linebacker spots. How do you go about replacing two such productive players as Tremaine and Andrew?

BF: "That will be hard because those two guys were erasers for us. They were big-time playmakers. The one thing they did do for the younger kids ... we kept as many of the younger kids in the meeting room as possible because we knew there would be a changeover. I was hoping Tremaine would stay one more year, but I also knew he'd be a first-round pick. It's hard for a guy like that to stay back.

"But those guys, and it has been over the years, it's been the culture we've built just through the lunch pail. Those guys — Andrew, Tremaine, Sean Huelskamp, Anthony Shegog — were really professionals on and off the field. They worked their tails off, and how they played is how they practiced, but it's also how their approach was in the meeting room and their preparation and how they attacked those types of things. They were great examples of mentors and role models for our younger guys.

"Right now, in our early morning workouts and with how I've seen them [the current players] approach the workouts and how they're attacking with their effort, I'm seeing the baton being passed to the younger guys. With each individual group, we have an expectation here, and it's not so much what I expect, but what the game demands and what we've done, and now I think there is a little peer pressure amongst the guys that have been here ... It's pretty cool when you have that culture built in. Now, we've got to encourage that and keep reinforcing that the culture was built on hard work and commitment. Nothing is given to you. It's earned — but I think we have that in this room.

"I'm excited. We've got a lot of good, young guys. There is going to be competition, and competition is healthy. I've been pleased with how they've been working since the bowl game. Now we've got to transfer that on the field."

Q: Rayshard Ashby and Dylan Rivers played on special teams as true freshmen this past fall, and Dylan played in a mop-up role in a game or two. What do you like about these two, and where do they fit into the mix?

BF: "I think both of them are capable. They were highly recruited kids and top-rated kids. Rayshard did a nice job on special teams [this past fall]. So did Dylan. When Dylan was in there to finish a couple of games, he made some plays.

Dylan got to practice a little more, particularly at the end when Shegog was banged up a little bit, so he got more practice time on defense, but all those kids got some pass skel [skeleton, 7-on-7 work] work and middle drill work.

"But the competition is going to be wide open. Between Rayshard, between Rico Kearney and Daniel Griffith, those three guys are going to battle at the mike [linebacker] spot. I'm excited about Dax Hollifield coming in [from North Carolina]. I think he's a special guy, and I think he'll compete once he gets here. I'm anxious to see where Keshon Artis fits in, whether he's a mike or a backer. I like his movements and explosiveness and those types of things. He's a good football player.

"Mike is a playmaking spot, and we need to find a playmaker out of this group and a guy that's consistently good. That position, year in and year out, is going to be our top tackler, or should be, and I want that guy to have some leadership qualities — and I think those guys have the ability to do that.

"At the backer spot, I would say that Dylan is a little ahead of the other guys. Jaylen Griffin is a guy that I was impressed with in the scrimmages and middle drills as a freshman. He played that position in high school, and he shows he can play with vision. He has some instincts, so I'm anxious to see his development. We also brought Alan Tisdale in early. He's not ready to play physically just yet, but I like what he's all about. He's long and athletic. He's not to the strength of some of these guys, but he has some qualities that I like. Zack Treser is a walk-on from Blacksburg, and he's done a great job of changing his body. We'll see if he can help us somewhere, but I like what the kid is all about. This program is important to him, which you appreciate.

"Those will be the guys battling for playing time, not just at linebacker, but also for special teams. It's a great opportunity for them to make a name for themselves."

Q: You also lost both starting cornerbacks — Greg Stroman and Brandon Facyson — and both were extremely productive. That said, how important is this spring for Adonis Alexander?

BF: "I'm counting on him to be the lead guy on one side. He had an opportunity to leave early, and he's making the right decision to stay for a lot of reasons. If he is focused, and if he is disciplined, he can be as good as anyone we've had around here. He's long, he's athletic, he's got great ball skills, he's got great timing, he's a good tackler ... he has a lot of qualities physically that make him pretty special. He just needs to be consistent, and that means being sound fundamentally and with his techniques. But that's why he's coming back — to continue to develop and grow as a football player and a person. I'm hoping he'll be the leader of that group."

Q: The rest of the cornerbacks are relatively unproven, with Bryce Watts and Tyree Rodgers probably the most experienced after having played mostly on special teams in 2017. What do you like about those two, as you look to replace Stroman and Facyson?

BF: "Obviously, with a guy like Bryce, he was the 100-meter champ out of New Jersey, so he can run, and Tyree is a guy that when we put him in the game, he did a nice job. Sometimes, he played some clean-up spots, but I just like how they're working in the offseason.

Football is important to them, and you're seeing that through their body of work. We need for them to step up just because of who we lost. They're the next guys in line. That doesn't mean that they're going to be the starters because we have some younger guys coming in.

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Youth

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for TECH'S DEFENSE

entering

Spring Practice

Youth the STORY for **TECH'S DEFENSE** *entering Spring Practice* *Continued from page 15*

and doing it on the field, but I have been impressed by their abilities and athleticism during early-morning workouts. Those are guys that have a skill set that we're looking for and what we've played with in the past."

Q: I wanted to ask you about Devon Hunter, who came in highly touted, but struggled with injuries some this past fall. Where do you see him fitting in, and what are your expectations of him?

BF: "He played rover, but we're going to potentially look at Devon as our nickel guy with Mook [Reynolds] being out this spring [with an injury], and we'll maybe look at DJ, too, because he played the position some in high school. For us, that's a key position. He needs to be instinctive and a good cover guy and also a playmaker in space."

"But Devon, I'm anxious to see him. He came in with a lot of accolades, but you know, at the same time, what he was asked to do as a freshman in college compared to what he was asked to do in high school was a big difference. That's not always an easy transition for a kid to make, particularly in our defense. We're a 'check with me' group, meaning we're going to change coverages or defenses depending on formations and backfield sets and things like that. That's not always easy for a young player to do. I don't care if he's playing in the secondary or another position."

"He did a nice job on special teams, but he's got a lot of tools. We probably would have liked to have redshirted him. I know this — he's going to be a better player and have a chance to compete for a starting position because he played last year. He's a lot like Dylan Rivers and Rayshard Ashby in that he's a notch above the other guys [in his

class] because they all were able to practice a little more and do some different things."

"I'm excited about him and his future, with the way he runs. He's a dynamic athlete. We need for him to figure it out and hopefully have a big spring for us."

Q: You did lose Terrell Edmunds, but you're gaining Divine Deablo, and you're moving Khalil Ladler to free safety. Do you feel good about the free safety position?

BF: "I was really pleased with Divine last season before he broke his foot. I like the kid. It's important to him, and he played well. He was really starting to understand the position, so we're excited to get him back."

"And then, I thought Khalil came in and did a good job. I was extremely pleased when he stepped in and played — and with how he played. He's not the fastest guy, but he knows how to compete. He knows what his strengths and his weaknesses are. He's just a smart, heady player. There will be some competition there."

Q: Maybe the strongest part of this defense right now is the defensive line, led by Ricky Walker, Vinny Mihota and Trevon Hill. Looking at Settle's spot, whom do you see as the frontrunner for Settle's spot since both tackle positions lacked depth a year ago?

BF: "We're going to move Vinny down inside. I think he's weighing around 285. He tore his ACL at the end of the Pitt game, and he'll miss spring ball, but I think he's a good fit at tackle. If he's going to play at the next level, I think that's his best chance to showcase his talents, and he knows that."

"But I think it'll be him and Jarrod Hewitt next to Ricky. I'm excited about Jarrod. He can run. He played a little more and got better as the year went along. You saw his production continue to improve as the season progressed."

"But we need some young guys to emerge, like Xavier Burke or Darius Fullwood. Unfortunately, Robert Porcher [a freshman] was a

guy we were hoping to get a great evaluation on, but he's not going to participate [because of an injury]. We've got another kid, J'Bril Glaze [another freshman], and we'll see where he fits, but Xavier Burke and Darius Fullwood are the next guys because of their age and maturity, and you hope both of those guys step up. They need to."

Q: Walker gets a lot of attention — and deservedly so — but is this the year that Trevon Hill really breaks out? He actually tied for the team lead in sacks in 2017.

BF: "I hope so. We need to develop that guy. We need a guy that gets 10, 12, 15 sacks, and we need to do it on the other side, too. Trevon is the one guy that has consistently put pressure on the quarterback. We need to get that other spot doing that. I think House Gaines does some things extremely well. He loves the game, and he likes to compete. I'd love for him to get a little bit bigger. Those two guys will be our lead guys. I like their abilities. I'm hoping Trevon can get 10-12 sacks, and House got better. I'd love for us to have two bookends, so that the offensive tackles are shivering in their cleats when you're lining up."

Q: You lacked depth at spots on the defensive line, but you elected to redshirt five defensive linemen. Whom can fans expect to emerge out of that group?

BF: "Well, I'm excited about our ends. Between Nate Proctor, Tyjuan Garbutt and Zion DuBose, those guys, to me ... I'm excited about them. It's unfortunate that Porcher is out. I know he wants to play end, but he may get bigger and be a better fit inside, especially with his athleticism. We'll see where J'Bril ends up, but all those ends are bigger and stronger. I think the lower half of Zion's body gives him the potential to get bigger, and he could be a guy that plays a little inside [at tackle] and a little outside [at end]."


"But with Zion, Tyjuan and Nate, and you throw Eli Adams [a freshman who enrolled in January] in the mix, that gives you four young ends that are going to continue to work to go along with a couple of guys that are playmakers for us in Trevon and House. It'll

be interesting to see. I like those young kids. Zion and Tyjuan were two guys that stuck out during middle drills and some of our team stuff that we did during our bowl preparations when we had some extra time. They played on the other side of the line of scrimmage and played fast, so we'll see."

Q: Where would you hope to see this defense by the end of spring practice? What do you hope to get accomplished?

BF: "It's not a whole lot different than every year, but we are younger at a lot more spots. I think we've got 60-65 guys on this team that are freshmen or sophomores, and it's real, especially on defense. They've got to learn their position, they've got to understand their position and the expectation within their position, and then they've got to understand how that fits within the defense. Then they need to work every day and grow every day, and hopefully, we'll get better every day. This will be a group — and it's no different every year — when you have 15 practices and you're finished with the spring game, you'd like to start over again, but you can't."

"Hopefully, these guys will get enough instilled in them as far as what their position demands and what our defense demands and the game demands through spring practice that it will carry over through summer workouts and doing the 7-on-7's [passing drills] and that type of thing. That's where they can take what they've learned into the summer and improve. The linebackers, for example, they can go out and do the fundamental stuff, except for tackling, without pads. That's what we've had before, with the leadership of guys like Andrew Motuapuaka or Greg Stroman or Terrell Edmunds or Ricky Walker. Those were guys that would take these young guys out and work them a little bit and get better."

"I'm hoping all of these guys will learn their positions and understand the expectations and how that fits into the scheme and get to the point where their mind is not tying up their feet and then go play." 



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VIRGINIA TECH's football program amassed nine wins in 2017, and it comes as no surprise that the Hokies played well on offense in those wins, averaging 32.9 points and 438.9 yards of offense per game.

Offensive coordinator Brad Cornelsen wants to see that type of production on a game-by-game basis, so this spring practice represents the next critical stage in the development of an offense that played well in wins, but struggled in three of the four losses this past season.

In most statistical categories, Tech ranked between 50th and 70th nationally. The Hokies averaged 412.8 yards per game, which ranked 53rd, while finishing 54th in rushing offense (173.4 ypg), 54th in passing efficiency (135.39) and 57th in passing offense (239.5 ypg).

Arguably, Tech's most important accomplishment in 2017 was taking care of the ball. Redshirt freshman quarterback Josh Jackson only threw nine interceptions in 13 games, and Tech only turned the ball over 14 times. That ranked tied for 19th nationally for fewest turnovers.

Jackson returns to the lineup, along with seven other starters. The Hokies still need for their younger players—including Jackson—to develop heading into this fall.

The process to do that started March 17 with the opening of spring practice. Cornelsen sat down a few days before the start of practice and answered some questions about players and his expectations this spring:

Q: Josh Jackson was sixth in the ACC in yards passing (2,991) and fifth in touchdown passes (20) and completion percentage (59.6) this past season. How would you assess his play?

BC: “I was pleased. Going into the season, we knew we were going to be pretty young and inexperienced offensively, certainly, at the skill positions. We had a pretty good defense coming back, so protecting the ball on offense ... We knew we had a chance to have a pretty good year if we could protect the ball and execute a little bit. We knew there were going to be some growing pains. So having a guy there that we knew would take care of the ball and steady through some ups and downs and continue to be a leader for us was important. I was really pleased with him with that.

“I think he was certainly a freshman, too. There were some really good plays in there at times and there were some mistakes at times. I think there is definitely another level he can get to with his consistency. But overall, I was pleased. We've got to get better at quarterback, and he's got to get better—and he knows that. To be a freshman and be inexperienced at the positions around him, I thought he did a good job.”

Q: What are your expectations of him heading into spring practice?

BC: “The thing about Josh is that he's smart, and he's a self-aware kid. He knows what he needs to get better at, and he's going to work to get better at them. I expect him to take another good step this spring. He can get to a good level mentally about the game. He's that type of kid, with that type of intelligence and football IQ. He needs to continue to be a step ahead of everything. That needs to be his niche.

“Throwing the ball, just his consistency with his ability to execute at a fast pace, quickness with which he gets the ball out, accuracy ... those are the things that, just at times, he missed a few things. There is a

fine line with quarterbacks of anticipation, throwing the ball with anticipation and taking care of the football. It's really fine. It's hard to coach. There are instincts and talents that are involved with that. I think Josh is going to have to continue to push that line of taking more risk at times in order for us to continue to improve in the passing game.

“I thought there were a few throws that he played too safe. That's just part of it. Certainly, those guys [Tech's quarterbacks] are coached hard to side with protecting the ball. Eventually, that's what he did. I feel like he's the type of kid that knows the difference and knows exactly what we're talking about and can probably take a few more chances.”

Q: What can we expect to see from Hendon Hooker and Ryan Willis?

BC: “I'm really excited about that group. It's going to be an extremely competitive spring. It's going to be the situation that you want—a returning starter and guys that have the ability to win his job, to beat him out. So now, you've got an extremely competitive situation, which you hope to have at all positions.

“Hooker is a kid that is really, really talented. He's got a really nice skill set. He's still figuring out the nuances of the position and the offense, and he is an extremely hard worker. He's really got a big upside.

“He was in position to go in the game if something had happened to Josh. Him and A.J. [Bush] were both sharing the backup position. At a certain point late in the season, it wasn't worth burning his redshirt, so we made that decision to redshirt him, but it certainly could have been a scenario where Josh gets hurt in the third game and Hendon starts the last six games of the year. That would not have surprised us one bit. He's got a lot to learn, and he's working his tail off to do it.

“Willis started several games as a true freshman at Kansas in a program that is trying to get rebuilt. He didn't play quite as much his sophomore year, and then he came here and watched for a season. He's extremely skilled and talented throwing the ball. He has one of the better releases. He's got some nice instincts. Those things that we talk about with Josh as far as playing it safe, Willis is flirting with the other end of that spectrum. He's got such a talented arm, and he understands the

timing and anticipation of the passing game. I'm going to have to coach him the other way and make sure he is protecting the football and being careful at times. He's got a good grasp of the offense already. He's in the mix. He's going to have a chance to be a good player.”

Q: Will this be an open competition? This isn't Josh's job automatically, is it?

BC: “No, not even close. The thing you earn by starting a year like that is you get the benefit of the doubt because you've done it with us against these teams in games. That certainly helps, but those guys are going to get pretty equal reps all spring. Josh won't go live as much as the other two guys. We'll want to make sure we get some really good work in scrimmages where those guys are live. We won't feel the same about Josh. We know what he's about live. We know what kinds of decisions he can make live.”

Q: Cam Phillips was in the top five of the ACC in nearly every receiving category, but he has departed. Is there someone who can be that “go-to” guy in this receiving corps?

BC: “We had three or four freshmen that played last year. We had a couple of sophomores. It's going to take all those guys again. It's going to take some new guys still. We're still pretty inexperienced in the grand scheme of things at that position and a little bit unproven as to who is going to take certain roles.

“I think we know what type of guy we have in [Eric] Kumah and that he can be one of those big, physical guys that can catch balls in traffic and catch 50-50 balls. To me, after that, there are still a lot of guys trying to prove what kind of receiver they can be for us. We're starting to get a glimpse of that, but it's still kind of wide open in my mind.

“Damon Hazelton is a guy that's had experience at this level and has played well in college, and he's shown us some good things in practice over the year. I think he can be a guy that can step in and add something to that group.”

Q: Speaking of Hazelton, how much can he help this group after transferring from Ball State last year? Are the expectations high for him?

BC: “He has still yet to do it in the ACC and at Virginia Tech, but he did have a good year at Ball State (51 receptions, 505 yards). The guys that we talk to have a lot of good things to say about him, so that makes you feel better. Still unproven for us here, but just the way he's competed and the things he's shown us in practice is certainly encouraging that he can be a guy that can really bring something to us and add to that group.”

Q: Phil Patterson dealt with injuries most of the season, though he returned to catch seven passes in the bowl game. Would he have helped the receiving corps earlier in the season had he been healthy?

BC: “Absolutely. Going into the year, he and Kumah were two guys who had been here longer than these true freshmen. They were guys that have ability. They have to bridge the gap between the old guys that we lost and the newcomers coming in. The last few games for Phil were really encouraging for us, just starting to see what we were kind of

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Josh Jackson threw for nearly 3,000 yards and 20 touchdowns in his first year as the starter, but will be asked to do more this spring.



by Jimmy Robertson

Virginia Tech's offense broke in a lot of new players last season, including at quarterback and wide receiver, and this spring, offensive coordinator Brad Cornelsen wants to see all his players—and his offense—take yet another step forward

**BUILDING
ON LAST SEASON'S
SUCCESSSES**
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encouraged by the way he finished the season.”

Q: You played two young tight ends quite a bit last year in Dalton Keene and Chris Cunningham. Did you like how they progressed, and do you expect improvement from them?

BC: “Absolutely on both. They’re both really, really hard-working kids. Chris has been here it seems like a lot longer. He continues to get better. He continues to get bigger and stronger and is starting to develop into a guy that isn’t trying to get thrown around up there, but a guy that can move people. That’s the kind of athlete he can be.

“Dalton came in and showed us some nice football intelligence. That’s a tough position, that hybrid H-back position. It takes some savvy, some intelligence and toughness. It takes the right type of skill set to do all those things that we ask those guys to do. He was an early grad out of high school, came in and put some weight on. He really gave himself a chance to make it through the season, and that’s really what happened. He’s got to take another stride physically to ensure that he finishes the season stronger. As the year wore on, it physically wore on him, but I love what we’re getting out of those two guys. We just have to add to it. Drake [Deluliis] is a guy that is going to add to that. He has a different type of skill set, but he can certainly add to that position.”

Q: Deshawn McCleave was outstanding in the bowl game. Do you see him emerging as a lead tailback, or do you see more of a committee approach with Steven Peoples and others?

hoping he could be. He’s still got a long ways to go. You’d certainly have loved to have started the year the way he finished the year, and I think he could have helped us with that inexperience at receiver, but we were definitely

BC: “Looking back at the cut-ups, McCleave had a really good year. He made some mistakes. He busted in protection a couple of times. But just top to bottom, taking care of the football, being productive, making big plays, breaking tackles just because he’s running harder than they were trying to tackle him ... we were really pleased and excited about him moving forward.

“Steven [Peoples] was the same way. Really, since we started messing with him at tailback two years ago, he’s been the most explosive guy. You hand the ball off and there is nothing there, and he still gets you two or three yards every time. That’s kind of an invaluable part of an offense. He was still banged up at times this year, but I think both of those guys, what we’ve seen and what we saw ... I still think it’s going to be by committee. There are still some young guys, with Jalen Holston, and we’re excited about him and the things he can do.

“I don’t see it being us going into the season saying, ‘Here’s our tailback that’s going to get 30 carries a game and the other guys are going in when he’s tired.’ It didn’t feel that way going into the season, and after evaluating the season and what we’ve got going forward, I expect all those guys to contribute. I really like how they work, what kind of upside they have, and we’re excited about using them all.”

Q: The offensive line appears to be in solid shape with three starters returning and quite a bit of depth, but Eric Gallo departed, leaving that void at center. As a coordinator and quarterbacks coach, how closely will you be watching the center position this spring?

BC: “You lose a lot of experience with Gallo — a lot of snaps and a guy that really maximized his ability. The thing about Gallo is that you knew he was going to be there every day. You knew that he was going to be ready to go. He was always going to be 100 percent into it and knew exactly what to do. That accounts for a lot, so finding more of those guys is going to be critical.

“[Kyle] Chung is a guy that really came on for us last year that we’re excited about, and he’ll go compete with Zechariah Hoyt at center in

there. With that, some young guys at tackle are going to have to come on for us. You get [Yosuah] Nijman back, but you’ve got some really talented, young outside guys in T.J. Jackson, Silas Dzansi and Tyrell Smith — he’s a junior now. It’s time. He’s been here. He’s been through the offseasons, and he knows what to do. He’s one of those guys that’s going to have step up for us.

“I think it’s one of those healthy competitive situations up front this spring and going into fall camp. We have a number of guys with the ability to go be a good player. It’s going to be how many young, inexperienced guys can grow up, and how many guys that haven’t figured it out have the light bulb come on. That will determine if we’re really good and really deep, or being average and hanging on by a strand if injuries occur. But I think it’s an exciting group.”

Q: Who are some younger players whom you’re anxious to see this spring?

BC: “I think the guys that you haven’t got to see play in a game yet. For me, that would be the two other quarterbacks. That would be Hazelton. That would be Terius Wheatley, who has really shown big strides on and off the field. He’s starting to grow up. His body is changing, and he’s in shape. Caleb Steward is an early graduate freshman, and Drake. Up front, it’s Silas Dzansi, it’s Lecitus Smith, it’s T.J. Jackson, it’s Aiden Brown — those young guys that have the ability. You know they have the ability, but didn’t play last fall. They didn’t play or didn’t have a big role. Those are the ones that I want to see.”


Q: Where do you hope this offense will be at the end of 15 spring practices?

BC: “I feel like we’re still so young and inexperienced. I don’t see us at the end of spring saying, ‘Here’s our 11 starters, and it’s set in stone. Here is exactly what we’re going to be and here are our best guys.’ I think it’s going to be a spring and a summer and a fall camp until we really know about these guys and what we’re going to be the best at. There is a lot of development that needs to be done.



Eric Kumah showed flashes of greatness this past season, and the coaching staff wants to see more of that in spring practice.

“I hope, at the end of the spring, that these young guys that we’re excited about, that we’re still excited about them. I hope they’re still developing and that they’re coachable and they’re working hard. I hope we’re seeing movement in the right direction.

“We know some will take big strides, and some will take small strides, but just as a group, with the inexperience and new blood we’ll have at all positions, I hope we’re excited about the intangibles of that group, of the toughness and the effort level and the willingness to learn. I hope we have a bunch of guys that want to be good players and our team-first guys. If we can pull that out of them and continue to get that type of attitude and effort out of them, we’ll be just fine in the end.” 

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Behind four individual champions, the Virginia Tech wrestling team won its second consecutive ACC title and the program's fourth tournament title overall
by Jimmy Robertson

Tony Robie is by no means a gambling man, but he certainly felt confident in his hand as the matches wound down in the finals at the ACC Wrestling Championship on March 3.

After all, his team held a small cushion, and he possessed an ace in his hand.

"I'll put my money on that every day of the week," Robie said. "Winning or losing, we'll go out with Jared Haught and feel good

about how he's going to compete."

Robie and the Hokies hit the jackpot in a big way, as Haught's overtime victory sealed yet another ACC championship for Virginia Tech, which outlasted NC State to capture the team crown at North Carolina's Carmichael Arena.

The title marked Tech's fourth tournament title, and combined with three dual meet titles, the program now has seven overall.

"It feels good," Robie said. "We felt good about it coming in. We really, really did. I felt like if we went out and wrestled up to our abilities, I felt like we had a very, very good chance of winning this thing.

"So not really surprised, but happy with the effort for the most part. We had guys that were scrapping. Even in a couple of matches that we lost in the finals, our effort was really, really good. Credit to our

coaching staff for getting these guys ready to go and helping these guys develop through the course of the season. Guys just kept improving and improving, and credit to our guys for believing in themselves."

The Hokies won four individual weight classes, amassing 81 points to best the Wolfpack, who won three weight classes and finished with 73. North Carolina took third, followed by Duke, Virginia and Pittsburgh.

Haught, a redshirt senior wrestling in his final ACC match, entered the tournament ranked No. 1 nationally in his 197-pound weight class, but found himself in quite a battle with NC State's Michael Macchiavello, who entered ranked No. 3 nationally by one wrestling service. The two tangled for five overtime periods before Haught managed a quick escape and a reversal and held on for a 6-4 win.

The Hokies led by five entering the match, so Haught only needed to avoid being pinned or losing by technical fall. But getting the win was the perfect way to close this chapter in his career.

"It was just grit and believing," Haught said. "We just had to believe, believe in ourselves. A lot of people didn't believe in us, but we believed in ourselves. We believed we could do it. We're just grateful to be here. So grateful to have this opportunity to be able to wrestle in the finals and wrestle in the ACC. All the guys who wrestled today should be grateful."

"I can't say enough about what Jared has done for our program—the way he lives his life, his leadership, his work ethic, his commitment to getting better, his belief in himself, his belief in his teammates ... we're going to miss that guy," Robie said. "I'm glad he went out with another ACC title, for sure."

Three other Hokies joined Haught in claiming gold medals—Dennis Gustafson, Brent Moore and David McFadden.

Gustafson, a redshirt senior like Haught,

trailed with less than a minute left in his 133-pound championship match against UVA's Jack Mueller. He rallied, though, getting Mueller on his back and nearly pinning him. The four near fall points and riding time enabled Gustafson, who won the ACC as a true freshman four years ago, claim an 11-7 victory.

"I mean, there were times when I thought I couldn't do it, but the coaches kept telling me, 'You're awesome. You're great. You can beat anybody,'" Gustafson said. "And now, the confidence is there. Everything is there. I'm wrestling well, and that's really all the matters. In the end, you've just got to do what you've got to do."

Moore then pulled the shocker of the tournament, upsetting NC State's Kevin Jack at 141 pounds. Moore lost to Jack 15-0 in a dual match in Raleigh, North Carolina two weeks prior, but he kept Jack, who is ranked No. 5 nationally in this weight class, away from his legs. Tied at 4 at the end of regulation, the two went to overtime, and Moore's takedown gave him a 6-4 win over the two-time defending ACC champion.

The title marked the first for the redshirt freshman, who was named the tournament's most valuable wrestler.

"I'm not going to say I didn't have any expectation to win," Moore said. "I wanted to focus on my effort and stay in a good position and weather the storm early in the match. I wore him out and was able to get the takedown in overtime."

McFadden, a redshirt sophomore, was his usual outstanding self and easily could have been named the Most Valuable Wrestler. He won both of his matches by major decision, including a 22-9 victory over Duke's Zach Finesilver in the championship match at 165 pounds.

McFadden remained unbeaten on the season and is now 31-0 heading to the NCAA Championships.

"At this point, I'm not surprised because of what the coaches have done for me and our team is great," McFadden said. "Coach Robie came up to me and told me that I was going to lead this team. It's an honor to lead Virginia Tech. So I'm like, 'All right, let's go. I've got to go win.' I just go out and focus on the next match, so if I win, I win—and I won."

Ryan Blees (149), Hunter Bolen (174) and Zack Zavatsky (184) all made it to the finals, but came up short.

Blees and Bolen, though, were huge keys to the team's success because of their victories during the semifinals earlier in the day. Blees knocked out NC State's Beau Donahue, the No. 2 seed, by a score of 6-4, and Bolen bested NC State's Daniel Bullard 7-4. Also, Gustafson beat the Wolfpack's Tariq Wilson in the semifinals at 133. Those wins limited the Wolfpack's opportunities heading into the finals.

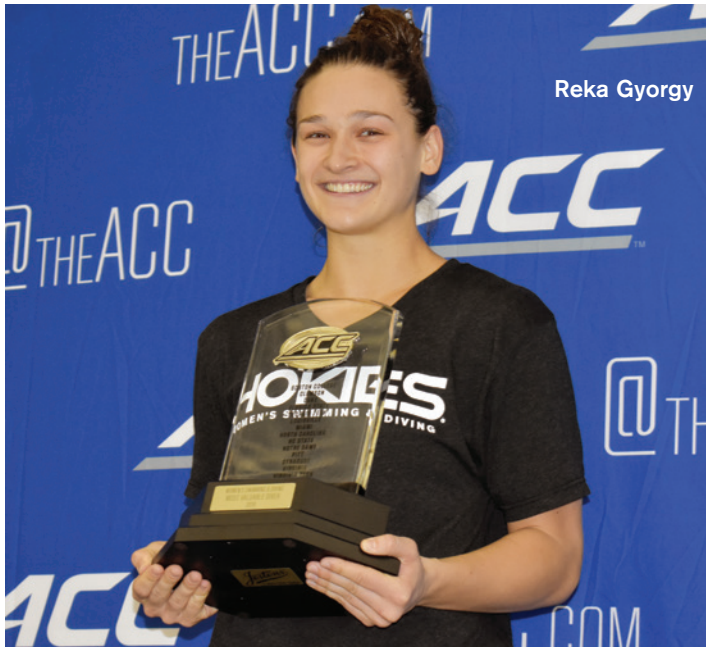
Tech also gained a measure of satisfaction following its 19-15 loss to the Wolfpack in Raleigh on Feb. 16. The win gave NC State the ACC dual meet title, snapping the Hokies' streak of three straight.

"We just kept doing what we do," Robie said. "I felt like we wrestled well enough that night to win, and things didn't go our way. We lost two overtime matches. So we just believed in the process. I know it sounds cliché, but it's the truth. You just go in every day, you put your hard hat on, you focus on getting better, you don't panic, you stick to the plan and you just keep guys believing in themselves. I think, throughout the course of the season, we've done a good job of that, and the results show tonight."

Nine wrestlers qualified for the NCAA Championships, which were held March 15-17 in Cleveland, Ohio. Tech will be in search of its sixth straight top-10 finish.

With the way the Hokies wrestled in Chapel Hill, no one should bet against them.





TECH MEN COME IN SIXTH, WOMEN SEVENTH AT

ACC Swimming and Diving CHAMPIONSHIPS

Reka Gyorgy, Ashlynn Peters and Klaudia Nazieblo won individual medals on the women’s side, while Norbert Szabo brought home a silver medal for the men

by Jimmy Robertson

Performances that earned a gold medal, two silver medals and two bronze medals served to headline the accomplishments of the Virginia Tech swimming and diving teams at the ACC Swimming and Diving Championships held in late February at the Greensboro Aquatic Center in Greensboro, North Carolina.

Reka Gyorgy won the lone gold medal, while Norbert Szabo and the women’s 200-yard medley relay team of Klaudia Nazieblo, Joelle Vereb, Maggie Gruber and Adriana Grabski claimed silver medals. Nazieblo claimed a bronze medal in the 200 butterfly, while Ashlynn Peters brought home a bronze in platform diving.

Behind these performances, the Tech men’s team finished in sixth place with 688.5 points, while the Tech women’s team ended up in seventh place with 736 points.

On the women’s side, only 50.5 points separated four teams.

“I am proud of our ladies and their effort at ACCs,” Tech head coach Dr. Ned Skinner said. “Clearly, we were hoping for a higher team finish, but we just came up short in a tight cluster between fourth through seventh. We gave it all we had on the boards and in the pool.”

Gyorgy, a sophomore from Ullo, Hungary, came in first in the 400-yard individual medley for the second consecutive year. She swam the event in a time of 4 minutes, 4.42 seconds, breaking her own school record by more than two seconds and notching the sixth-fastest time in the nation this season.

Peters, a junior from Cypress, Texas, was the ACC’s Most Valuable Diver of the women’s championships. She won a bronze medal in the

platform event by finishing with 239.25 points, while recording fifth-place finishes in both the 1- and 3-meter events. She was the only female diver to qualify for the finals in all three events.

The Tech women also pocketed a silver medal and another bronze. The 200-yard medley relay team of Nazieblo, Vereb, Gruber and Grabski came in second with a time of 1:36.35, while also setting a school record. Nazieblo, a senior from Wroclaw, Poland, claimed the bronze medal in the 200 butterfly, swimming the event in a time of 1:55.01. She also registered a fifth-place finish in the 100 backstroke, swimming that event in a time of 52.56 seconds.

In addition, Nazieblo was part of the 800-yard freestyle relay team of Gyorgy, Grabski, and Chloe Hicks that came in fifth with a time of 7:07.49. The 400-yard freestyle relay team of Grabski, Vereb, Danielle Griggs and Gyorgy came in fifth as well, setting a school record with a time of 3:15.

“It appears four relays will swim at the NCAAs, and improving relays was a big goal of ours,” Skinner said. “Including breaking one of our oldest school records in the 400 free relay to end the meet. We will look forward to building on this as a program and for our march to the NCAAs next month.”

Other notable individual performances came from Gruber, who finished sixth in the 100 butterfly with a time of 52.64 seconds, and Vereb, who came in fifth in the 100 breaststroke with a time of 1:00.49.

On the men’s side, Szabo claimed the only medal with his second-place finish in the 200 IM. The junior from Budapest, Hungary swam the event in a time of 1:42.70, which marked the second-fastest time in the event in school history.

Szabo also scored points in the 200 freestyle and 200 butterfly events. He came in fifth in the 200 freestyle in a time of 1:35.06 and 13th in the 200 butterfly in a time of 1:44.62.

“Even though the final scores show we did not meet our team goal, we sure did go out and perform well with all we had,” Skinner said. “The men stood by each other... and we took away many positives. The Hokies had so many awesome performances.”

Lane Stone, a freshman from Springfield, Virginia, set two school records and scored points in three events. His time of 4:16.80 in the 500-yard freestyle set a school mark by nearly two seconds and enabled him to finish 11th, while he came in eighth in the 1,650 freestyle in a school-record time of 14:55.50. He also finished seventh in the 200 freestyle.

The Tech men’s team also got top-10 performances from Ian Ho and Michael Craddock. Ho came in fifth in the 50 freestyle with a time of 19.34 seconds, setting a school record that had stood for 10 years. Craddock wound up ninth in the 1,650 freestyle with a time of 15:03.76.

In addition, the Tech men received three top-eight performances from their relay teams. The 800-yard freestyle relay team of Stone, Szabo, Harrison Pierce and Hassler Carroll finished fourth, while the 200 freestyle relay team of Ho, David Herbert, Pierce and Thomas Hallock wound up fifth after swimming the fifth-fastest time in school history. The 200-yard medley relay team of Jake Lamparella, Hallock, Pierce and Ho was eighth.

Like the women’s team, the Tech men’s squad received solid performances from its divers, who scored 179 points themselves. That total was the third-most of the divers on ACC men’s teams behind Duke (212) and Florida State (195).

Thomas Shinholser finished in the top 11 of all three diving disciplines, led by his fifth-place finish in the platform event, where he scored 317 points. Shinholser also registered a ninth-place finish in the 1-meter event, and he came in 11th in the 3-meter event.

Ben Schiesl finished in the top 12 of each discipline. He recorded seventh-place finishes in the platform and 1-meter events, while coming in 12th in the 3-meter event.

Now, athletes from both of Tech’s squads await possible NCAA competition. The NCAA Women’s Swimming and Diving Championships will be held March 14-17 in Columbus, Ohio, while the NCAA Men’s Swimming and Diving Championships will be held March 21-24 in Minneapolis, Minnesota.



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TECH TRACK TEAMS FINISH SECOND AT
ACC Indoor
Track and Field
CHAMPIONSHIPS

The Hokies won eight events and 28 student-athletes earned All-ACC recognition — and felt disappointed at just missing out on bringing home the team championships

by **Jimmy Robertson**



The Virginia Tech track and field teams combined to win eight gold medals, and 20 of them earned a spot on the All-ACC first team, and yet the Hokies trudged back to the team bus following the ACC Indoor Track and Field Championships with somber looks on their faces.

This bunch didn't necessarily want medals. They wanted the big trophies, ones symbolic of team championships, and unfortunately, they came up just short.

"If you're in a position where you're disappointed with second, then I think your program is in a really good spot," Tech director of track and field and cross country Dave Cianelli said.

Both Tech squads finished second at the league's indoor meet, which was held Feb. 22-24 at the Clemson Indoor Track and Field Complex on the Tigers' campus. Despite scoring 107 points — an impressive number — the Tech men came up four points short of Florida State in the race for the league crown. The Tech women scored 81 points and also came up short against the Seminoles, who won with 91.

Cianelli and his coaches found it hard to fault their athletes, who displayed their grit, toughness and talent over the course of three days. Their painful takeaway was this — the Seminoles were just a touch better on both sides.

"I think it's human nature to go back and say, 'We could have done this there, or this in this event,' but I try not to do that," Cianelli said. "I've been on the other side — winning meets by very, very slim margins — and I've been on this side, where you lose a championship and get second.

"But I'm really, really proud of the kids, with the way they fought to the end. You've got to

give Florida State credit. They had a good meet, and they're very talented. They did what they needed to do. Hats off to them."

The Hokies got strong performances from their pole vaulters and their middle-distance and distance runners on both sides. Most notably, the men's pole vaulters swept the top three spots early on the final day to bring the men's team back into the hunt.

The men's vaulters continued their dominance in the event — a Hokie has won the individual indoor title in this event 11 times since the school joined the ACC. Deakin Volz won his first career ACC championship, leading the trio of Hokies atop the leaderboard.

Volz and teammate Torben Laidig finished with top vaults of 5.50 meters (18 feet, 0.5 inch), but Volz won on progressions. Laidig claimed the silver medal, while freshman Joel Leon Benitez captured his first ACC medal with a top vault of 5.10 meters (16 feet, 8.75 inches). Jaelyn Demory finished sixth with a personal-best vault of 5.00 meters (16 feet, 4.75 inches).

"The guy vaulters did a tremendous job," pole vault coach Bob Phillips said. "Deakin and Torben jumped season bests to take the top two spots. Joel is still not 100 percent [with an ankle injury], but was able to take a couple of jumps and make the podium, which was a fantastic effort. And Jaelyn may have been the performer of the meet for us, scoring in his heptathlon debut the first two days of competition and then jumping a triple PR [personal record] in the vault."

Like their vaulting counterparts, the men's middle-distance and distance runners dominated, starting with the distance medley

relay team winning a gold medal on the first day. The quartet of Daniel Jaskowak, Brandon Thomas, Thierry Sieve Yanga and Neil Gourley ran the event in a time of 9 minutes, 38.31 seconds, which was a facility record.

On the final day, Tech won titles in both the 800-meter run and the mile, with Gourley setting a facility record in the 800 with a time of 1:47.04 and Ciattei winning his second straight indoor title in the mile with a time of 4:03.08. Patrick Joseph finished fourth in the 800, while Diego Zarate claimed a silver medal in the mile and Jaskowak finished seventh in the mile.

Though mostly a middle-distance runner, Ciattei came back two hours later and actually scored in the 3,000 — and he scored while running out of the slower of the two sections of runners in the event. He came in sixth overall.

"That was an amazing effort for him to come back from the mile and then score out of the first section of the 3,000," Cianelli said. "You just don't see that. That was an incredible effort. Vince and Neil and Jaskowak and Patty ... those guys have been doing that for the last three or four years, and that's been the backbone of our middle-distance program."

At the longer distances, Peter Seufer took care of business, winning two bronze medals by coming in third in both the 3,000 and the 5,000. The two medals marked the firsts of his career. Jack Joyce also got into the act, coming in seventh in the 3,000 to give the Hokies three of the top seven performances.

The same thing occurred on the women's side, as the DMR team of Rachel Pocratsky, Arlicia Bush, Shannon Quinn and Sarah Edwards rolled to victory in a school-record time of 10:57.60. The Tech women won the DMR at the ACC meet

for the first time since the 2005 indoor season.

Pocratsky, a junior from Gaithersburg, Maryland, continued Tech's dominance in the women's 800, as a Tech runner has won this event each of the past five years. She held off two hard-charging Clemson runners to win in a time of 2:03.17. Teammate Laurie Barton came in fourth, running the event in a personal-best time of 2:03.72.

In addition, Edwards came up big in the women's 3,000, winning a silver medal in a time of 9:18.99. She just missed her second career ACC gold medal, finishing only 32-hundredths of a second behind winner Elly Henes of NC State. And Katie Kennedy finished fourth in the women's mile in a time of 4:44.77. The senior from Springfield, Virginia found herself in traffic toward the latter stages of the race, which allowed Notre Dame's Jessica Harris to pull away. Harris won with a time of 4:38.58.

"I think we scored 62 points as a distance unit at the ACC Championships, where there are so many great athletes," distance coach Ben Thomas said. "You can't be disappointed, but of course, we're disappointed in not winning the title for the seniors. We had a lot of people step up, but I think the other team [Florida State] just earned it in this case. Florida State really had an outstanding meet."

The Tech women dominated in the pole vault as well, finishing first and second behind the performances of Lisa Gunnarsson and Rachel Baxter, respectively. Gunnarsson, a freshman, won the event with a top vault of 4.35 meters (14 feet, 3.25 inches), while Baxter, also a freshman, came in second with a personal-best vault of 4.30 meters (14 feet, 1.25 inches). Gunnarsson became the first Tech female to win the pole vault since Martina Schultz swept the indoor and outdoor crowns in 2014.

"They were both the top-ranked vaulters coming in, and so, the expectations for them were to be on the podium," Phillips said. "Still, it's easier to say that than to do it, and they did a great job of making sure that happened."



Deakin Volz won his first ACC gold medal when he captured the pole vault title ahead of teammate Torben Laidig at the ACC Indoor Track and Field Championships.

Gunnarsson and Baxter were part of the youth movement that performed outstanding at this Championships. Sophomore Eszter Bajnok joined the group by winning the gold in the triple jump with a school-record jump of 12.93 meters (42 feet, 5.25 inches), besting the competition by nearly four inches. Teammate Stefanie Aeschlimann, a freshman, came in sixth with a personal-best jump of 12.62 meters (41 feet, 5 inches).


Freshman sprinters Caitlan Tate and Kennedy Dennis also held their own. Tate came in eighth in the 60-meter dash, and both were part of the 4x400 relay team that broke the school record and came in fourth.

On the men's side, sophomore Keishaun Limehouse came in seventh in the 60-meter hurdles, and freshmen Matthew Manilli and Demory both scored in the heptathlon — part of a trio that scored along with senior Mackenize Muldoon, who just missed a school record with 5,246 points.

In all, Gunnarsson, Baxter, Bajnok, Barton, Bush, Edwards, Aeschlimann, Tate, Dennis, Yanga, Benitez, Demory, Limehouse, and Manilli scored points, and all are freshmen or sophomores.

"I'm very excited for this group because we're still pretty young," Cianelli said. "We don't have that many seniors, and a lot of freshmen and sophomores stood out. We had athletes here for the first time, and sometimes that can be nerve-wracking, but overall, they handled it well.

"That really bodes well because they're going to come back stronger the next time. I feel good about the next few years with the group that we have. I think we'll continue to be a program that's in the hunt."

Select members of both teams participated at the NCAA Indoor Track and Field Championships held March 9-10 in College Station, Texas, and the Hokies then start the outdoor season March 23-24 at the Weems Baskin Invitational in Columbia, South Carolina. 

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As a former ACC Scholar-Athlete of the Year and a young man pursuing two degrees in the hardest of fields, Torben Laidig possesses an abundance of intelligence. In fact, he ranks as arguably one of the smartest student-athletes on Virginia Tech’s campus.

Yet Laidig remembers a time when his decisions weren’t so astute — such as the time when he first attempted to pole vault.

At roughly the age of 14, he was working as a multi-athlete in his native Germany, participating in a series of track and field events in which the results all combine for a score during any given meet. Though not quite of age to compete in the pole vault, he felt the urge to get a head start on the event.

Rather than wait for proper instruction, he headed over to the pole vault area following a practice at the center where he trained and grabbed a pole.

“The coach was like, ‘OK, grip low, take it easy,’ which I didn’t do,” Laidig said. “I came down the runway full speed, and it did not go well. I actually planted and pulled as hard as I could, which is something you should not do — and just came right back on the runway.”

Suffice it to say, Laidig learned his lesson, and he eventually took well to appropriate coaching, refining the techniques that, today, make him one of the best collegiate pole vaulters in America. His credentials include two ACC titles, four ACC silver medals and four All-America honors in the event. He nearly won the national championship in 2016 when he came in second at the NCAA Outdoor Track and Field Championships held in Eugene, Oregon.

The short-term goal for the redshirt senior centers simply on becoming the first pole vaulter to win a national championship for Virginia Tech.

“I want to perform well at the NCAA [indoor] meet [March 9-10], and then going into outdoors ... I’m still not quite in the shape that I could be in,” he said. “I think I can still improve a lot of things about my jump, and hopefully, that will show outdoors.”

It represents a rather lofty goal for the small-town young man from Schwabisch Hall, a Blacksburg-sized place in the southern part of Germany. He knew of Virginia Tech’s hometown because of his relationship with former German pole vaulters who previously excelled for the Hokies — Martina Schultze, Stephan Munz and Victoria von Eynatten. They all came over and enjoyed decorated careers for the Hokies.

They spoke highly of Blacksburg, of the university, and perhaps most importantly, of Bob Phillips, a three-time Virginia Tech graduate (undergraduate, master’s and doctorate) and the Hokies’ pole vault coach who once held the school record in the event and earned All-America honors for the school in 1980.

“Before I came here, I was training in Stuttgart at the Olympic training center, you could call it,” Laidig said. “There were three other pole vaulters that also went here — Martina Schultze, Stephan Munz and Victoria Von Eynatten. We were all from the same area, and I was very close with Martina and Stephan. Obviously, I wanted to go to the school they had. They were telling me about how great it is here and how great the facilities are and how good of a coach Bob is. That convinced me to come here, just listening to their experiences.

“As soon as Bob offered me, I was sold.”

Largely because of his smarts, Laidig adjusted to American life rather easily. He knew enough English to understand conversations, though it took him a month or so to engage in them. As far as the food — arguably the biggest difference between life here and life at home for international students — he made the best of the situation.

On the track, things went nearly perfectly. He won the ACC title at his first league meet and finished in sixth place at the NCAA Indoor Championships. During the outdoor season, he came in second at the ACC meet and earned All-America honors at the NCAA meet.

But a hip injury completely derailed his sophomore season — the first of two major injuries for Laidig during his time at Tech.

“I probably trained a little too much coming out of my freshman year when everything went pretty well,” Laidig said. “I wanted more. I wanted to improve even more my second year. That fall, I was probably going a little too hard for my body, which unfortunately resulted in the injury in my hip, so I had to sit out that year.”

Laidig bounced back as a redshirt sophomore, nearly winning that national title in June of 2016. He won his second ACC title in February of last year at the league’s indoor meet and finished sixth at the NCAA Indoor Championships that March, but still, despite the accomplishments, he felt unsatisfied with his progress.

Unfortunately, disaster struck again weeks after the NCAA indoor meet. During a practice later that March, he went up for a vault, and his pole snapped. He crashed to the track and broke his wrist.

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Torben Laidig owns the school record in the pole vault, and the Germany native hopes to continue that success into his final outdoor season and beyond, while preparing for medical school and a future as a doctor in the process
by Jimmy Robertson

“That was really frustrating,” Laidig said. “That whole indoor season, something was missing. I was in really good shape, and I think I could have jumped higher, but it just never happened at the meets that we went to.

“After indoor was over, I had two really good weeks of practice, where things started to click, and it resulted in me jumping 5.70 [meters] at the Texas Relays. So I was super happy about that, but five days later, the following Thursday, I had a really good practice, and on my third or fourth jump, I broke my pole.”

The injury took him out right when he was vaulting his best. His 5.70-meter vault (18 feet, 8.25 inches) at the Texas Relays in Austin, Texas set the school’s outdoor record and the ACC record and also qualified him for the 2017 World Championships. So he not only missed the Hokies’ outdoor season, but the injury also wiped out his opportunity to represent Germany at the World Championships held last summer in London.

Now in his final season, he hopes to make the most of a final opportunity. He nearly won his third ACC gold medal when he vaulted 5.50 meters at the recent ACC Indoor Championships, but teammate Deakin Volz vaulted the same and edged him on progressions.

In ACC competition, teammates have been his biggest competition. Guys like former teammate Chris Uhle and Volz have kept Laidig from mining more ACC gold.

“I think that competitiveness is really important to push each other and jump high, push each other to the next level and get every little bit of energy out of you during workouts,” Laidig said. “I think it’s very beneficial. It’s something I didn’t have in Germany, and it’s also one big reason why I came here, just because everything is so competitive, and joining a competitive team, I knew I was going to get that every day.

“I think everybody who’s been here has made me better—Chris

[Uhle], Jeff Linta, Brad Johnson, Jared Allison— all those guys have really made me a better athlete. All of them have their strengths and things that they’re better at than me. Obviously, I’m trying to reach their level in whatever they’re better at. Like James Steck, he was a really good gymnast, and I’m trying to get to his level when it comes to gymnastics. Chris is really fast. Joel [Benitez, a current teammate] is really fast. Obviously when we’re doing sprints, I’m trying to beat them at practice, and I think that really helps to just push myself and push them to the next level. I think that’s a big reason why we’ve been so successful as a pole vault team over the years.”

Laidig plans to keep vaulting once he departs Virginia Tech in May, with an eye toward the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo. He may find it difficult to work in practice time, though, considering he’s set to enroll in medical school in Germany later this summer.

Laidig not only embraced the challenge of being a student-athlete at Tech, but also welcomed the opportunity to pursue two degrees in tough fields— biological sciences and biochemistry. He arguably has spent more time in labs or doing undergraduate research than on the track, and yet he rarely complained.

“I’ve always been interested in science,” Laidig said. “I went to a biotechnological high school that put a big focus on sciences. I’ve always been interested in it, and with me wanting to go to med school, it was just something that I wanted to do.

“I just like how the human body works. It’s kind of related to sports, I guess. It’s just something that interests me, and in the long term, I want to be able to help people as a doctor, and in order to do that, you’ve got to have an in-depth understanding of how the human body functions.”

Of course, Laidig’s staying in the United States would meet with approval from Tech coaches, teammates and friends who would want to see him on a more regular basis. And for sure, the U.S. features


some of the world’s best medical schools.

However, Laidig’s reasoning for returning to Germany for medical school is a rather simple one.

“In Germany, it’s for free,” Laidig said.

Hard to argue that logic. And hard to argue his impact on the track and field program. Any conversation of the greatest pole vaulters in Virginia Tech history—and there have been numerous—certainly includes him, and for that, he always will be grateful.

In fact, the decision to come to Blacksburg may have been the smartest one he’s ever made.

“I’m really glad I made the decision,” he admitted. “I’m kind of getting nostalgic already because it’s my last semester here, and it’s slowly coming to an end. I look back on it fondly. I’ve really enjoyed my time here. I don’t have a lot of regrets.” 

GETTING TO KNOW ... TORBEN LAIDIG

Q: You’ve done a lot of traveling over your career, especially in Europe. Which city is your favorite among those you’ve visited?

TL: That’s a good question. I’ve been traveling a lot, but when you’re traveling for meets, you see the hotel, and you see the track. Probably Austin [Texas] or Boston. I like Boston a lot, even though the meet [the 2016 ACC indoor meet] wasn’t very good. And when we were in Austin for the Texas Relays [last spring], I thought that was a nice place.

Q: What’s your favorite form of social media?

TL: I do have an Instagram account. I do have a Twitter account, but I’m never using it. Instagram is probably my favorite. I like photos. I’m not a huge social media guy. I last posted something on Instagram right after the meet [the ACC Indoor Championships], but before that, my last post was eight months ago. I’m not a huge social media person, but since I know so many athletes from around the world, it’s fun to keep following up with them and seeing what they’re doing— seeing what they’re doing in practice and getting inspiration for my own workouts.

Q: What’s your dream vacation?

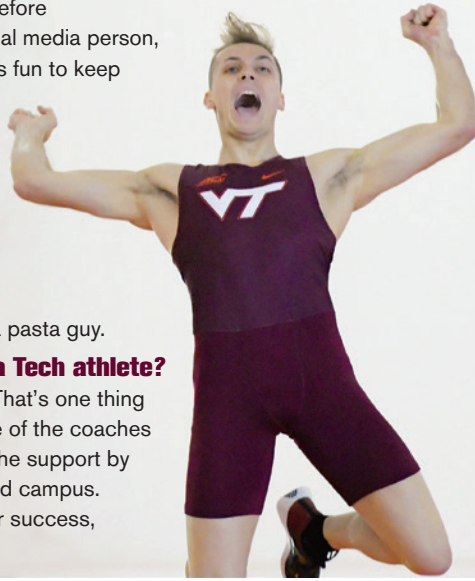
TL: Probably going to the beach and being in nice weather with nothing to worry about.

Q: Where is your favorite place to eat in America?

TL: Pick any Italian place. I like Italian food. I like pasta. I’m a pasta guy.

Q: What’s your favorite thing about being a Virginia Tech athlete?

TL: The gear [laughing]. I really like our new gear package. That’s one thing for sure, but then also obviously the facilities, the knowledge of the coaches and that it seems like everyone wants you to do well—just the support by coaches, obviously, teammates, but also other people around campus. People are invested in sports here and are interested in your success, seeing you succeed.





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Being a successful student-athlete takes more than just the effort on the part of the individual. The process takes a team, no matter what sport. No one knows that more than Virginia Tech swimmer Ian Ho.

The former Virginia Tech walk-on has leaned on his parents, coaches, and teammates to make it to where he resides today. That support system has helped raise one of Virginia Tech's top swimmers into a leader both in and out of the pool.

Originally from Blacksburg, Ho never intended to leave the area that he had grown to love when it came time to choose a college. When one asks most high school students where they want to attend college, they say that that they want to leave their hometowns. They want to explore the world and see something new, while exhibiting a sense of independence. Ho, however, felt right at home and wanted to remain in Blacksburg.

"The mountains here are beautiful, and I had no desire to leave," he said. "Between New River [Community College] and Tech, they worked really well in terms of classes. I knew I was going to Tech before I knew I was going to swim for Tech."

Ho didn't know he wanted to swim at the collegiate level right away. In fact, he never intended to swim in college. After talking to the coaching staff at Virginia Tech, he ended up walking on to the team. Tech head coach Dr. Ned Skinner, who has resided at the helm of the Virginia Tech swimming and diving program since 1998, knew there needed to be some significant work put in for Ho to contribute.

"I remember, as a freshman, he could only do the 50 [-yard freestyle]," Skinner said.

Ho didn't have the best times his first year. His best time in the 50-yard freestyle was 20.25 seconds, and in the 100-yard freestyle, 45.39 marked his best time.

Fast forward a few years, and Ho finds himself competing with the best that the ACC offers. His time of 19.34 in the 50-yard freestyle at the ACC Championships in February broke a school record that had stood for 10 years and enabled him to finish fifth. The Hokies' sprinter also swam the 100-yard freestyle at the ACC Championships held in late February.

In addition to these races, Ho was a member of the men's 800-yard freestyle relay team that placed 24th at the NCAA Championships in 2017. He also qualified for the NCAA Championships in the 200- and 400-yard medley relays, and he received accolades outside the pool as well, earning a spot on the All-ACC Academic Team and earning College Swimming and Diving Coaches Association of America Scholar All-America honors. He finished eighth in the 50-yard freestyle at the ACC Championships last season, too.

In 2016, Ho competed at the Olympic Trials and finished second in his heat and 36th overall in the 50-yard freestyle with a time of 22.94. So after barely swimming at the collegiate level to becoming one of the best sprinters to come through the Virginia Tech program, Ho has seen his swimming career come a full 180 degrees.

"It's been pretty surreal," Ho said. "It's been a great experience for me to know that I could have stopped swimming, but by being able to take it to the Olympic Trials and national championships last year and to NCAAs the year before, it's been a road that I'm extremely grateful for."

For Skinner, the most rewarding part has been seeing Ho's maturation process since coming to Virginia Tech.

"How he has maintained being a kind, gentle person, somebody as fast as he has become, sometimes have a little swagger, cockiness to them ...," he said. "Ian is just one of the most kind-hearted people I've ever met. He's fast, and he'll swim fast, but he doesn't have an attitude

that goes with it. To me, he's always been Ian Ho, whether he was 12 years old or now to an elite ACC finalist and NCAA qualifier."

Of course, Ho is known for more than just swimming at Virginia Tech. As a mechanical engineering student, he dabbles in 3-D printing, laser cutting, and just about anything that involves the use of his hands to build something.

As a kid, Ho loved building things with his hands, and once he got to high school, he started taking engineering classes that accelerated his interest in the field. Not only did Ho take difficult classes, but he also received his associate's degree from New River Community College while in high school.

While at New River, Ho took a class taught by his father, Caisy Ho, who is a professor at the college.

"He was a little harder on me, but what parent wouldn't be," Ian said. "Growing up with him as a teacher throughout my life, knowing the ways he wants to you approach a problem, definitely helped."

As for one of the sources for his dedication to swimming and school, the Blacksburg native credits his father. As a kid, Ho noticed how devoted his father was to his job, their family, and his faith. Those traits left an unforgettable impact. Ho's willingness always to strive for more and never to settle also comes from his family.

While Ho hails from Blacksburg, his family calls Hong Kong home. Ho recently visited the city of more than seven million people.

"I still love Hong Kong as a city. Its super-fast paced, and the food there is amazing. It was good to visit family again," he said.

Now at one of the best engineering schools in the country, Ho, like many other athletes, has to balance his busy schedule. Participating in a Division I sport and in a demanding academic program leaves little free time during the day.

*Continued
on page
34*



“
*I knew I was going to Tech before
I knew I was going to swim for Tech.*
Ian Ho on coming to Virginia Tech
”

Hometown SUCCESS

*Blacksburg native Ian Ho has many hobbies,
including building things as part of his mechanical
engineering coursework and playing the violin, but
he also has become
one of the fastest sprint swimmers
in Virginia Tech history*

*by **Nathan Loprete**
Special to Inside Hokie Sports*

Hometown SUCCESS

Continued from page 32

That's where fellow athletes Jared Haught and Robert Owen come in to help. Haught, a current wrestler for the Hokies, and Owen, a former swimmer, also pursue degrees in mechanical engineering. Together, the three continue to work their way through college, while Ho and Haught currently excel at their respective sports (Owen also excelled during his four years). Often, students and fans tend to forget the pressure facing student-athletes because they only see them on the athletics fields, on the court, on the mat or in the pool. To sum it up briefly, Ho said, "Engineering is a team sport."

For Skinner, there isn't much reason to be concerned about his student-athletes. The men's and women's swimming and diving teams earned Scholar All-American Team honors from the College Swimming and Diving Coaches Association of America for the academic work done by

both during the fall semester. Virginia Tech athletics, as a whole, saw 60 percent of its student-athletes earn at least a 3.0 GPA.

"Our men's team carries almost a 3.1 team GPA," Skinner said. "We are used to seeing very good swimmers who care about engineering. Mike Swanhart, our academic coordinator, merits a lot of credit. The

“

Ian is just one of the most kind-hearted people I've ever met. He's fast, and he'll swim fast, but he doesn't have an attitude that goes with it. To me, he's always been Ian Ho, whether he was 12 years old or now to an elite ACC finalist and NCAA qualifier.

Tech swimming coach Dr. Ned Skinner on Ian Ho

”

culture of the men's team, where academics is important, helps Ian. He tutors a lot of the guys and is always looking out for them. Guys on the team looked out for him when he was going through the ranks, and now he is

looking after these guys academically. I think that environment helps that."

Ho is one of six seniors on the men's team, and with young sprinters growing into the program, his leadership role provides the Hokies with something they need. It serves as a big part of the reason why Virginia Tech produces quality swim teams year after year.

Between all of the pressure that comes with school, Ho still finds time to be a college student, as he has a keen interest in surfing and rock climbing.

"We went to Hawaii, and I learned how to surf there," he said. "It's a different dynamic to swimming. I love it a lot because there's less drag. You're on a board, and your surfing on top of it, but you can still use all the same muscles for getting around."

It's no surprise that a swimmer enjoys surfing, but when it comes to rock climbing, Ho finds the finesse part the most interesting.

"Seeing other people who are super good, and if they have amazing body control, that blows my mind sometimes," he said.

He also finds ways to incorporate his field of study into helping improve his personal life. As a talented violin player, Ho recently



After walking on to Tech, Blacksburg native Ian Ho holds the school record in the 50 freestyle event, which makes him one of the fastest swimmers in Tech history.

designed a 3-D shoulder rest that fits him for when he plays his violin. He put his musical talent on display last April at The Gobblers, which is the year-end athletics department awards event.

Some more of Ho's recent projects include a 3-D printed case for his 3-D mouse and a lamp that he made out of pipes. These may sound like odd projects to those not familiar with engineering, but these projects challenge Virginia Tech students, and other top engineering schools assign similar projects as well.

As for the next step, Ho still has one year of eligibility left for swimming. He plans on pursuing a master's degree in mechanical


engineering at Virginia Tech, so much more remains for the talented sprinter who keeps beating his own times.

However, Ho knows that his time with the team remains short, and there's no doubt that he'll miss it once he touches the wall for the final time, whenever that time arrives.

"You spend 20-plus hours with these guys. Day in and day out, you have 5:30 workouts, weights, dry lands, afternoon workouts, meets, and it's going to be hard to say goodbye," he said.

Once he finishes with school, Ho hopes to pursue a career in additive engineering, but he admits that he struggles to look ahead to the future. Instead, he prefers to let things

happen, much in the same way they happened for his swimming career. From swimming for Blacksburg High School to swimming for one of the better programs in the ACC, Ho has taken things one lap at a time, and it seems to have worked out perfectly.

Unlike many Virginia Tech students who move away from their hometowns, Ho already knew what Blacksburg provided and never wanted to leave. There was a sense of comfort and familiarity that already existed. After finding success in both the pool and the classroom in his hometown, he, for sure, knows what it's like to be a Hokie. 

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Arguably the best player on the Virginia Tech lacrosse team plans to return to her home outside of Philadelphia after she graduates in May. And yes, her future career entered deeply into her thought process when she made that decision.

But Tristan McGinley readily admits that other factors of great importance went into that decision as well.

“It’s a place where I can be a loud and bold Eagles fan,” she revealed, laughing.

For sure, no one on the planet expressed more outright joy at the Philadelphia Eagles’ 41-33 victory over the New England Patriots in the Super Bowl than McGinley, an Eagles fan since birth. The Super Bowl win marked the Eagles’ first and the organization’s first championship since 1960, which pre-dates the Super Bowl era.

McGinley, who calls Moorestown, New Jersey home, hopes some of that magic transfers to the Tech lacrosse team, which is coming off an outstanding 2017 campaign in which the Hokies tied a program record for wins under first-year head coach John Sung. In addition, they snapped a 27-game ACC losing skid, and not only did they win a bunch, they were also fun to watch, setting school records for goals (253) and points (326).

Of course, McGinley played a rather prominent role in the turnaround, scoring 50 goals, setting a Tech record for draw controls (95) and becoming the program’s first Tewaaron Award watch list nominee—the Heisman Trophy of college lacrosse.

In short, she made the transition a rather smooth one for Sung, who came to Blacksburg from Winthrop in 2016.

“She is definitely a great fit for what we like to do,” Sung said. “Obviously, she brings a tremendous amount of power. She’s one of those kids that you’re so glad you’re able to coach them, but when they graduate and leave, obviously they leave a pretty big hole.”

That McGinley has become quite the lacrosse player comes as no surprise. She stands 6-foot-1, a relative giant in front of the net, with long arms and a keen understanding of the game. She also possesses quick feet, with the ability to re-direct with ease, and sufficient speed—a necessity in this game.

That speed is part genetic, of course. And also part learned. After all, when you’re the fifth of seven children, you learn quickly to hustle to the dinner table to grab the largest portions.

McGinley just turned 22 in early March. The ages of the rest of Bill and Deb McGinley’s children range from 35 to 11, with the 11-year-old, a girl, having been adopted from Russia. The breakdown consists of five girls and two boys, meaning that the girls often shared—rooms, bathrooms, clothes, toys, etc.—and thus solitude became a precious and rare commodity.

“Privacy didn’t really exist at all, but I think we were fine with that,” McGinley admitted. “My sisters are my best friends, so anything that was private to me, I probably would have ended up telling them anyways. The same with my parents. We don’t have too many secrets.”

Such a comment reveals a rather strong family dynamic, and for sure, Bill and Deb McGinley were first-team all-conference in parenting. They shepherded their children through the turbulent teenage years (except the youngest), and for the most part, the kids excelled academically and athletically. Four of them graduated from college—two from Liberty, one from Rutgers and one from Virginia Tech—and Tristan graduates in May. Their youngest son is working on his degree at Samford.

Each of the McGinleys, both parents and children, would credit the family’s successes to their religious faith. They believe in the importance of church, and the family attends nearly every Sunday. They hold each

other accountable, living those values and reinforcing Biblical beliefs.

Of course, Sunday morning services also allowed them to multi-task, as they caught up on Eagles’ news, too. Eagles head coach Doug Pederson lives in Moorestown as well, and he, wife Jeannie and their three sons attend the same church. One of their sons and Tristan’s younger brother are close friends.

Certainly, Pederson is viewed as God in Philadelphia these days after leading the Eagles to their first title in 58 years. But the McGinleys know the real God, especially Tristan, who credits her faith with helping her navigate some first-year difficulties at Tech.

“Definitely throughout college, it’s been my go-to,” she said of her faith. “My freshman year was tough, but that was the one thing—my faith pushed me and got me through. I think that’s why I find so much joy in the people and this school and my team. I love them so much.

“My joy is in the Lord and not the circumstances of this world. I’m really involved in FCA [Fellowship of Christian Athletes] and other stuff, and it’s a lot of fun. It’s tough to get out of the athlete ‘bubble’ once you’re in it, but with that [FCA], I’ve met a lot more people.”

Her passion for Virginia Tech easily reveals itself in any conversation, but she’ll also be the first to admit that she never wanted to come to Blacksburg. In fact, she wanted no part of Tech, primarily because one of her older sisters attended here, and she wanted to do something different than the rest of her siblings.

McGinley expressed an interest in Ohio State and took a visit there. But her mom emailed then-Tech head coach Megan Burkner in an attempt to push the recruiting process south.

“Tristan, you just need to check it out,” Deb McGinley told her daughter.

“No, I want no part of it,” Tristan said, stubbornly.

Parent-daughter negotiations ended with Tristan agreeing to a visit. She made her first visit to Blacksburg, attended a night football game against Georgia Tech and got to walk on the field with her sister before the game. There were fireworks and “Enter Sandman” and jumping, and the Hokies won a breath-taking affair in overtime.

Days later, Burkner called to offer a scholarship. McGinley told her that she would get back to her, and then went downstairs to tell her parents.

“Go back upstairs and call her and tell her you’re ready for this,” Bill McGinley said.

She ran back upstairs, grabbed the phone and hid in her closet. Then she tentatively made the call, accepting the offer—and the subsequent life change that came with it.

“It was a whirlwind,” McGinley said. “It happened so fast, but I didn’t feel the way I felt here at any other school I visited, and I had visited big schools and small schools and city schools because I wanted to know what I liked. I really had no idea.

“But I walked on this campus, and I was like, ‘This is the school I need to come to,’ and I’ve never regretted it. I think it every day—I’m at the coolest place in the whole world.”

McGinley became one of nine seniors off her Moorestown High lacrosse team to land at a Division I school, including one whom she annually sees in competition—North Carolina’s Marie McCool. The group led Moorestown to three consecutive state championships and never lost a game.

But the transition to Virginia Tech wasn’t as easy for McGinley. She had wanted independence. She had wanted to be her own person after

Continued on page 38



It took a little family persuasion to get Tristan McGinley to Virginia Tech, but thanks to them and her faith, she has grown into one of the lacrosse programs greatest players, as she prepares to return to her beloved Philadelphia area to focus on her future following graduation

by Jimmy Robertson

TAKING HER SHOT Continued from page 36

years of being influenced by her siblings. Yet she became terribly homesick and missed her large family despite having 30,000-plus friends on campus around her every day.

“Academics, I was not getting the hang of,” she said. “The social life, I wasn’t used to. Balancing my sport, my schoolwork and a social life, I wasn’t good at. I missed home like crazy. I was so homesick that I wasn’t functioning.”

Fortunately, lacrosse season started the following semester and commanded her sole attention for a two-hour window each day. And as she focused, she became better at her sport. In fact, she started her first collegiate game and scored a goal in her second.

Her numbers that season wound up being modest, as she scored six goals. But one came against then-No. 7 Syracuse and another came against then-No. 2 North Carolina. Those sparked an unshakeable confidence within her.

She has started every game since—a span of 45 straight entering an ACC game against Notre Dame on March 11. Her 50 goals last season as a junior ranked as the sixth best in a single season at Tech. That total includes four that came against Boston College and helped

the Hokies snap a 27-game ACC losing streak.

“I think it’s again a fit into a system,” Sung said. “She fits into what we do, and it’s also us instilling confidence in her to be like, ‘Hey, we trust you. We want you to do this.’ She understands what our expectations are and that we know how she can grow. All those things have been great for her development.”

“She’s developed a lot. I wish she was a sophomore because I know how much better she can get. She’s not hit her ceiling at this point. It’s my job as a coach to get it all out of her.”

An NCAA Tournament appearance would be a great way to cap a tremendous career. If she maintains her current pace, McGinley will depart as one of the top 10 goal scorers in Virginia Tech history, becoming one of just 11 players in the 23-year history of the program to score more than 100 goals.

Competitive lacrosse probably comes to an end for McGinley at the conclusion of this season. Rest assured, though, bigger plans are in the works.

Her intent is to start nursing school at one of the Philadelphia schools in August or September. Tech lacks a nursing program, but her coursework here in human development provided her with nearly all of the pre-requisites and enables her to enroll in an accelerated program at whichever school she chooses.



Tristan McGinley’s goal-scoring prowess has made her the Virginia Tech lacrosse program’s first Tewaaraton Award nominee, an award that goes to the best player in college lacrosse.

GETTING TO KNOW ... TRISTAN MCGINLEY

Q: Snapchat, Twitter or Instagram ... which is your favorite and why?

TM: Instagram. I’m an annoying picture person. I’m like a young mom picture person. I like taking pictures of other people just as I like to be in them.

Q: If you could take a dream vacation, where would it be?

TM: Probably Greece. I’ve never been able to travel much just with sports my whole life and a big family—that’s obviously not something cheap. Anywhere I go, I’m pretty much in awe of. I got to go to the Bahamas for the first time over winter break, and I’m like, ‘Holy cow, people come here all the time.’ But I was say Greece because of what I’ve seen in movies. Not anything else really. It seems wonderful and beautiful.

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

TM: Taylor Swift or Beyonce. I’ve always wanted to be a rock star my whole life. I just don’t have the talent for it. So if I could pretend for a day, that would be awesome. Definitely.

Q: What type of music are you listening to these days?

TM: I’m a big country girl. My mom is from Alabama. I’ve been listening to country forever. I’m not just, ‘I came to Virginia, and now I’m a country girl.’ I always have been, but also anything I can dance to and sing to. I listen to a lot of music, a lot of different stuff.

Q: What has been your favorite thing about being a Virginia Tech athlete?

TM: That there are so many people here to support you and help you. Academically, we have the best people. Nutritionally, we have the best people. People to keep you in shape ... we have the best. Definitely so much support. There is always someone to turn to.

“I’ll do a program that takes about a year or less, and then hopefully, I’ll be at a hospital,” she said. “I’ve wanted to be a nurse since I was little.”

The move, of course, will bring her full circle. McGinley left Philadelphia to come to

Blacksburg and found brotherly love, along with so much more. Now she’ll make a return, which allows her to pursue her passion, hang out with her family and unapologetically cheer on her city’s pro sports teams.

It’s simply the perfect move for her to make.



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“

I didn't really know that student-athletes had a say or a voice. You kind of just go to practice at this time, go lift at this time, and you forget that this is your experience, and it's what you make it.

Jaila Tolbert on being a member of SAAC ”

Currently in pursuit of a degree in international studies with a business concentration, while also learning Chinese, Jaila Tolbert sat down not long ago with a professor whom she considers a mentor and discussed future career options.

“CIA,” he suggested, referring to the Central Intelligence Agency, the nation’s largest intelligence agency and one tasked with gathering, processing and analyzing human intelligence for national security reasons.

“I’m like, ‘Really?’” Tolbert said. “That’s different. That’s not what I expected.”

Before she jumps into a world of covert operations, Virginia Tech’s standout volleyball player may want to consider a future in college athletics administration. After all, she’s putting together a rather impressive resume for a path toward helping future student-athletes.

The Minneapolis, Minnesota native added her latest resume piece recently, as Tolbert’s participation in Virginia Tech’s SAAC—Student-Athlete Advisory Committee—led to her attending the NCAA Convention in mid-January as the ACC’s SAAC representative to the NCAA Division I SAAC.

Confused? Well, here’s a little clarity.

Virginia Tech’s SAAC is a leadership group consisting of two student-athletes from all varsity sports at Tech. Those on this committee provide input on rules, regulations and policies that affect student-athletes’ lives, and they serve as a conduit for communication between student-athletes, coaches and administrators. Two student-athletes on the executive team of SAAC also represent the school on ACC SAAC, which collects student-athlete input on conference issues. Tolbert, a member of Tech’s executive team, was chosen to be a representative on ACC SAAC, along with men’s swimmer Harrison Pierce.

Each Division I conference selects a student-athlete to represent and partner with the NCAA and to vote on legislation regarding student-athlete welfare. The 30-member ACC SAAC chose Tolbert as its representative on Division I SAAC at the NCAA Convention held Jan. 17-20 in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Her attendance marked the first time in Virginia Tech history that one of its student-athletes had been chosen to represent the conference’s SAAC office. She joined former swimmer Brandon Fiala as the only Tech student-athletes ever to attend an NCAA Convention. Fiala served as an ACC student-athlete representative last year.

**Experience at
NCAA CONVENTION**
an eye-opening
**one for
Tolbert**

The Tech volleyball standout served as an ACC SAAC representative to the Division I SAAC group and had a voice on several issues, including transfer rules and early recruiting

by **Jimmy Robertson**

“The NCAA Convention was an amazing experience,” Tolbert said. “Honestly, I was a little nervous because I knew there were going to be ADs [athletics directors], and Board of Directors and a lot of higher-ups in the NCAA doing a lot of really important work, and I didn’t know how I would fit into that equation, but everyone was so welcoming.

“They had a great schedule planned for us. I went to a lot of different forums, and we talked about a lot of different issues going on right now at the NCAA level. We’re really trying to pinpoint what Division I SAAC wants to work on and our goals for at least the rest of my term.”

The convention ended with several rule changes and modifications taking place, including—perhaps most notably—the granting of additional health insurance benefits to student-athletes for at least two years after a student-athlete leaves his/her institution. A student-athlete’s significant other also receives this benefit.

The Division I Council also changed the college basketball schedule, allowing teams to start three days earlier. In response, the autonomy conferences—those in the Power 5 conferences—passed a proposal calling for a three-day holiday break for basketball players. This goes into effect for the 2018-19 season.

But the topic that dominated conversation was the NCAA’s existing transfer rules. Currently, student-athletes in football, men’s basketball, women’s basketball, baseball and ice hockey must sit out a year after transferring to another Division I school before becoming eligible to play. That’s not the case in the other sports, as student-athletes receive the opportunity to transfer and play immediately.

The Division I Council plans to make its transferring proposals in April and potentially take a final vote this summer.

“We [Division I SAAC] felt it was a little bit restrictive,” Tolbert said of the current transfer rule. “Our main question is how can we make the student-athlete’s life a little more similar to a regular student’s life? Regular students can transfer whenever they want, and having that option is really important to us.

“As a committee, we’ve stood on trying to make the transfer environment a little less restrictive and giving a little more leeway to the student-athlete who wants to transfer for good reasons.”

The NCAA seeks uniformity in the rule, and it wants to be fair to the schools, the coaches, and the student-athletes. The question is how, given the competing interests?

Most student-athletes want the ability to be able to transfer to any school of their choosing and be eligible to play right away. The coaches fear that allowing them to do so creates “free agency” in which mass quantities of student-athletes leave every year, thus hindering the

coaches’ ability to develop programs.

The Big 12 recently put out a proposal that allows student-athletes to transfer to any school of their choice, but all student-athletes in all sports must sit out a year. The exceptions would be for walk-ons, for those who graduated at the original institution, for those whose original school went on probation that limited postseason competition in the student-athlete’s sport, and for those whose head coach at the original institution resigned or was fired, though the student-athlete could not transfer to the head coach’s future institution.

This proposal certainly gives a lot of latitude to student-athletes, but requiring those who aren’t among the exceptions to sit out a year after transferring may be a deal breaker. The Division I SAAC appears to be leaning toward a different model.

“Personally, I’m leaning toward a model that is maybe sitting out a year, but having a one-time exception rule [for instant eligibility] if you meet certain academic benchmarks,” Tolbert said. “Those are things in the works, things that we’re hoping will come on paper soon, but that’s what I’m leaning toward and what our committee is leaning toward.”

Other topics discussed by Division I SAAC included early recruiting and student-athlete engagement—getting student-athletes more engaged with SAAC, starting with education at the campus level of what SAAC is and knowing that there are opportunities to have one’s voice heard.

The topic of early recruiting isn’t quite as polarizing as that of the transfer situation, but student-athletes want to see it addressed, as college coaches continually recruit younger and younger prospects in an attempt to gain an edge.

“We, as a unit, are hoping early recruiting will be—I don’t want to say stopped, but give prospective student-athletes time and resources to make educated decisions,” Tolbert said. “In that, pushing unofficial and official visit dates back a little more and leveling the playing field for everyone. Giving people a chance to make an informed decision. Giving them a chance to know the coach and know the campus before having to feel pressure to make that commitment and sign that letter of intent.”

Tolbert said Division I SAAC plans to make mental health awareness a future point of emphasis. The convention occurred right around the time when Washington State quarterback Tyler Hilinski committed suicide, which, of course, put a spotlight on an issue that continues to gain more notice.

Most of that discussion figures to center on the resources provided by the schools. Virginia Tech is out in front, with two sport

Continued on page 44

Jaila Tolbert (fourth from right) and the Division I SAAC group served as the student-athlete “voice” at the NCAA Convention in January.



Experience at NCAA CONVENTION

Continued from page 43

psychologists—one full time and one part time—on the staff. Both work out of offices in the Merryman Center within easy access for student-athletes.

“We’re so lucky,” Tolbert said. “We’re trying to get schools on the same playing field. There are schools that don’t even have doctors—and we have two. I think we’re really lucky and hopefully we can use our resources to get the message out and make some changes.”

Tolbert’s term on ACC SAAC runs through May of 2019, so she’ll have a voice in discussions and hopefully legislation at least over the course of the next 17 months. That she gets a say comes as surprise, especially considering that she knew nothing about

SAAC before enrolling at Virginia Tech.

In that respect, she resembles most collegiate student-athletes, and that realization somewhat pains her. Today’s student-athlete gets a say—a stark difference from the years past—and to affect change, student-athletes need to take advantage of this opportunity.

“I didn’t really know that student-athletes had a say or a voice,” Tolbert said. “You kind of just go to practice at this time, go lift at this time, and you forget that this is your experience and it’s what you make it.”

“When I became a SAAC rep and I was sitting in on meetings about legislation and what’s going on in our community and how we can make the student-athlete life better ... I just felt like I was doing something. I felt like I was contributing back to Virginia Tech.”

Tolbert’s term ends, coincidentally, around the time in which she graduates from Virginia

JAILA TOLBERT CAREER HIGHLIGHTS


- Pursuing a degree in international studies, with a minor in Chinese studies
- 2017 All-ACC second team
- 2017 team leader in points, hitting percentage and kills
- 2017 All-ACC Academic Team
- 2017 member of Virginia Tech Student-Athlete Advisory Committee Executive Team
- 2017 member of ACC Student-Athlete Advisory Committee
- 2017 representative to Division I Student-Athlete Advisory Committee
- 2017 NCAA Convention attendee
- 2016 member of Virginia Tech Student-Athlete Advisory Committee
- 2016 team leader in hitting percentage
- 2015 ACC All-Freshman Team

Tech. At that time, she’ll be in decision-making mode, choosing between either more education or future career paths.

Her education leaves her with possibilities, but her experiences on SAAC, at the NCAA Convention and during an internship with the athletics department’s marketing office certainly give her a foundation for a future in college athletics.

Such a future sounds appealing, particularly now.

“It wasn’t my plan, but I’m open to the idea of continuing a career in college athletics,” she said. “It’s all just a part of gaining experience and learning.

“It feels like we, as athletes, are having a conversation with the people who have the power to make change. The student-athlete voice wasn’t represented until now, so being able to be a part of that ... I’ve been so humbled and so fortunate.” 



Virginia Tech was well represented at the NCAA Convention, with (left to right) Reyna Gilbert-Lowry, Whit Babcock, Derek Gwinn, Jaila Tolbert, Angie Littlejohn and Joe Tront all attending.



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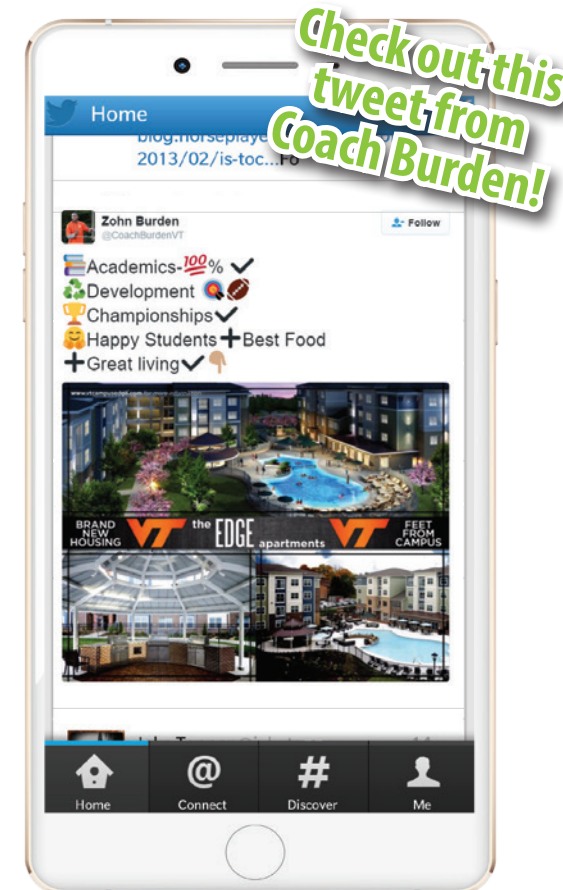
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