

inside

Vol. 9 No. 5, May 2017

HOKIESPORTS

The Official Publication of Virginia Tech Athletics

SEIZING OPPORTUNITIES

Several of Virginia Tech's young football players, including Caleb Farley, made their cases for playing time this fall, as the Hokies concluded spring practice

WHAT'S INSIDE:

A position-by-position analysis, as the football team gears up for summer workouts and ultimately fall practice

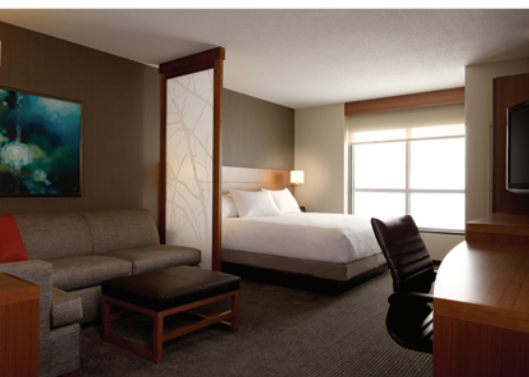

spring
FOOTBALL *REVIEW*

PAGE 18

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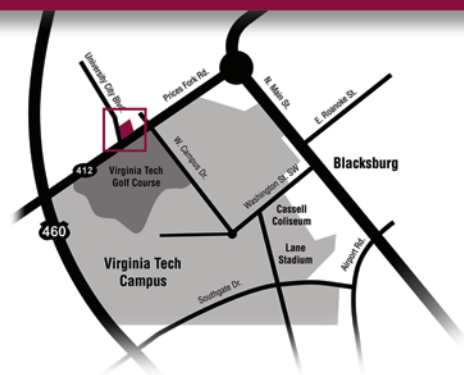


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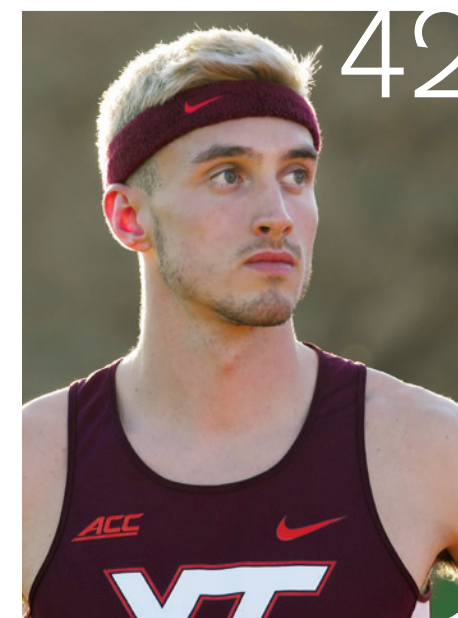
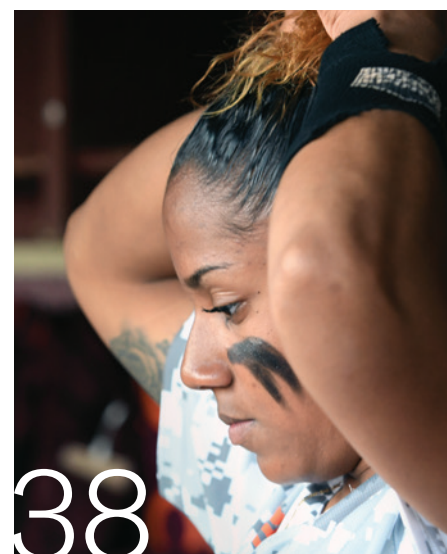
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- 2 Hokie Club News
- 8 News and Notes
Four Hokies selected in recent NFL Draft
- 9 From the Editor's Desk
Hokies have a lot of talent, but lack of depth is major concern
- 10 Behind the Mic
Slye event proof of what resilience really is
- 12 Compliance
- 14 Academic Spotlight – Sansitha Nandakumar
Women's tennis standout wants to pursue career in sports management
- 15 Academic Spotlight – Rahiem Cooper
Baseball star hopes to write stories or produce documentaries about athletes
- 16 IHS Extra – Skelton Awards
Bose, Gallo claim top honor handed out by Tech athletics
- 18 Spring Football Position Reviews
A review of each position based on coaches' evaluations of spring practice
- 34 Baseball Spotlight – Jack Owens
After a pit stop at East Carolina, Owens at home here at Tech
- 38 Softball Spotlight – Aysha Richardson
Crazy road ends with Richardson enjoying best season
- 42 Track and Field Spotlight – Drew Piazza
Transfer aiming for national title for Tech men's track and field program



contents

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Former standouts and Olympians make *CELEBRATION OF WOMEN’S SPORTS* a huge success

The Virginia Tech Athletics Department held its second annual Celebration of Women’s Sports luncheon on April 21, with former Tech athletes and 2016 Olympians Kristi Castlin (track and field, center) and Carmen Farmer (rugby) serving as the special guests for the event. Castlin, who won a bronze medal in the 100-meter hurdles at the Olympics held in Rio de Janeiro this past August, and Farmer, who was on the U.S. women’s rugby team that came in seventh at the Olympics, participated in a panel discussion, with current Tech women’s soccer player Blayne Fink serving as the moderator.

Castlin earned seven All-America honors during her career at Tech—the most by a female athlete in the school’s history—and graduated in 2010. Farmer started every game in which she played on the Hokies’ softball team (225) during her career and graduated in 2003.

The luncheon sold out, and proceeds from ticket sales, the online auction and in-event donations resulted in approximately \$50,000 in revenue—all of which will be used to benefit the women’s sports programs at Tech and to expand nutritional opportunities for all Virginia Tech student-athletes.

The Donor File

Lucas Huddleston

HOKIE CLUB LEVEL: Silver
CURRENTLY RESIDES: Winchester, Virginia
FAMILY: Jennifer (wife); Claire (daughter); Blake (son)



Q&A

Q: A Hokie is one ...
A: who is dedicated to Virginia Tech and the goals in which it pursues.

Q: The Hokie Nation is real because ...
A: it is the spirit apparent whenever any Hokie is present. That was evident last fall when we visited Notre Dame. Even at an event so far away from home, the presence of Hokie Nation was in full effect. That spirit filled the stadium with excitement and with an identity that no one could deny!

Q: What is your fondest memory of Virginia Tech Athletics?
A: The most special season was 1999 when the Hokies went undefeated. However, for me, the most special event was the Nebraska game in 2009. There were two miracles that day—the Hokie comeback and the birth of our first child. I reversed my direction on the way to Blacksburg to join my wife at the hospital to time contractions and to watch the game!

Q: How did I get involved in the Hokie Club?
A: I started donating when I purchased my first season tickets several years ago. I became a Hokie Club rep in 2006. Then in 2015, I became a Hokie Club president of the Winchester area. I have been a Virginia Tech fan all of my life. My father was a Tech graduate and worked for the extension division. I began attending sporting events at a very early age. As I grew, I watched him get involved in fundraising through various programs. I have found that same passion in Hokie athletics.


Q: Do you have any gameday superstitions? If so, what are they?
A: On home gamedays, I begin my three-hour drive to Blacksburg by listening to “Enter Sandman.” As soon as I reach 460, I begin listening to the lyrics once again. I always arrive early, so that I can get into the full Hokie spirit to support our teams. A perfect day at Virginia Tech starts with beautiful weather and with my family present. A Virginia Tech victory completes the package. Every devoted fan has tailgating traditions! For me, that includes early arrival, family and friends, and great food!

Q: What motivates you to give back to Virginia Tech Athletics?
A: I am motivated to give back to Virginia Tech Athletics because I am proud of the goals and success of this university. To remain the best, Virginia Tech needs the support of the entire Hokie Nation. I enjoy being a part of the efforts to see that students receive the scholarships they deserve. The combination of a superior education and the athletics spirit is an important part of why “We Are Virginia Tech!”

Q: I am a Hokie Club Member because ...
A: The Hokie Club works to see that the athletics programs receive the support needed to provide, in turn, the support of athletes and their educational pursuits.

Q: My favorite VT sports are ...
A: football and basketball.

Q: Who are your favorite Virginia Tech players?
A: I have many favorite football players. If I have to select just one, it would be Michael Vick. My favorite student-athlete from another sport is Malcolm Delaney (men’s basketball).



“Hokie Club member’s generosity and commitment to Virginia Tech has changed my life drastically and their spirit embodies our motto: Ut Prosim. Their love for VT is unmatched and I strive to give back as they do one day. I appreciate the support of each donor to the Hokie Club.”
 - JAILA TOLBERT | VOLLEYBALL | SOPHOMORE | INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

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“The Hokie Club is the reason I have been able to attend Virginia Tech through receiving a scholarship. To donors, thank you. I would not be able to compete and represent this school without the Hokie Club and supporters like you.”
 - JOEY LANE | MEN’S GOLF | SENIOR | FINANCE




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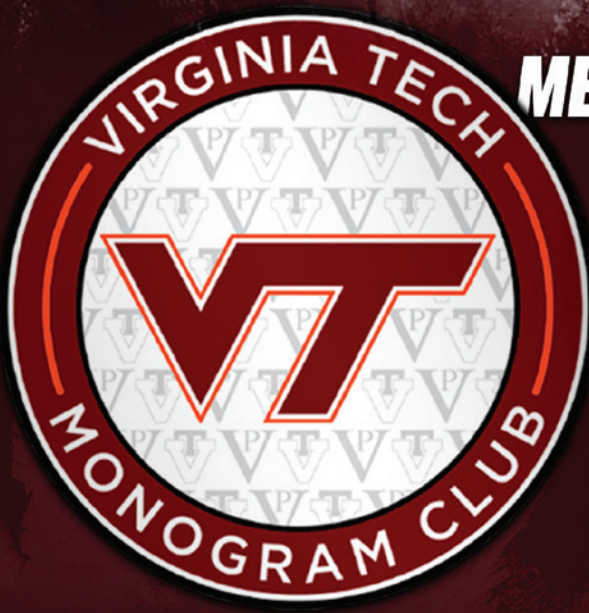
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Four chosen in NFL Draft

For the 24th straight year, an NFL team selected at least one Virginia Tech player in the NFL Draft, as this year, four Hokies were chosen by various NFL teams at the 2017 NFL Draft held April 27-29 in Philadelphia.

The four Hokies selected by NFL teams represent the most Tech players chosen in an NFL Draft since 2010. The contingent includes free safety Chuck Clark, tight end Bucky Hodges and fullback Sam Rogers, who all went in the sixth round, while receiver Isaiah Ford went in the seventh round.

The Baltimore Ravens picked Clark with the 186th pick, while the Minnesota Vikings selected Hodges with the 201st pick and the Los Angeles Rams took Rogers with the 206th pick. In the seventh and final round, the Dolphins chose Ford with the 237th pick.

Several other Tech players signed free-agent contracts with NFL teams, including Woody Baron (Dallas Cowboys), Jon McLaughlin (Arizona Cardinals), Ken Ekanem (Denver Broncos), Nigel Williams (Buffalo Bills) and Jerod Evans (Philadelphia Eagles).

Haught, Laidig and Green named ACC Scholar-Athletes of the Year for respective sports

Jared Haught, Torben Laidig and Hanna Green each won the ACC Scholar-Athlete of the Year honors for their respective sports, as announced several weeks ago. Haught won the honor for the sport of wrestling, while Laidig took home the honor for men’s indoor track and field and Green won the award for women’s indoor track and field.

The ACC Scholar-Athlete of the Year awards were established in September of 2007 to be awarded annually to the top junior or senior student-athlete in his/her respective sport. Candidates for the awards must have maintained a 3.0 grade-point average for their careers as well as a 3.0 for each of the past two semesters.

Haught, a redshirt junior from Parkersburg, West Virginia, is pursuing a degree in mechanical engineering, while Laidig, a redshirt junior from Schwabish Hall, Germany continues pursuit of degrees in both biochemistry and biology. Green graduated in May with a degree in interior design.

The ACC also announced the all-academic teams for its winter sports. Minimum academic requirements for selection to the All-ACC academic team are a 3.0 grade-point average for the previous semester and a 3.0 cumulative average during one’s academic career for undergraduate students. Athletics achievements during the most recent season also receive consideration in the selection of the All-ACC academic team.

Here are the Tech representatives on those teams:

Men’s swimming and diving

- Brandon Fiala (finance)
- Ian Ho (mechanical engineering)
- Ben Schiesl (business)
- Mauro Castro-Silva (marketing)
- Women’s swimming and diving
- Caroline Buscaglia (political science)
- Maggie Gruber (business information technology)
- Jessica Hespeler (human nutrition, foods and exercise)
- Ashlynn Peters (business)

Men’s indoor track and field

- Kevin Cianfarini (computer science)
- Vincent Ciattei (engineering science and math)
- Daniel Jaskowak (human nutrition, foods and exercise)
- Torben Laidig (biochemistry and biology)
- Mackenzie Muldoon (human nutrition, foods and exercise)
- Drew Piazza (civil engineering)
- James Steck (creative writing and literature)
- Peter Seuffer (economics)
- Diego Zarate (criminology)

Women’s indoor track and field

- Courtney Blanden (business information technology)
- Hanna Green (interior design)

Wrestling

- Jared Haught (mechanical engineering)
- Solomon Chishko (packaging systems design)
- Zach Epperly (real estate)
- Zack Zavatsky (packaging systems design)



Overcoming depth issues key to challenging for Coastal and ACC crowns

In many respects, the Virginia Tech football program’s spring practice served as a “Groundhog Day” — or the same as 2016. Fans may remember the 1993 movie of the same name, which centered on a weatherman traveling to Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania to cover the groundhog’s annual emergence. Somehow, he found himself living the same day over and over.

Tech football coach Justin Fuente played the Bill Murray role this spring, as for the second straight spring practice, Fuente and his staff searched for a quarterback, gave a lot of young players reps for evaluation purposes, saw a bunch of that group make plays, kept the veterans sharp and bemoaned a lack of depth. All of that was on display in various degrees at the annual Maroon-Orange Spring Game, a soggy affair that concluded spring practice.

“I think we put good work in throughout the entire spring,” Fuente said in a broad analysis of the Hokies’ work. “Thinking back and reflecting on our 15 practices, I am really proud of the way our guys continued to battle through the dog days of practicing. We didn’t really have a huge drop-off with any of those practices.”

This year’s spring game turned out to be a mildly entertaining event. Hendon Hooker made some nice throws. Caleb Farley made two beautiful catches. Dalton Keene caught a touchdown pass. Tavante Beckett was all over the field. Joey Slye connected from long range. Tech’s first-team defense appeared stout. All of this came about despite an annoying rain that kept many at home.

But the untold, or under-told, story of this spring centers on the Hokies’ lack of depth/ experience pretty much at every position. In the post-spring analysis of each position to be found a little later in this issue, nearly every coach cited depth as a concern. That could put a damper on Tech’s upcoming season.

The staff found itself fortunate this past fall. Consider this: Tech started pretty much the same lineup in every game. The only two major injuries occurred when defensive tackle Nigel Williams and cornerback/punt returner Greg Stroman missed time with sprained ankles.

That certainly validates the chops of Tech’s sports medicine, strength and conditioning and nutrition staffs. Yet such good fortune rarely lasts — and the Hokies need to be prepared.

Let’s first be clear — Tech possesses a lot of talent, but a lot of those players haven’t played in a college football game. Some of them only played on special teams last season. Unfortunately, the coaches need those players to contribute right now. The staff simply lacks the time to ease certain players into roles.

“I think we approach it more from it’s a fact of life, and that’s the way it is,” Fuente said. “It’s our job to develop the guys that are out there.”

The positions to watch include receivers, tight ends and the defensive line. Injuries decimated the receivers this spring, as C.J. Carroll, Henri Murphy, Eric Kumah and Phil Patterson all missed valuable reps. Out of the entire group, only Cam Phillips and Carroll played with any regularity a season ago.

At tight end, Chris Cunningham played

some this past fall, but the backups include Keene, a talented freshman who enrolled in January and possesses a bright future, and Colt Pettit, a former offensive line who plays in short-yardage and goal-line situations. Two more tight ends arrive in July, but the position certainly lacks experience.

The defensive line features four front-line starters — Vinny Mihota, Tim Settle, Ricky Walker and Trevon Hill. Yet line coach Charley Wiles remains uncertain on his backup situation, which hinges on the development of Darius Fullwood, Jarrod Hewitt, Emmanuel Belmar and Raymon Minor.

“We are very thin,” Fuente admitted. “We are going to need to get some guys back healthy, some young guys to contribute, and we’re going to need some guys who have not played significant time to step forward. That is a process much like the young wide receivers. We are working through it. In no way, shape or form are we there yet.”

The coaches have three months to sort through all the pieces before putting together the puzzle in August. In the end, Tech fans want to see the starting quarterback, whoever wins the job, set a bunch of records, watch the offense break a bunch of records as well, and revel in a defense that plays fast, hits hard and stops its opponents. By the end of the season, they hope to be Coastal champs and competing for the league’s title.

In other words, they want 2017 to be “Groundhog Day” — only better. It certainly would be a sequel well worth watching.



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Fighting Back

It was about this time last year that I wrote a column in this space about my dad's (Mark) battle with multiple myeloma. In the past 12 months, I'm sure a lot has happened in everyone's life. For me, many of those things have involved the Hokies. Some have involved the Hokies and my dad. And recently, one has involved a Hokie student-athlete, the Hokie community and my dad.

The former two have included bucket-list items for me, such as calling the ACC Championship Game, the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament and my dad being able to be in attendance for the greatest comeback in Virginia Tech football history in the Belk Bowl. It was an experience he called, "the most fun he has ever had." However, it is the latter that I am feeling the most grateful for, as I write to you a year later.

First, I have been consistently overwhelmed at how many times Hokies have come up to me to ask how my dad is doing. Fortunately, the answer is that he is doing great. He is in full response, which is as close to remission as you currently can get with multiple myeloma. He has resumed many of his passions, including golf and travel, and he has traveled to Blacksburg twice in the past year. It has been rewarding for me to see his face when he visits and Hokies come up to lend a well wish or a positive thought.

So things are good. He's begun his process of kicking cancer in the butt, as he set out to

do. However, I don't think I will ever truly shake the fear of losing him. Realistically, I understand the inevitable nature of mortality, but it was a smack in the face—a wake-up call.

I also have a brother, Ben, who is three years younger than me. As we have both recklessly meandered through life over the years, I have had a passing thought as to what it might do to our family if something ever happened to him—or me. But it was just that, passing. I never mentally played out what that scenario would feel like.

For Hokies student-athlete Joey Slye, reality is incomprehensibly more than a passing thought. Tragically, he lost his older brother, A.J., to acute myeloid leukemia (AML) while still in high school. Unlike me, he knows that hurt, but more importantly, he now knows how we would respond.

The day after the Maroon-Orange Spring Game, I was honored to witness first hand what that response looks like. What it looks like is Joey impressively morphing into an event planner — racing around the indoor practice facility to show food trucks where to park, place volunteers in the proper locations and maniacally checking and re-checking silent auction slips. It looks like his mom, Laura, handing out instructions and hugs in equal measure. It looks like his dad, Dave, sprinting from one end of the football field to the other with "Help Joey Kick Cancer" bracelets to hand out and scripts to keep the

event running effectively.

It also looks like present and past members of the football program playing corn hole in support of their brother. It looks like every member of the coaching staff showing up on a rare day off with their families to lend a hand. It looks like student-athletes from numerous other Virginia Tech sports programs serving as volunteers. It looks like campus police officers playing bubble soccer. It looks like Virginia Tech photographer extraordinaire Dave Knachel manning a photo booth for four hours ... and the list goes on and on.

Most importantly, it looks like a community rallying around one of its own for something of vital importance. It rained all day. It was cold and dreary. It didn't matter. It looked like *Ut Prosim* ("That I May Serve").

Slye has volunteered to campaign for The Leukemia and Lymphoma Society's Man of the Year Award. That means he has assembled a team, including myself, that gives roughly two months in the interest of raising money for research of blood cancers. The team that raises the most for its candidate helps that candidate become the person of the year. Obviously, everyone wins.

The scene that I was previously describing came during the signature event of Joey's campaign, the "Be the Match" event.

To me, it also looked like progress. It looked like more dollars in the research pool. It looked like more donors in the database. It

looked like a day closer to a cure for my dad.

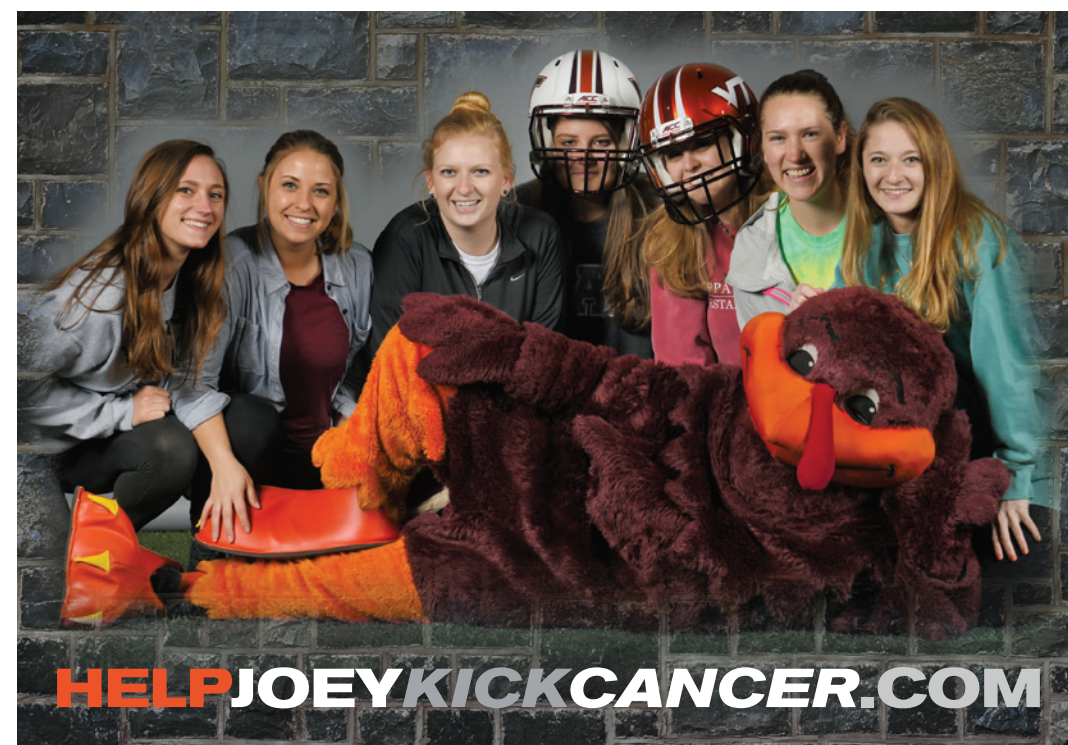
The list of things that have impressed me about Slye's efforts runs beyond lengthy. His balancing of time between academics, athletics and philanthropy ranks near the top of the list.

But at the very top is that he has done all of this with the knowledge that it won't bring back his brother. Mine is a selfish participation. The work that is being done can and has saved my dad. I hope it never comes to this, but some day, it may save my brother or me. That work is remarkable and the advancements in treatment are real and being felt daily. Slye is doing it for me and potentially you ... and so are all of you.

I hope that those who participated could feel the aura of resilience in the air over the weekend. I hope that the Slye family took a moment through their efforts to feel the community-wide embrace. I hope that it brought them some solace. I hope that they felt proud of what they already had accomplished by being willing to get back up and fight after getting flattened.

As I was leaving the event, I began to think of that feeling in a grander sense. I couldn't help but be reminded of a similar feeling I had the weekend before while participating in the 3.2 for 32 Run of Remembrance.

It was collective resilience. Resilience doesn't take away pain. Resilience doesn't allow others to understand personal mourning. And as I mentioned earlier, resilience won't bring back Slye's brother, A.J. It also won't change the events of April 16th,




2007, or prevent other families from dealing with tragedy and loss.

But resilience makes the profound statement of whom we are and what we refuse to be defined by. It has allowed the Virginia Tech community to heal, and a decade later, for its members to be sewn from the same cloth of those who showed such resilience a decade earlier. It allowed for the scene at the indoor practice facility to be awash in smiles, even though tears didn't lie too far beneath. It brought Slye to Blacksburg. It has brought many others of a similar makeup as well.

I have wrapped up my second year in a place that has become home—a year where the punctuation mark at the end was evidence of that resilience. Reminders of the

promise that drew me here in the first place. An extraordinary community with a resilient spirit. Since then, I have enjoyed the privilege of meeting amazing families like the Slys. I thought I knew what resilience looked like. I underestimated it. I am grateful for that.

So as we head into graduation season and the turning of another page in our history, I say a collective thank you for who you are, what you have and will continue to fight through, and most of all, for being Hokies!

***Joey Slye's campaign and LLS's fight against blood cancers continues. If you would like to read more about his story and to donate or participate, please visit HelpJoeyKickCancer.com. 

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COMPLIANCE CORNER^{by} Jimmy Robertson

Keeping up with Compliance

Q: What did you think of the Maryland president's comments that North Carolina should receive the death penalty as a result of the academic scandal there? Is there any end in sight to this case? Thanks for the input, John from Roanoke.

TP: "The comments were surprising in that most university officials refrain from commenting on pending investigations at other schools. That said, this has been a polarizing case on many fronts and received unprecedented national attention.

"As for the case timeline, the NCAA Enforcement Staff provided an initial ruling on this case in 2013. However, new information led to the governing body re-opening the case in 2014, and an official "Notice of Allegations" was issued in 2015. The Enforcement Staff has amended the Notice of Allegations on three occasions, sending the latest notice to North Carolina in December.

"North Carolina's 90-day deadline to respond to the latest notice of allegations passed in mid-March. The latest reports


stated that the school and the NCAA were in consultations. Once it receives North Carolina's response, the NCAA Committee on Infractions will have a month to respond, at which time it will set a date for Tar Heel representatives to appear in person. Following that appearance, and barring the introduction of relevant new information, the committee—which is comprised largely of employees from Division I schools and conference offices—will then reach a decision regarding the case.

"Given the nature of the case, the many amended notices, and the changing levels of responsiveness from pivotal witnesses, it's difficult to say when the case will actually come to a conclusion."

Q: When can high school prospects start taking official visits? So many of them take unofficial visits over the spring and summer at their own expense and make a decision before their senior years. Didn't I read that this was changing? Thanks, Ruth in Christiansburg

TP: "Well, the first permissible date for official (i.e. paid) visits varies by sport. The sports of men's and women's basketball already allow official visits by high school juniors—men's recruits beginning Jan. 1 of the junior year, and women's recruits beginning on the Thursday following the national championship game in April. For all other sports, recruits may not take these paid visits until the first day of class of their senior years in high school.

"Now, for football, that is about to change. On April 14, the NCAA Division I Council adopted a recommendation by the Football Oversight Committee to allow for high school juniors to be provided official visits during a window that begins April 1 and extends until nearly the end of June. The NCAA Board of Directors voted to approve this change and many others at its meeting April 26. The change will take effect Aug. 1.

"For all other sports, the first-day-of-senior-class start date remains in force...at least for the present." 

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SANSITHA NANDAKUMAR

WOMEN'S TENNIS
Coimbatore, India
by Jimmy Robertson

Sansitha Nandakumar started for the Tech women's tennis team this past season and usually played in the No. 5 or 6 spots in the lineup. She graduated this spring with a degree in economics and plans on attending graduate school next fall to pursue a master's in sports management.

Q: Why did you decide to pursue a degree in economics?

SN: "I am attracted by financial and regional economic issues, as I took economics at my high school. Majoring in economics at Virginia Tech has given me skills in scientific and methodology economics in a complex environment. As a sports person, I understand the socioeconomic problems of all societies in the world. So economics gave me the open view of the socioeconomic vision of the society."

Q: Have you worked any internships? If so, what did you do?

SN: "I did an internship with HokieVision [the Tech athletics video office] last summer. I fell in love with the work and enjoyed working every day. HokieVision, being my first internship, was right on campus, and the experience that I got gave me a broad view of what I want to do in my future. I also coached tennis last summer. I received great work experience, and everything was right on campus."

Q: What did you learn from doing your internship?


SN: "Being on the Virginia Tech women's tennis team taught me about leadership, commitment and teamwork. I was able to implement them into work when I did my internship. The internship gave me an experience to the outside world. HokieVision taught me to do Photoshop, live broadcasting and seeing sports through the camera. I have always been on the other side of the camera, but viewing the sports through the camera was a completely different experience. I also learned how to use the equipment."

"Since I am a tennis player, I was able to connect economics, media and sports, and I understood that I want to pursue a career in sports management, as I will be able to show the world the economic problems related to sports through media. I also would like to handle the macro-level problems related to athletes and make a documentary of it."

Q: What are your plans after graduation this spring?

SN: "I want to get a master's in sports management after graduation. So I am going to be adding some experience by working as a coach for the tennis team next year and also work at HokieVision, which will make me stay at the school."

Q: What is your long-term "dream" job?

SN: "My long-term goal is to become a CEO of a sports management company, which I want to start on my own and spread the visionary awareness of the day-to-day life of athletes. I also want to help low-income people get involved into sports and make society healthier. I also want to connect the socioeconomic problems with media in sports and make it entertaining." 

Rahiem Cooper graduated in May of last year with a degree in public relations and came back for his final season. He hopes a career in professional baseball works out, but if not, he'd love to remain in sports by producing documentaries or writing feature stories about athletes.

Q: Why did you decide to pursue a degree in public relations?

RC: "I decided to pursue a degree in communications because I like meeting new people. I think public relations will give me different opportunities because it is so broad. I was originally a multimedia journalism major, but I didn't want to get into broadcasting. I was more interested in writing stories about athletes or doing documentaries."

Q: What is it that you like about writing?

RC: "I like creating my own work, and writing gives me that opportunity. At the end of the day, whatever I write is mine. It belongs to me."


Q: What are your plans once the season ends?

RC: "I would like to get a chance to play at the next level, so I will wait to see what happens with that first. If that doesn't work out, I would pursue other jobs related to the public relations field."

Q: What is your long-term "dream" job?

RC: "I would love to be an every-day player in Major League Baseball, but not too many people make it. If that doesn't work out, I would love to be a sports agent or create documentaries about athletes."

"I think writing stories about athletes is another way to get them exposure. People really only see what an athlete does on the field. They don't know about their lives. I think it's pretty cool to know more about the athlete. The 30 for 30 documentaries [a series of documentaries produced and aired by ESPN] are where I kind of started liking that idea."

"I don't have specific plans. I just know I want to stay in sports. I wouldn't mind working for an MLB team in the communications department. That could be another option that I pursue." 



RAHIEM COOPER

BASEBALL
Gordonsville, Virginia
by Jimmy Robertson

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Elizabeth Bose and Eric Gallo took home the top honor handed out by the athletics department — and both have their sights on accomplishing even bigger things in their futures
by Jimmy Robertson

Bose and Gallo winners of SKELTON AWARDS for Academic Excellence in Athletics

In the throes of taking classes, finishing homework, doing undergraduate research and working on her burgeoning golf game, Virginia Tech women’s golfer Elizabeth Bose nearly passed on filling out the application for the Skelton Award.

“I just had a lot going on at the time,” she said. “Then I thought, ‘This is something I should do.’ It was definitely a good return on the investment.”

For sure, as she, along with football player Eric Gallo, were announced as the winners of the 2017 Skelton Award for Academic Excellence in Athletics at the Athletics Director’s Honors Breakfast held April 23 at the Inn at Virginia Tech.

Each recipient of the top honor handed out by the Virginia Tech Athletics Department receives a scholarship of \$5,000. The Skelton Award, named after the late Dr. Bill and Peggy Skelton, goes out each year to a rising junior, senior or fifth-year male and female student-athlete who has participated in intercollegiate athletics for at least two seasons at Tech and who holds an overall grade-point average of 3.40 or better.

“I was really surprised and felt very blessed to achieve such an honor, especially since I’m only a sophomore going into my junior year,” Bose said. “It’s really nice to be recognized for a lot of work that I’ve put in.”

Gallo, a rising senior from Richboro,

Pennsylvania, echoed similar sentiments.

“I had a flashback to my freshman year when I saw [women’s soccer standout] Katie Yensen win the award [in 2014], and she was doing the speech,” Gallo said. “I remember sitting in the Inn and listening to her, and thinking to myself, ‘What an amazing accomplishment for her! Congratulations to her. That’s an incredible honor for her.’ Then I thought, ‘Wow, what an honor to be mentioned with the Skeltons!’ They’re such an influential family. They’re so generous and really carry out the university motto of ‘Ut Prosim’ [That I May Serve].”

“I wasn’t sure that I was going to win because I know how competitive it is. It’s amazing how driven the student-athletes are here, not only sports-wise, but also off the field. To be honored amongst all my friends in athletics, it’s really amazing because there are a lot of great student-athletes here.”

Bose, a rising junior from Norfolk, Virginia, led the Tech women’s golf team this past season, recording five top-25 finishes in 11 events encompassing the fall and spring semesters. She came in third at the Starmount Fall Classic this past fall and finished 21st at the ACC Championships.

Bose is pursuing a degree in biochemistry, while also seeking minors in both chemistry and French. She spent a portion of last summer doing undergraduate research that involves basic metabolism and studying enzymes under

the direction of Dr. Robert White, a professor in the department of biochemistry, and a doctoral student.

She somehow balances classes, golf, research and homework. She also belongs to the prestigious Phi Sigma Biological Honor Society and participated in an initiative that involved issuing grant money to local schools in support of science programs.

Bose, named an All-American Scholar last year by the Women’s Golf Coaches Association, hasn’t narrowed her final career objectives yet, but admits being interested in research, which compelled her to pursue her current research position last summer.

“I wanted to see what research really was since I had an idea in my mind,” she said. “I realized that I needed experience to see what I’d be getting myself into. I was only going to do it during the summer [last summer], but the people in the lab that I’m in trust me enough to let me in the lab at night, and that’s a really special opportunity. I don’t think that’s typical.

“It’s been a worthwhile experience just seeing everything that goes into science and seeing how much commitment it takes — and patience. Everything moves around all the time. It’s been cool to see how I can use skills from golf in science. The frustrations that I feel are very similar in both settings, which has been cool, just from the patience and perseverance that it takes.”

As for Gallo, he has been a two-year starter for the Hokies as a center on the offensive line. He started 25 games over the previous two seasons, including 12 of the 13 games in which he played this past season.

Gallo plans on graduating in May of 2018 with a degree in finance. He has been named to the ACC All-Academic Football Team on two occasions — an honor that requires student-athletes to maintain a cumulative 3.0 grade-point average during his/her academic career.

He worked an internship last summer for the Wadsworth Group at Morgan Stanley, a wealth management firm in Roanoke, Virginia, and he plans to do so again this summer.

“I’ll have a different role, and I’m not sure what that will be, but last summer, I had a great experience, and I’m looking forward to returning this summer,” he said. “When I decided to major in finance, it just seemed to be the jack-of-all-trades when it came to business. Essentially with a finance degree from Virginia Tech, you can do anything business related just because it’s such a strong business school and such a strong finance program.

“Besides from that, I was looking to challenge myself in the classroom, and I thought that finance was going to be the biggest challenge for me. That’s what I wanted to do. I wanted to have a versatile degree, and I wanted to challenge myself along the way.”

In addition to naming Bose and Gallo as the Skelton winners, the athletics department


also named its ACC Scholar-Athletes of the Year. Those honors went to men’s swimmer Brandon Fiala and volleyball standout Lindsey Owens. Fiala, a four-time member of the All-ACC Academic Swimming and Diving Team, graduated in early May with a degree in finance, while Owens, a three-time member of the All-ACC Academic Volleyball Team, graduated with a degree in biology.

The department also honored those with the highest GPA during the 2016 calendar year, and that group included Torben Laidig (men’s track and field), Brooks Wilding (wrestling), Hanna Green (women’s track and field), Jennifer Boyles (women’s soccer), Anissa Dadkhah (women’s soccer), Murielle Tiernan (women’s soccer) and Nick Stegmuller (cheerleading).

The department recognized its 2016 All-Academic Team, which includes the top student-athlete academically in his/her sport. The list for this team included Greg Donlon (men’s basketball), Mac Caples (baseball), Brent Musselman (men’s cross country), Brandon Facyson (football), Drew Johnson (men’s golf), Rodrigo Zampieri (men’s soccer), Fiala (men’s swimming), Jason Kros (men’s tennis), Laidig (men’s track and field), Wilding (wrestling), Regan Magarity (women’s basketball), Green (women’s cross country), Bose (women’s golf), Tara Feehan (lacrosse),



Breanna Davenport (softball), Boyles (women’s soccer), Dadkhah (women’s soccer), Tiernan (women’s soccer), Caroline Buscaglia (women’s swimming), Caroline Daxhelet (women’s tennis), Erica Hjerpe (women’s track and field), Katie Krueger (volleyball), Regan Wu (managers), Hellen Samuel (trainers), Stephen Dixon (video), Stegmuller (cheerleading) and Maggie Mitchell (HighTechs).

In all, more than 300 student-athletes were recognized at the AD’s Honors Breakfast, including all those who achieved a grade-point average of 3.0 or better during one or both semesters in the preceding calendar year. 

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Seniors *lead the way* for Hokies along an offensive line with **EXPERIENCE, YOUTH** and **TALENT**

by Jimmy Robertson

Normally, Tech fans spend this time of year lamenting about the lack of depth, and in some cases, talent along the offensive line, as the team seeks to rebuild from the previous season.

This spring, though, saw little in the way of conversation about that group, perhaps because educated fans know that the Hokies return three starters and several interesting young players at the various five positions. The mix of experience and youth, and the overall play of the unit this spring, has line coach Vance Vice cautiously optimistic, as the program heads into summer workouts.

“They don’t turn the scoreboards on right now, so I feel all right,” he said. “I’m excited about the summer and definitely excited about the fall, but we’re definitely a work in progress. This spring, they’ve gotten after it. I like to complain, but this spring, I can’t complain about how they came to work every day. I had no issues, none of that stuff. I feel good about those guys coming back, and I’m excited about the guys that are new, too.”

Vice saw veteran leaders Augie Conte and Jonathan McLaughlin depart off last fall’s squad, and they took with them a lot of production and experience. McLaughlin started 49 games in his career, while Conte started 37, but Vice saw his top task as

replacing their leadership first instead of their on-field production.

He leaned heavily on his seniors to accomplish that this spring, specifically guard Wyatt Teller and center Eric Gallo, and the two of them played well. Those two anchor things up front for the offense and possess the most experience. Teller enters the fall with 30 career starts, while Gallo has 25.

“Wyatt’s the old guy now,” Vice said. “He’s trying to be the leader. He had the luxury of Jon and Augie taking the leadership role, and now he’s at the top tier just because of his age and his experience. That means I can’t have an off day from him. He got better each and every day this spring. He’s got an opportunity to have a productive year for us.

“It’s the same with Gallo. Gallo had the best spring he’s ever had. He’s running the show. He holds the whole thing together.”

Those two worked with the first team for most of the spring, along with left tackle Yosuah Nijman, who started all 14 games last season. Vice believes the 6-foot-7, 300-pound Nijman possesses the traits to become one of the best offensive linemen in the ACC.

With those three returning to their positions, Vice centered his attention on the right guard and right tackle spots where Conte and McLaughlin played. Tyrell Smith got most of

the first-team reps at right tackle, while Braxton Pfaff and Kyle Chung rotated at right guard. Keep in mind that Parker Osterloh, who missed spring practice with an injury, will figure into that mix in August, but this spring, the aforementioned trio received the most work.

“Tyrell and Braxton know it’s a challenge, and they’ve accepted that,” Vice said. “They had good days and not good days. Some of Braxton’s bad days were because of [defensive tackle] Tim Settle. Timmy’s getting better, and that’s good. I told Braxton, ‘You’re the luckiest and unluckiest guy.’ You’re unlucky because you had to line up against Tim every day, but you’re lucky because it will pay off in the fall.

“But those guys [Smith and Pfaff] have done a great job of trying to earn a spot. The effort is exactly what I want. Did we make mistakes? Yes, but that’s why we practice.”

Vice also liked what he saw from Chung this spring. In fact, Chung is an incredibly valuable player because of his versatility. He worked at three different spots this spring, with little in the way of drop-off.

“Chung is a guy that I think is a left guard, a right guard and a center,” Vice said. “He gives me a little bit of depth at those inside positions because he’s played all three of those, but he’s also in a battle trying to be one of the [starting] five.”

The Hokies don’t have a true two-deep on the offensive line just yet, but Gallo, Teller, Nijman, Pfaff, Smith, Chung and Osterloh give Vice seven reasonably consistent and dependable players. Guys like Chung and Osterloh give him more in that they possess the ability to play several spots.

That doesn’t mean that the Hokies lack young talent. On the contrary, some of the younger players caught Vice’s eye this spring. That contingent included tackles T.J. Jackson and D’Andre Plantin, guard Austin Cannon and center Zachariah Hoyt.

Jackson may be the most intriguing of the group. The 6-6, 325-pounder took a redshirt season this past fall and impressed Vice despite playing just one year of high school football.

“T.J. has a very high ceiling,” Vice said. “He’s in the process of learning how to work from play to play. He’s flashy—and then he’s not. We’re working on consistency, and that’s typical of a lineman during his freshman year.”

Vice also came away impressed with the work ethics of both Cannon and Hoyt, who hails from nearby Salem, Virginia. In fact, Hoyt improved as much, if not more, than any offensive lineman over the course of the 15 spring practices.

Hoyt’s emergence gives the Hokies three consistent centers, along with Gallo and Chung.

“The No. 1 reason why he’s made the improvement that he has is because I don’t know if there is a guy on this team that’s matched the work he’s put in this past year,” Vice said of Hoyt. “Over Christmas break, it’s out there snowing, and he’s running 100s [100-yard sprints]. He’s put in extra work. He lives in the weight room, and he’s got himself into position now. I’ve got comfort because Hoyt’s getting bigger and stronger every day, and he’s starting to understand the game a little bit. That’s one of the most pleasant surprises.”

Overall, the Hokies are in better shape numbers-wise on the offensive front than a year ago and even in years past. The staff likes the mix of youth and experience, both for this upcoming season and for future seasons.

Yet those younger guys need to develop. Tech’s staff wants to run the ball more effectively and wants to protect the passer better. That means continued improvement—for everyone.

“I don’t think it’s necessary to know who the five starters are going to be coming out of spring practice,” Vice said. “I’ve never been able to do that, but I’ve got an idea of who gives us a chance. We’ve got a chance to be OK up front, but we’ve got to develop some players.

“We need a great summer from everyone. I don’t think we’re good enough anywhere to take the summer off and say, ‘See you in the

Offensive Line

- 50** Patrick Kearns (6-5, 288, r-Fr.)
- 52** Austin Cannon (6-2, 302, r-Fr.)
- 56** T.J. Jackson (6-6, 324, r-Fr.)
- 57** Wyatt Teller (6-5, 308, r-Sr.)
- 60** Silas Dzansi (6-5, 310, Fr.)
- 61** Kyle Chung (6-3, 290, r-Sr.)
- 62** D’Andre Plantin (6-5, 295, r-So.)
- 63** Daniel Bailey (6-3, 301, r-So.)
- 64** Eric Gallo (6-2, 295, Sr.)
- 65** Matt Christ (6-3, 274, r-So.)
- 66** Billy Ray Mitchell (6-4, 285, r-Jr.)
- 67** Parker Osterloh (6-8, 326, r-Sr.)
- 68** Connor Kish (6-2, 280, r-So.)
- 69** Yosuah Nijman (6-7, 300, Jr.)
- 70** Kevin Kish (6-2, 286, r-So.)
- 74** Braxton Pfaff (6-5, 293, r-Jr.)
- 75** Zachariah Hoyt (6-4, 285, r-Fr.)
- 76** Jarrett Hopple (6-7, 293, r-Fr.)
- 77** Demetri Moore (6-6, 303, r-Jr.)
- 79** Tyrell Smith (6-3, 295, r-So.)

fall.’ We can’t do that. But overall, I like how they showed up every day this winter and this spring with the right mentality. Now we just need to continue doing that.”

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Cunningham **HEADLINES** a group of young, inexperienced tight ends

by Jimmy Robertson

Most Tech fans and even media members who cover the Virginia Tech football program spent much of the spring focusing on the Hokies' depth issues at the receiver and defensive line spots.

That was certainly understandable, but the situation at tight end bears just as much scrutiny.

The position features one player — Chris Cunningham — who saw a moderate amount of action at the spot last season. He played in 12 games, starting two of them. Colt Pettit, a converted offensive lineman, was the only other tight end to play last season, and he worked just as an extra blocker.

Chris Durkin, who spent last season at tight end, transferred out of the program, and then the coaching staff moved Xavier Burke from tight end to defensive end shortly before the start of spring practice to shore up that spot. Burke played some at defensive end in high school, so moving the rising redshirt sophomore was a logical decision.

All that left James Shibest, the tight ends coach, trying to get his inexperienced group better this spring in hopes of finding one or two dependable players to insert in the Hokies' various packages this fall. Cunningham's experience probably gave him a slight edge coming out of spring practice.

As a redshirt freshman a year ago, Cunningham caught six passes for 48 yards, but four of those receptions went for touchdowns. He became an underrated red-zone threat.

"He is understanding the offense better," Shibest said. "He is getting a little bit more instinctive. He just has to keep going, keep getting tougher and keep fighting."

"You see glimpses of a guy that can do everything that we are asking of him. He just has to continue to grow and gain some confidence. He needs to believe that he is going to go out there and win each rep. He's moving in the right direction, and we've been happy with him. It's hard to be patient at times with these guys, but he is still young."

The staff hopes Cunningham merges into an all-around threat, but they want to use Pettit in short-yardage and goal-line situations, or when they simply want to pound on a defense late in the game. Pettit's experience in that area should be beneficial to him and Tech's offense.

"He is there to block people," Shibest admitted. "He is running around better, and he looks better. We just need some guys right there, and he did help us at the end of the year last year. We need that physical guy at the line of scrimmage when we get in that personnel grouping."

Shibest and the rest of the staff really like Dalton Keene, a freshman who graduated from high school early and enrolled in January for the spring semester. Keene played a bunch of positions on both sides of the ball while in high school, but the staff pegged him as a tight end right away.

Keene looks the part at 6-foot-4, 225 pounds and with a frame to get even bigger. But he impressed the staff both with his toughness and his overall athletic ability this spring.

"He looks a little raw," Shibest said. "He is almost like a newborn giraffe out there the way he moves at times, but he is strong and athletic. We are going to need him ... He is going to have to play next year, just looking at it right now, so we are glad he had this early start."

Casey Harman and Cole Blaker, two Southwest Virginia natives, also figure into the mix, and the other tight end signees from this past February — Lecitus Smith from Georgia and Drake Deluliis from Charlotte — will get a close look starting in July.

Overall, the Hokies feature youth and inexperience at tight end heading into the fall. But the good news is that their talent may be able to overcome that. **VT**



spring VT 2017 (in numerical order) Tight Ends

- 29 Dalton Keene (6-4, 225, Fr.)
- 42 Cole Blaker (6-3, 200, Fr.)
- 80 Casey Harman (6-3, 245, r-So.)
- 80 Colt Pettit (6-3, 298, r-So.)
- 85 Chris Cunningham (6-2, 236, r-So.)

Tech staff hoping younger receivers **FOLLOW LEADERSHIP** of veteran Phillips by Jimmy Robertson

At roughly the halfway point of the Hokies' spring practice, media members made a request to talk to receivers coach Holmon Wiggins. He received an array of questions, which comes as no surprise given that the receiving corps lost Isaiah Ford and Bucky Hodges from this past season.

Wiggins wants to get his positions in as good of shape as what he had at Memphis, where he played seven or eight receivers throughout the course of a game the final two years there.

"Will we get to that point?" he said. "I'm still trying to get to the point where I can trust four or five guys."

Most of the concern of head coach Justin Fuente about his team centers not on the quarterbacks, but on the players around him. That obviously includes the receivers.

Tech returns one stalwart in Cam Phillips, who caught 76 passes for 983 yards and five touchdowns in 2016. Phillips lined up mostly in the slot last season, but Tech's staff moved him around quite a bit this spring — lining him up wide, lining him in the slot and using him on jet sweeps and reverses.

Phillips assumed the leadership role of this young unit really by default. Outside of him and C.J. Carroll, who started one game last season and missed spring practice with an injury, no other receiver started a game and only two others (Henri Murphy and Sean Daniel) even played in a game. But Wiggins liked what he saw from Phillips, both on the

field and from a leadership perspective.

"He has his sights set on a lot of good things for us," Wiggins said. "This being his last year, he wants to do some things. I told him that he couldn't be perfect. That's the one thing. He's striving to seek perfection, and he may be overdoing a few things, but the leadership has been awesome. He's been helping our young quarterbacks and helping our wideouts. He wants to make a play every play. I like the fact that he wants to be the guy, and he's going to be our go-to guy this year."

Wiggins spent most of his spring worrying about the rest of the group, and toward the end of spring, a few started to emerge as potential playmakers. Specifically, he liked what he saw from rising sophomore Eric Kumah before an injury limited him in the final couple of weeks and rising redshirt freshman Phil Patterson.

Kumah, in particular, caught not just the eye of Wiggins, but also of others. He played in 13 games as a true freshman, but most of the action came on special teams. In several scrimmage situations this spring, he out-jumped Tech cornerbacks to make a nice catch, displaying athleticism and good hands.

"He was making plays," Wiggins admitted. "At the end of the day, we've got to produce. As coaches, we've got to win games. As receivers, you've got to catch the ball and bear fruit and produce. He was doing that. When his number was called and the ball was in the air, he did a good job of fighting and scrapping and taking

it out of the air."

In addition to Kumah and Patterson, Wiggins saw progress from Samuel Denmark, a rising redshirt freshman. Also, Kalil Pimpleton, a freshman who graduated from high school and enrolled early, received a lot of meaningful reps this spring.

Pimpleton lacks size, standing 5-foot-8, 153 pounds, but he brings an element of explosiveness. Tech's staff worked him primarily in the slot position, and he figures to see the field this fall.

"He's a smart kid," Wiggins said. "He loves ball. That's the one thing. A kid with his measurables, you've got to have a chip on your shoulder, and I think he plays with that. He's smart, he's tough and he is dynamic with the ball in his hands."

"It was good to see him hold down the information that we threw at him. He got a lot of reps, and he did a good job of taking the bull by the horns and learning as much as he could."

Hopefully, Carroll and Murphy, who also missed much of spring practice with an injury, return to full strength. Those two, combined with Phillips, Kumah, Patterson, Denmark and Pimpleton, give the Hokies seven receivers — provided the younger guys in that group develop into consistent playmakers.

If they do, then they should enable the Hokies to overcome the large losses of Ford and Hodges.

"I think those guys are eager to showcase what they can do," Wiggins said. "Will we have three dynamic guys, like we did last year? I don't know. That's yet to be seen. Hopefully, we'll be able to fill those shoes, maybe by committee or maybe by three guys." **VT**



spring VT 2017 (in numerical order) Receivers

- 5 Cam Phillips (6-0, 199, Sr.)
- 8 Phil Patterson (6-2, 180, r-Fr.)
- 12 Henri Murphy (5-10, 175, Jr.)
- 27 Dominic Benson (6-2, 183, r-Fr.)
- 30 Jordan Jefferson (5-8, 170, r-Fr.)
- 39 Sean Daniel (5-9, 183, r-So.)
- 41 Kevin Henry (5-10, 165, r-Fr.)
- 81 Samuel Denmark (6-0, 183, r-Fr.)
- 83 Eric Kumah (6-2, 210, So.)
- 86 C.J. Carroll (5-8, 167, r-Jr.)
- 87 Bodhie Long (6-3, 200, r-Fr.)
- 88 Kalil Pimpleton (5-8, 153, Fr.)



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spring
FOOTBALL REVIEW

New Australian punter received lots of **ATTENTION** this spring

by Jimmy Robertson

Much of the special teams news coming out of spring practice centered on Oscar Bradburn, the freshman punter from Australia who enrolled at Tech in January just in time for the spring semester.

Bradburn spent much of his first two months in Blacksburg learning the culture and dealing with the weather extremes before hitting the field to take over as the Hokies' punter.

Bradburn replaces Mitchell Ludwig, who graduated and decided not to return for his final season of eligibility. The left-footer played Australian Rules Football while growing up and now is adjusting to the American brand of football.

He needs to do so quickly because the Hokies have no other punter listed on the roster. James Shibest, Tech's special teams coach, liked what he saw this spring, and having coached Australian punters before, he likes his guy's background.

"We've had success with it," Shibest said. "We are excited about it. I never coached a left-footed punter before, so it is a little different for me. I was asking [coach Brad] Cornelsen if it was the same as a left-handed quarterback, and I think it is because the way you scheme things is a little bit backward sometimes. It may take a little bit more for me to get used to than him, I think."

"He is doing great. He is working his tail off, and he is picking up things really quickly."

Shibest harbors no such concerns over placekicker Joey Slye, who enters his fourth season as a starter. Slye stands on the cusp of breaking many of former kicker Shayne Graham's school records.

Shibest, though, wants to see him connect from long range. Slye possesses a powerful leg, but has missed all eight of his career attempts from beyond 50 yards.

spring VT 2017 (in numerical order) Special Teams

PUNTER

91 Oscar Bradburn (6-1, 191, Fr.)

KICKERS

46 Joey Slye (5-11, 210, Sr.)

93 Brian Johnson (6-1, 161, r-Fr.)

SNAPPERS

51 Hundley McCurry (5-11, 190, r-Fr.)

87 Colton Taylor (6-1, 220, r-Sr.)

95 Chaska Moon (5-10, 227, r-So.)



"He knows I'm upset that he should make them – at least be a little bit more consistent," Shibest said. "We just have to get confident in getting it done. He hasn't missed by much. He has plenty of leg, so to me, it is a confidence issue that we have to overcome. You have to make them [50-yard field goals] if you want to be the best in this league, or one of the best in the country ... it's just a matter of doing it on gameday and getting it done."

The biggest bummer on the special teams front for the Hokies this spring came in the form of injuries, as top returners Greg Stroman and C.J. Carroll missed the entire spring with injuries. Also, Henri Murphy went down with an injury early in the spring.

All of those guys should return in the fall, but the injuries forced Shibest to work several players as kick and punt returners, including younger players such as Kalil Pimpleton and Caleb Farley.

"It's important to be able to get a good nucleus of guys there, not just for next year, but as we grow into the future a little bit," Shibest said. "They'll be kick returners, too. We were happy the way Henri Murphy finished [this past season], but we need two or three more guys here that can compete for those jobs." VT



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Settle and Walker anchor a defensive line that needs for depth to *EMERGE*

by Jimmy Robertson

Virginia Tech's defensive line played outstanding this past fall after seniors Woody Baron, Ken Ekanem and Nigel Williams anchored a defense that finished 18th nationally in total defense.

But those three departed, and line coach Charley Wiles faced a rebuilding job this spring—one that wasn't helped when Vinny Mihota and Trevon Hill missed spring practice while recovering from injuries suffered in the fall. Making matters worse, Houshun Gaines, a defensive end who really needed reps this spring, sat out after not meeting certain off-field standards set forth by head coach Justin Fuente.

Any talk of the 2017 defensive line starts with projected starting tackles Tim Settle and Ricky Walker. Those two take over for Baron and Williams, and both of them enjoyed excellent spring practices. In fact, both of them possess All-ACC potential and represent the positive side of the equation in an assessment of Tech's defensive line.

"I think they can be stars," Wiles said. "We're going to be asking a lot of both of them, but they have the talent, and they also played a lot last season. They played in every game, and Ricky even started for us when Nigel was

spring VT 2017 (in numerical order) Defensive Line

DEFENSIVE ENDS

- 11** Houshun Gaines (6-3, 248, r-So.)
- 18** Raymon Minor (6-2, 231, Jr.)
- 40** Emmanuel Belmar (6-2, 228, r-Fr.)
- 43** Xavier Burke (6-3, 255, r-So.)
- 94** Trevon Hill (6-3, 240, r-So.)
- 99** Vinny Mihota (6-5, 264, r-Jr.)

DEFENSIVE TACKLES

- 4** Tim Settle (6-3, 328, r-So.)
- 8** Ricky Walker (6-2, 282, r-Jr.)
- 47** Darius Fullwood (6-3, 252, r-So.)
- 55** Jarrod Hewitt (6-1, 299, r-Fr.)
- 61** Joe Koshuta (6-1, 255, r-So.)
- 96** Jimmie Taylor (6-2, 240, r-Fr.)

out [for four games because of an injury]. We obviously need for them to stay healthy."

That's because Wiles came out of spring feeling unsettled about the backups at both defensive tackle spots. Last fall, he enjoyed the luxury of rotating Baron, Williams, Settle and Walker, but none of the current

group of backups played with consistency this spring.

That group consists of Darius Fullwood, Jarrod Hewitt and possibly Jimmie Taylor, who came to Tech last summer as an end, though Wiles thinks he fits better at tackle. Fullwood also came to Tech as an end and later moved to tackle.

"I'm a little worried," Wiles said. "I do think we had our best week of practice that last week [before the spring game], but we were inconsistent for the most part.

"Darius has shown the athleticism to play the position, but has been inconsistent. He reminds me of Barry Booker [2003-07], who didn't play until his junior year—but we don't have that luxury with Darius. We've got to have him now. I want to see him get mentally tougher and play multiple plays in a row at a high level. In a drill setting, he can look good, and he can move. He's got exactly what we want for the position, but he needs to get stronger this summer."

Hewitt's strength is his strength, as he recorded a 415-pound bench press in offseason testing. He probably needs another year of "seasoning" after taking a redshirt year this past fall, but the Hokies need for him to provide depth this season. And Taylor needs to get

bigger to be able to hold up at defensive tackle.

"In looking at those two, Jarrod needs to play with more knee bend, but he got better," Wiles said. "He started to play faster toward the end of spring. We just need for him to get a lot better quickly.

"Jimmie did some good things, but he doesn't run and move around well enough to play at end. Can he get big enough to be a three-technique [defensive tackle]? He's tough enough. He's 249 pounds. He just needs to get bigger, and hopefully, he can."

At defensive end, the injuries to Mihota and Hill—and both should be ready by August—left Wiles rotating a group of Taylor Raymon Minor, Emmanuel Belmar and Xavier Burke, whom the staff moved from tight end to defensive end before the start of spring practice. Of those, Minor probably progressed the most.

Minor came to Tech in the fall of 2014, and the staff worked him mostly at whip linebacker. He left the program for a brief period, but asked to return, and Fuente granted that request. The staff moved him to defensive end, where they saw a need and felt his skills could help.

Minor only weighs around 230-235 pounds, but his speed and athleticism work well at the defensive end spot.

"I was pleasantly surprised with Raymon," Wiles said. "I think we've got him in a good spot—we probably should have moved him sooner. We made the same move with Emmanuel Belmar, and that was a good move for him. They're developing, but they've only had 15 practices."

Tech's staff looked at Belmar, a freshman last fall, at backer before moving him to defensive end shortly before the bowl game. Wiles likes his speed and quickness coming off the edge, but said Belmar needs to get stronger and become more familiar with the scheme.

The same applies to Burke, who played in six games at tight end as a redshirt freshman this past fall.

"He needs reps, but he's gotten better," Wiles said. "He moves around pretty well. We need for him to become more instinctive, but that comes with more practices and more reps. He works hard.

"I could say the same thing about all of those guys, really—reps, reps, reps. This summer is big for them to get their bodies right and work on their technique."

Wiles expects continued development from the group, but if they lack consistency once practices resume in August, then he won't be afraid to play one or more true

freshmen—provided they progress enough to warrant game reps. Tech's staff signed five defensive linemen in February, including Robert Porcher IV, J'Bril Glaze, Zion DeBose, Nathan Proctor and TyJuan Garbutt.

Somehow, some way, Wiles wants eight quality defensive linemen in his rotation. When the Hokies play their best on defense, they usually rotate eight guys up front. Last season, Wiles essentially rotated seven—Baron, Williams, Ekanem, Settle, Walker, Mihota and Hill—and the Hokies' defense overall played well.

Entering summer workouts, Wiles feels good about projected starters Mihota, Hill, Settle and Walker, but he knows he needs for players to emerge behind them.

"We've got to fill in behind them," he said. "We've got to see if we can find us a third and fourth defensive tackle. We've got to find eight defensive linemen—and hope that no one gets hurt. It's a different world now than it was 10 or 20 years ago. Everyone wasn't trying to run 95-110 plays a game back then like they are now. Everyone wasn't trying to speed it up on offense.

"But if we can stay healthy, I think the first group is going to be pretty good, and then we've got to fill in and find that second group." VT

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Edmunds smoothly **TRANSITIONS** to free safety— arguably the defense’s most important position

by Jimmy Robertson

No assistant coach on Tech’s staff faced more uncertainty this spring than Galen Scott.

After all, he saw the defense’s best leader graduate in Chuck Clark, he had his best player slide into a new position with Terrell Edmunds’ move to free safety, he worked two relatively inexperienced players at rover, and his top nickel defensive back from a season ago, Mook Reynolds, spent all of spring practice on the sideline with injury.

Yet Scott came out of spring practice feeling optimistic about his positions.

“I think we’re going to be fine,” he said. “I like the guys I have. I think they’re a good

reflection of what we want as players.”

Edmunds, one of the Hokies’ top leaders, enjoyed a rather uneventful spring, as he seamlessly made the transition from rover to free safety. Defensive coordinator Bud Foster often talks about the importance of free safety in his scheme because that player makes all the coverage calls. Given that importance, he and Scott moved Edmunds primarily because they trust him.

“That guy has to run the back end back there, and he’s [Edmunds] one of the more experienced guys and more talented guys,” Scott said. “I think it [the transition] was pretty smooth. There was a learning curve, just making all the calls and the checks and stuff like that, but I thought he did a good job of picking it up. I think he’ll have a pretty good year.”

Rest assured, though, that Scott and the rest of the staff expect the same production as they received from Clark, who finished third on the team in tackles with 94 last season. Edmunds, though, was fourth with 89, so there figures to be little drop-off.

The position also demands more from a coverage standpoint, but that may be where Edmunds excels. He led the team with four interceptions a year ago.

“They’re [offenses] going to try you a little more,” Scott said. “You’ve got a lot of grass to cover, so you’ve got to be in tune and sharp. You’ve got to have your eyes where they’re supposed to be and do a good job.”

Coming out of spring, Divine Deablo—a converted receiver—stood second on the

depth chart at the free safety spot. Deablo draws comparisons to former Tech safety Kam Chancellor primarily because of his size (6-3, 208) and his number (No. 17), though that comparison is not exactly fair given his lack of experience.

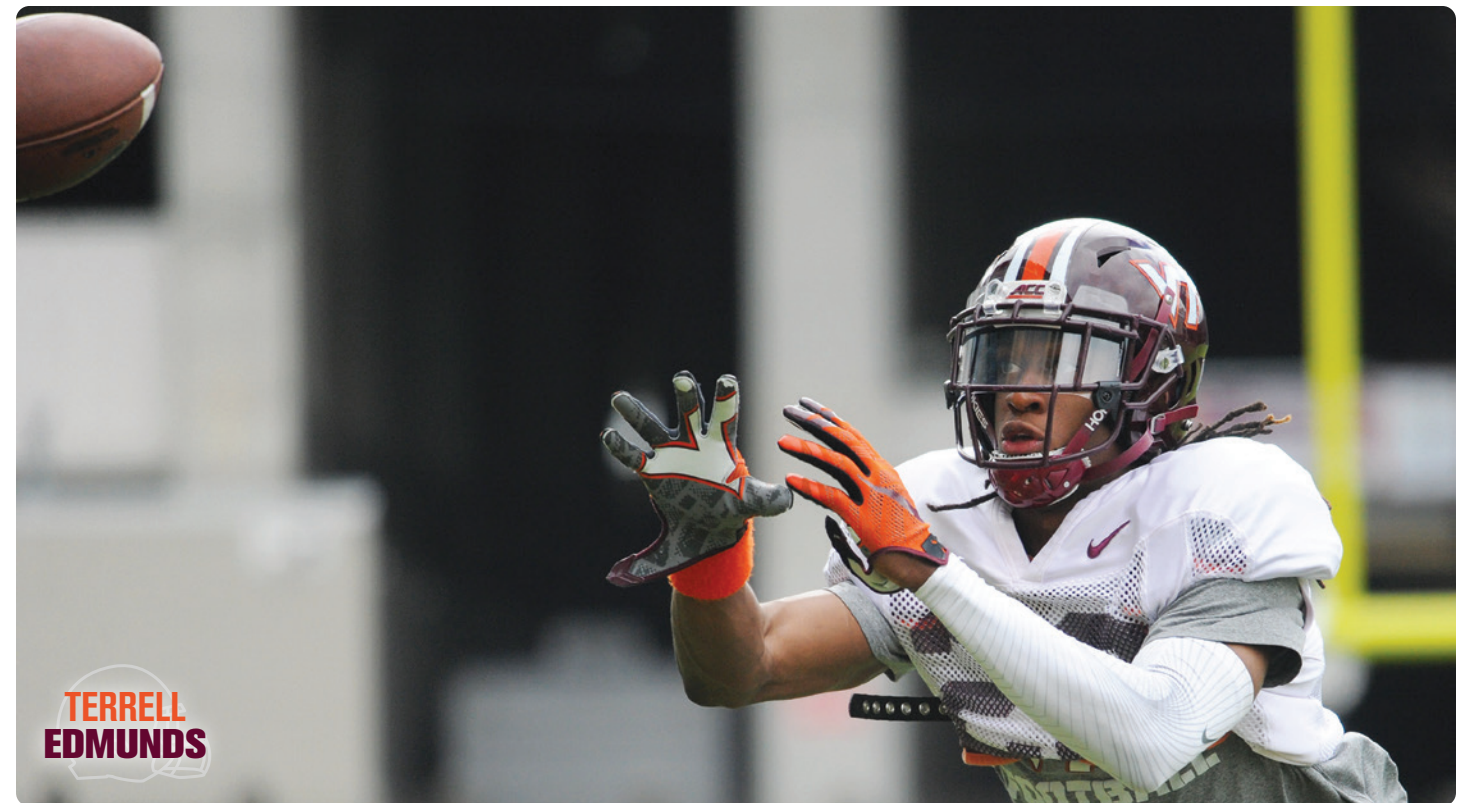
Scott liked what he saw from Deablo as a free safety this spring and likes the long-term potential.

“He picked it up pretty good for never having played defense before. He’ll have a chance,” Scott said. “The thing is when you have a guy first coming over, you worry about him not having his eyes where they’re supposed to be or blowing assignments, but that’s not him. He’s pretty good with that stuff. Now we’ve got to make sure the tackling aspect is good. You’ve got to get them [opponents] on the ground. That’s the next part we’re working on with him, but I think we’ll be fine. He’s got the size and range, and he wants to do it, so I think he’ll be fine.”

At the rover position, Reggie Floyd emerged atop the depth chart. He played in 12 games as a true freshman last season, seeing most of his action on special teams. That experience, and the practice reps that he received while working with the varsity group, obviously helped him this spring.

Floyd finds himself at a position that puts him in spots to make plays. His size and speed give him an advantage, and he picked up the scheme quickly, enabling him to be the frontrunner at the spot when August practices start.

“I’m pleasantly surprised with Reggie right now—and I’m probably harder on him than



anybody,” Scott said. “I think sometimes younger players think that they have time when they don’t. We’ve got to go. We’ve got to get it done right now. He has to have that sense of urgency. When he does, he’s a dynamic player.”

Khalil Ladler, a rising redshirt freshman, came out of spring ball behind Floyd at rover. Ladler spent much of his time on the scout team working at cornerback this past fall, but the staff felt his skillset fit in better at rover.

The nickel defensive back position was in a state of change this spring, as Reynolds missed spring practice with an injury. Tech’s staff had moved another nickel back, Anthony Shegog, to backer, and then Shegog got hurt,

missing part of spring practice and leaving the staff unable to work him at both spots as much as they wanted.

As a result, Deon Newsome, a rising fifth-year senior, received plenty of reps at the spot, and he played fairly well. Newsome, like Deablo, spent the early part of his career at receiver, but the staff decided to move him into a defensive back role last year. He played in 12 games in 2016, with most of that playing time coming on special teams.

Scott saw marked improvement from Newsome and views him as someone with the ability to help the Hokies in multiple ways this fall.

“He really did a good job,” Scott said. “He’s

physical, he can run and he can cover. He’s learned the defense, so I think he can help.

“I think he sees that as his chance, and he wants to make the most of the opportunity. He just needs to do what he’s supposed to do and make the plays he’s supposed to make—and if you do that, you’ll find that you’ll also make a lot of plays that you weren’t supposed to make.”

All these positions bear watching once practice resumes in August. This group of players performed much better in scrimmages as spring practice rolled along. If the players continue to improve, and the injured players return to full health, then these positions of uncertainty quickly could become ones of strength when the season kicks off. **VT**

spring
VT 2017 (in numerical order)

Safeties, Rovers and Nickel Backs

FREE SAFETIES

17 Divine Deablo (6-3, 208, So.)

22 Terrell Edmunds (6-2, 210, r-Jr.)

41 John Jennings (5-11, 177, So.)

ROVERS

9 Khalil Ladler (5-11, 183, r-Fr.)

21 Reggie Floyd (6-0, 205, So.)

29 Ishmiel Seisay (5-9, 197, r-So.)

NICKEL

20 Deon Newsome (5-11, 193, r-Sr.)



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Depth *EMERGES* for Hokies at both linebacker spots

by Jimmy Robertson

Defensive coordinator Bud Foster also doubles as the position coach for the mike linebackers and the backers, and fortunately for him, his two projected starters at these positions rank among the finest in the ACC. So he spent his spring giving loads of practice reps to backups in an effort to build depth.

He did give Andrew Motuapuaka and Tremaine Edmunds enough work to stay sharp, though. The two of them led the Hokies in tackles last season, and Foster expects just as much production and even more leadership from the duo this fall.

“They both had good springs,” Foster said. “I felt they improved and worked on things that they needed to work on. They’ve been good leaders for us. I’m expecting them to do big things for us this year.”

To alleviate depth issues, especially knowing that Sean Huelskamp would be out for the spring with an injury, Foster made a couple of moves before spring practice. He shifted versatile Anthony Shegog from the whip/nickel spot to backer behind Edmunds and slid Tavante Beckett from backer to mike linebacker behind Motuapuaka.

Beckett seemed like a natural at the spot this spring. In Tech’s controlled scrimmages, he made plays all over the field. He makes the occasional mistake, mostly because he pursues the ball so fiercely. But Foster likes that he plays with such a motor, which certainly beats the alternative from a coaching perspective.

“He’s a really good football player,” Foster said. “He’s very instinctive. He just has a nose for the football. He’s very physical, and he plays with a high motor. He’s active. I’ve been pleased.

“We played him in a new spot. The mike is a little bit different than the backer spot even though there is some carryover. There are added responsibilities at mike compared to the backer spot, particularly from a coverage standpoint. We need for that guy to take charge. He sets the tone for the defense. Tavante’s learning, but he loves football, and he’s worked very hard. I think he’s going to play a lot of football when it’s all said and done. I like his future.”

Motuapuaka, Beckett and Huelskamp give Foster a nice trio at the position. He has a steady, productive veteran in Motuapuaka, a young playmaker to mold for the future in Beckett, and a versatile, experienced backup in Huelskamp.

At the other spot, Shegog also adjusted nicely to his move, as getting closer to the line of scrimmage makes sense for a player of his ilk. He missed a handful of practices midway through spring practice because of a minor injury, but returned for the final couple of weeks.

Foster’s decision to move Shegog came about after Shegog’s performance in the bowl game against Arkansas. He easily could have been the MVP after recording six tackles, a sack, a forced fumble and an interception.

“I think getting Anthony closer to the ball gave us an opportunity to evaluate and find out if he’d be better a little closer to the line of scrimmage,” Foster said. “Last

year, he only played primarily in our 30 personnel, special teams and occasionally when an offense was in a two-back formation. He’s a good football player, and we thought it would help to develop him and train him.

“I feel good about where he’s come, and he’ll be able to take this summer and work at that spot — and do the same this fall. He can be a valuable guy at several spots. We can play him at that whip position, or he can give us added depth at that backer spot.”

Foster added that the move allowed the staff to work Deon Newsome more at the nickel defensive back spot and to get an evaluation of Newsome, who received the bulk of the reps this spring because of Mook Reynolds’ injury and Shegog’s move to backer.

Overall, Foster feels confident in his group of linebackers. That said, he wouldn’t rule out playing any of the incoming freshmen in whom he feels confident — Dylan Rivers, Jaylen Griffith, Rico Kearney

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and Rayshard Ashby. He played Beckett as a true freshman last year, though most of Beckett’s action came on special teams.

“Obviously moving Anthony to backer gives us some depth, and that’s the big thing,” Foster said. “Otherwise, you’re counting on a guy like Dylan Rivers or Jaylen Griffith to be a backup guy at backer. We like those guys, but that’s a difficult position to put a freshman. We could move Beckett back, but I think he’s more suited to be a mike linebacker for us. So hopefully with the moves we’ve made, we’re a little more settled at both positions.” 

spring VT 2017 (in numerical order) Linebackers

MIKE LINEBACKERS

- 14** Tavante Beckett (5-10, 214, So.)
- 53** Trent Young (5-10, 214, r-Jr.)
- 54** Andrew Motuapuaka (6-0, 233, r-Sr.)
- 56** Sean Huelskamp (6-1, 222, r-Sr.)

BACKERS

- 24** Anthony Shegog (6-2, 213, r-Sr.)
- 48** Daniel Griffith (6-0, 216, r-Fr.)
- 49** Tremaine Edmunds (6-5, 236, Jr.)

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Upperclassmen **LEAD THE WAY**
at cornerback this spring *by Jimmy Robertson*



This past fall, the Virginia Tech cornerbacks accounted for five of the team’s 18 interceptions, and the group wants to improve drastically on that number this season.

Hopefully, Brandon Facyson’s interception in the annual Maroon-Orange Spring Game is a sign of things to come.

Facyson anchors a veteran group that also features rising senior Greg Stroman and rising junior Adonis Alexander. Facyson, a fifth-year senior, started every game in 2016, while Stroman started nine games and Alexander five. The trio ranks as arguably the most experienced and talented bunch of corners collectively in the ACC.

Facyson stands as the most experienced, as the fifth-year senior has started 36 games in his career. He contemplated leaving school early and making himself available for the NFL Draft following this past season, but ultimately decided to return and improve as a player.

He made strides toward that objective this

spring, and it showed in the spring game. Officials flagged him for pass interference on three occasions, but Facyson kept playing and recorded the lone turnover in the game.

“He’s had a great spring, and I’m expecting a great summer,” defensive coordinator Bud Foster said. “He’s going to be one of our leaders. He kept playing one play at a time [after the penalties in the spring game], and that’s all you can ask.”

Foster also raved about Alexander’s spring, citing it as Alexander’s best. The young man possesses a lot of tools, and over the first couple of years of his career, he flashed them. The coaches, however, wanted to see more of that on a consistent basis.

They received more consistency from Alexander this spring. That leaves Foster expecting a big 2017 season from the Charlotte native. At 6-foot-3, Alexander gives Tech the height to be able to match up with the league’s bigger receivers.

“Outstanding,” Foster said of Alexander’s spring. “He’s probably playing his best

football right now. He’s long, and he’s athletic. Everyone can see that, but he really approached this spring with a workmanlike attitude. He was very coachable, and he worked hard to improve the technique and fundamentals that Coach [Brian] Mitchell [Tech’s cornerbacks coach] is trying to instill in those guys.

“We’re trying to be multiple at corner and not just play ‘bump’ corner all the time. We’re trying to change techniques and different things like that, and Adonis has worked hard at that, trying to improve those. He’s big, athletic, can run and is physical. He has all the tools.

“The receivers aren’t getting any shorter. There is a premium on long corners. You’d like to get those guys, and he fits the bill.”

The final member of the trio, Stroman, missed spring practice while recovering from an injury suffered in the fall. In fact, the injury cost him to miss three games, and while he returned for the final two games, he wasn’t 100 percent.

spring
VT 2017 (in numerical order)
Cornerbacks

- 2 Tyree Rodgers (6-1, 173, r-Fr.)
- 3 Greg Stroman (6-0, 180, Sr.)
- 26 Jovonn Quillen (6-0, 176, So.)
- 27 Shawn Payne (6-3, 192, r-Jr.)
- 31 Brandon Facyson (6-2, 197, Sr.)
- 36 Adonis Alexander (6-3, 193, Jr.)
- 39 Tyrone Thornton (5-9, 193, R-So.)
- 42 Elisha Boyd (6-2, 185, r-Jr.)

Stroman may actually rate as the Hokies’ best corner. In 2016, according to STATS, LLC., he only allowed a reception on 30 percent of the throws that came his way, and he recorded an interception or a pass breakup on 42 percent of throws at him, both of which led the ACC. He led Tech’s corners with three interceptions.

Granted, he missed three games, but the third-team All-ACC choice is not someone whom opponents need to test.

“Greg had a really good year,” Foster said. “He was having a great year before he got hurt. He was all-league. I’m expecting him to get fully healthy this summer and have a great fall.”

The Hokies’ staff worked a lot of younger players at the cornerback positions to build

depth for this season and to find starters for the future. The group included guys like Jovonn Quillen, Tyree Rodgers and Caleb Farley.

Quillen played as a true freshman this past fall, seeing action in 11 games—most of that coming on special teams. He worked mainly at free safety, though, before the staff decided to try him at cornerback.

“Jovonn’s working at it,” Foster said. “He’s got the abilities and the tools that you’re looking for. We played him at safety last year, and we moved him to corner this spring. He has the tools. He’s very raw, but very talented.”

In the same recruiting class as Quillen, Rodgers, in contrast, took a redshirt season in 2016. He and Quillen resemble each other in that both possess a lot of skills, but need more reps to refine their technique and learn the position.

“I like Tyree’s future and potential,” Foster said. “All those kids are hard-working kids. They’re all competitive. They all have good skillsets. I feel like we’ve helped ourselves at those spots.

“I like our depth, which we didn’t have any last year. I’m not saying those guys are ready yet, those younger guys, but they’re in much better position of understanding the expectations and how important those positions are in our defense. There is a premium on corners, as far as what we

ask them to do, and now they have that understanding of what we want.”

Farley is the question mark of the group only in the sense that his future may be on offense. The staff worked him at corner for a little more than half of spring practice before moving him to receiver for the final handful of practices.

Farley made a couple of nice catches and a nice run in the Maroon-Orange Spring Game, leaving many to speculate that his position had been decided. Head coach Justin Fuente admitted to leaning one way, but wanted to discuss things with Farley first before revealing his decision.

Foster wants him at cornerback, obviously, but understands the situation.

“I was doing cartwheels and somersaults on the inside when he came on our side of the ball,” Foster said. “I was watching him grow and develop. I’m sure the offensive guys [coaches] are doing the same thing right now. He’s just a young guy who has a lot of abilities, a tremendous skillset and loves the game of football. Whichever side of the ball he plays on, he’s going to compete and work to be the best.”

Overall, the Hokies appear in good shape at cornerback, with a nice blend of experience, talent and youth. Hopefully, a young player or two emerges to give the group quality depth in the event of multiple injuries at these two spots. VT

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OWENS FINDS A HOME in Blacksburg

Virginia Tech second baseman and leadoff hitter Jack Owens started his career at East Carolina, but a coaching change there resulted in him coming to Blacksburg, where he is enjoying success

*by Nathan Loprete
Special to Inside Hokie Sports*

People who love the game of baseball come to learn it in different ways. Some are born into a baseball family, and some just learn to love it individually. Jack Owens' love for the sport came at an early age through the swift encouragement of his older brother. Starting from when Virginia Tech's leadoff hitter could first pick up a baseball bat, that love continued to grow.

"I honestly think my brother had the biggest role in that," Owens said. "He's 10 times more passionate about the game than anybody I've ever met. Dad bought a batting cage [and put it] in the backyard, and we lived out there. Sometimes when I didn't want to go outside and hit in the cages, he [his brother] would pick me up and throw me out the door. Hats off to him for that, and he's had success in his career, too, so it's awesome."

Owens' brother, Ryan, who was a standout at Mount St. Mary's and now plays independent ball in Canada, kept his brother by his side during his playing days.

"Jack has always had more talent than I had," Ryan said. "I was always there pushing him. Every time I knew I needed to go put in work, I would kind of force him to go with me. I think he appreciates it more now. I've always been passionate about the game, and I think that rubbed off on him."

The sibling rivalry played out over the course of their childhood. That rivalry fueled both brothers on all playing surfaces, and not just on the baseball field.

"We're different types of players," Ryan said. "He's an infielder, and I'm an outfielder, but when we were younger, it [the rivalry] was big time. I

would never let him win at anything. We would be playing Ping-Pong, and if he would beat me, I would not be happy."

Jack, a two-sport athlete growing up, finally decided to specialize in baseball when he headed into high school. "I played basketball up until about eighth grade. In ninth grade, I decided I really wanted to focus on baseball," he said.

Owens grew up in Burke, Virginia, which sits just south of the nation's Capitol. There, he attended Lake Braddock High School, and under head coach Jody Rutherford, his career began to take off. He was a four-year member of the varsity team.

"He's always been an athletic player," Rutherford said. "He's got good speed and good quickness. He's a smart ball player. I think I coached him for five or six years. He has the tools to play at the next level."

As a freshman on the varsity team, Owens hit .300 and helped the Bruins to the state tournament while playing in the outfield. He took over the shortstop position the next season, hitting .369 as a sophomore, as the team won the program's first state title.

The next year, Owens earned second-team all-region honors, while batting .468. He even hit .375 during a senior season in which he battled injuries.

"I still say to this day that Coach Rutherford could be a Division I baseball coach," Owens said. "He was very thorough in his coaching, and he taught me all of the skills that I use today. He was a very good high school coach."

Owens decided to attend East Carolina University once he graduated from Lake Braddock. The decision came after he got to know Billy Godwin, the coach at ECU at the time.

"I visited UNC and UCF and some other schools, but Billy Godwin recruited me at ECU, and I fell in love with the program and the coach," Owens said. "Out of high school, I had the mindset that I didn't want to play college baseball in-state. I wanted to expand my horizons."

Things changed in the summer before Owens was to start college when East Carolina decided to let Godwin go. The coach who had recruited Owens departed before Owens even got there.

Owens didn't play much his freshman year and felt something missing. Thus came the decision to transfer and to a school a little closer to home. Virginia Tech came calling again after trying to recruit him out of high school, and Owens refused to pass up the opportunity this time.

"Obviously, it didn't work out the way I wanted it to [at ECU], but I still love the program and my brothers there," Owens said. "I hope to see them succeed. It just didn't feel like home like this place does. After the whole thing at ECU, I understand what it's like to be closer to home and in your own state."

Virginia Tech hitting coach Ryan Connolly helped bring Owens to Blacksburg.

"When Coach Connolly called me, and once I got my release, I knew it was the right fit academically," Owens said. "My mother went here, and everything clicked."

Owens sat out a year, as required by NCAA rules governing transfers. That didn't sit too well for a player used to being in the middle of the action, and it hurt even more that Virginia Tech struggled in 2016. For Owens, the season was pure torture.

Continued on page 36

"The toughest part was having to watch baseball games from the sideline," Owens said. "Having to watch the team struggle in games and not being able to affect that in any way ... that was the hardest thing I've had to do in my college baseball career. Playing is the easy part. That's why we work so hard—so you can go out there and perform."

Entering May, Tech's second baseman was hitting a team-high .349 and led the Hokies in runs (44) and hits (67). He also had a team-high 18 multi-hit games. He had started all 43 games for the Hokies. For Owens, the key to his success goes back to having consistency at the plate in each at-bat.

"I think the biggest thing is staying confident," he said. "Some of my teammates will say, 'Stay hot, Jack,' but in my head during a game, I'm not in my head telling myself that. I'm going up there with the same approach every at-bat and hoping to hit the ball hard. If you do that, the average will follow. I haven't looked at my average one time this year. I've just been told."

In a game April 2 against Boston College, the Hokies rallied in the ninth to tie the game before Owens drove in the winning run in the 10th inning. That completed the sweep for Virginia Tech. For a player who sat out the previous year, the series reminded him that this was a different team.

"It's a whole different team than last year. We're competing to win more so than last year, and we're finding ways to do it," he said.

Owens also brings a spark to a Virginia Tech offense that lost Saige Jenco to the Major League Baseball First-Year Player Draft last year. The Hokies came into 2017 with chips on their shoulders, and it started at the top of their lineup.

"When he was at East Carolina, it was a tough situation," Ryan Owens said. "To get to Tech and play with the chip on his shoulder that he has—and to be doing what he's doing—is awesome. He's

grown not only as a player, but also as a person and in learning how to deal with adversity."

"I try to be relentless with energy and try to bring a passion to the field," Jack said. "Sometimes it's getting on yourself or getting on your teammates, and it could be viewed as negative, but in the end, it's positive. We're all out here trying to accomplish the same thing and earn a trip to Omaha. It's not going to get there by just going through the motions. You have to bring some emotions and some passion to the game."

Owens, who is only 5-foot-10, has overcome a lot to get to Virginia Tech and not only compete, but succeed. Young players rarely enjoy success in their first seasons of playing in arguably the best conference in college baseball, but Owens accepts the challenge of facing top-tier talent every week.

"You have to believe in your ability and your work ethic," Owens said. "When you're up there in the box looking at the pitcher, know that you put in more hours of work than him. You trust your talent and your hard work more than him. A lot of times, the baseball gods will pay off the guys who work harder and work hard when nobody's looking. It's awesome knowing that I'm not the biggest guy, strongest guy, or fastest guy, but I can still perform high at the ACC level because of all the work we put in as a team. It's good to see success."

Now a redshirt sophomore, Owens is pursuing a degree in sociology. He also takes life one day, or one at-bat, at a time and tries not look too far ahead.

"I really have no plans right now," he said. "I'm trying to let everything come to me. As of now, I'm just looking forward to the next day and trying to bring energy to the ball club."

Owens' path to Virginia Tech wasn't obvious, but he found his way by using the help of the people around him—a brother who saw talent in him and pushed him to succeed got it started and also a high school coach who helped mold him into the player he is now. Adversity early in his college career gave him the chip on his shoulder, and Virginia Tech gave him a place to finally call home. **VT**

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Jul 31	Harrah's Casino / Cherokee, NC	40	Sep 14-16	"Jonah" / Lancaster, PA	495
Aug 2-5	Ark Encounter / Kentucky	575	Sep 14-17	Myrtle Beach, SC	495
Aug 2-5	Amish Acres Festival / Napanee, IN	525	Sep 15-17	Washington, D.C. / Our Nation's Capital	395
Aug 3-5	"Jonah" / Lancaster, PA	495	Sep 16-17	Baseball / Atlanta Braves	260
Aug 7-26	San Francisco, CA & Pacific Northwest	2,695	Sep 18	Harrah's Casino / Cherokee, NC	40
Aug 12	"Song of the Mountains" / Marion, VA	60	Sep 18-23	Agawa Canyon / Sault Ste Marie	975
Aug 12-13	Tangier Island / Monticello	275	Sep 18-29	Nova Scotia & New England in the Fall	1,850
Aug 13-19	Niagara Falls / Montreal & Quebec	1,150	Sep 21-25	Long Island, NY / Hamptons	795
Aug 13-17	Elvis / Tupelo & Memphis	695	Sep 22-23	Tygart Flyer / American Mtn. Theatre	325
Aug 14-25	The Great Lakes	1,950	Sep 23-29	New England in the Fall	1,125
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Coaches love versatility in an athlete.

Quite simply, it's an addiction they seek to satisfy during their travels while searching for young men and women to bring into their respective sport programs.

Scot Thomas is no different. Tech's softball head coach seeks young women with the ability to play multiple positions, and Aysha Richardson, the Hokies' most versatile and talented player, fits perfectly into his philosophy.

Unfortunately, that versatility directly resulted in the worst possible outcome for both her and Tech — a season-ending injury.

An outfielder and pitcher, Richardson went to the circle to pitch batting practice one evening before the Tech-Louisville series in mid-April. Throwing to the final batter of practice, she took a line drive off her left eye. The blow broke her orbit bone in two places, and the subsequent concussion shelved the Hokies' leader for the remainder of the 2017 season.

"It's really sad. It's a bummer because I had been doing well," she said, admitting that she still suffered from headaches and blurred vision. "Forget pitching or anything else, I was doing well hitting, and that's what I love to do. Having to watch and put that pressure on our freshman is unfortunate.

"It's not the way I thought my career would end. That's for sure."

Richardson wasn't the only Hokie to suffer an injury in what became the story of the 2017 season for the softball program. Injuries ended the seasons of top pitcher Mikaela Aiken and shortstop Caitlyn Nolan, and forced Chelsea Whitcomb, a utility player/pitcher, to miss significant time. An injury also relegated standout outfielder Breanna Davenport to hitting duties only.

But Richardson's injury essentially snuffed the candle on Tech's season with 15 games remaining, as it took away the Hokies' leader in batting average (.373), hits (41) and stolen bases (12). Not to mention, it seized 50-plus innings in the circle on an already depth-shy staff and a pitcher who threw a no-hitter earlier this season against Seton Hall.

"Aysha's story, though, is more than just this year," Thomas said.

Indeed, as Richardson's lifelong path to this year's success has been a bizarre one, and in fact, almost unheard of in college athletics today. She only became interested in softball after tossing the ball with her grandmother in the backyard of her grandmother's home in Louisa County — a cutoff throw from Charlottesville — and she later went on to become an all-state performer in neighboring Orange County, which boasted a better program.

Yet she never gave a thought to her future.

"I wasn't planning on going to college at all," Richardson admitted. "Then my travel ball coach was like, 'Oh, Virginia Tech is here at this tournament. You should really talk to them. It's a really good school.' I'm like, 'Sure, whatever.'"

"They [Tech's coaches] came, and he [Thomas] liked me. I came on a visit, and when I came on the visit, I loved Tech. My dad was a UVA fan, so he hated the fact that he had to come here, but I loved it. Then I went on a couple of other visits, but nothing compared to Tech."

Thomas' offer served as a lifeline of sorts. It offered her an opportunity, both from a softball perspective and to put together a future once her time in the sport ended.

"I don't know what I would have done," Richardson said. "Probably community college and figure it out from there."

Richardson jumped into the mix rather quickly when she arrived in the fall of 2013. She earned a lot of playing time during the Hokies' fall season, and she even started seven games during the regular season the following spring. She played in 31 games overall, hitting .286 and stealing 15 bases — respectable numbers for a freshman.

Those numbers came despite some injuries. A balky hamstring prevented her from going all out, and then she missed most of that April with a gall bladder issue.

Frustrated with the injuries and feeling that she should have played more, she informed Thomas at an end-of-the-season meeting of her plan to transfer.

“
I'm very proud of her. A lot of people don't know her story. They just think she showed back up. It's a pretty special story because she accepted the fact that there were some failures there and wanted to work hard and be the best she could — and she's done it.

Tech softball coach
Scot Thomas
on Aysha Richardson

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He agreed to release her to talk to other schools except for those in the ACC and future Tech opponents — standard operating procedure in most transfer situations.

"Honestly, she was just hard to coach," Thomas said. "She didn't accept coaching at that point."

"I think that I was very selfish as a freshman, and I felt like I was just as good as everyone else," Richardson admitted. "I didn't really understand the process."

Richardson wound up transferring to Tusculum College, a Division II school in Greeneville, Tennessee. Yet her stay in the Volunteer State lasted all of four months.

"I knew that school was not for me," she admitted.

She returned back to Louisa County at the end of the fall semester and started taking classes at Piedmont Virginia Community College in Charlottesville that spring. No longer on scholarship, she landed several jobs, which provided the income needed to make tuition, rent and car payments. Softball, at the time, was in her rearview mirror.

She worked as a personal care assistant for an in-home care company and set up displays for American Greetings, a greeting card company. On the weekends, she added a job working at a local winery. All of these helped her make ends meet.

"At that time, I really didn't know what I was going to do," she said. "I started going to community college and taking courses, and it was like, 'OK, I'll take classes here, and I'll eventually transfer to UVA or something like that after I get done.'"

That lifestyle lasted throughout the spring and most of the summer. For the first time in what seemed like forever, she did not set foot on a softball field.

Working three jobs and taking classes afforded her little time to reminisce about the game, but during those pockets of free time, she longed for it. She also realized that she found herself falling into a pattern that so many in her county fall into —

Continued on page 40

Aysha Richardson started her softball career at Virginia Tech, transferred to a Division II school and later missed a year while attending a community college before finally finding her way back to Blacksburg • by Jimmy Robertson

Continued from page 39

working low-paying jobs and trying to get by in the real world.

“I just loved to work, and I loved the money,” she said.

“Since I wasn’t here, that was my way of feeling successful.

I felt like I was doing something, but at the same time, that’s what everyone in my hometown was doing, and I didn’t want to be like that.

“I didn’t want to be stuck just working. I was working so much that I would drop a class. I just knew that wasn’t the cycle I wanted because I don’t think I would have finished.”

During this time, one of her old teammates, Vanessa Gonzalez, started nagging her to come back to Virginia Tech and return to the softball program. The lanky Californian and Richardson were close friends, and Gonzalez wanted her buddy to come back to Blacksburg.

Gonzalez convince Richardson to send Thomas an email and inquire about the possibility of a return. She even told Richardson what to say in the email.

Eventually, Richardson worked up the courage to send it. Thomas and Richardson met a week later, and he agreed to let her back into the Tech softball program. He wanted her to attend an offseason workout two days after their meeting.

“We talked about it, and I just thought everyone deserves a second chance, especially if they’re serious about it—and I could tell by her demeanor that she was very serious about wanting to come back and be a different person,” Thomas said. “She wanted to be a different player and a different teammate. I thought it was worthy. There were no guarantees, but we had a handshake deal.”

Before meeting Thomas, Richardson enrolled in four online courses just before the university’s deadline, and afterward, she hustled back to

Central Virginia for what turned out to be a whirlwind 48 hours. She hadn’t even told her parents about her request to return to the Tech program.

“They had no idea,” she said. “I wasn’t living with them—and I didn’t think he’d say yes.”

Richardson told her mom, Yvette, and then she called her dad, Scott. She contemplated turning down Thomas’ offer because she needed to work to make her car payments. Plus, there was time left on her lease. But Scott Richardson set his daughter straight on the matter.

“You’ll never get this opportunity again,” he told her. “Go. I will handle what I have to handle.”

Once she received his blessings, she made her decision.

“I always wanted to come back to Tech because I loved the school,” she said. “I’ve always loved the school. I took advantage of it my freshman year, but I knew that if I came back, I would not feel right if I didn’t play softball because that’s what I came here for. To come and not play, that would have been weird.

“I knew I had to get back on the softball team. If I couldn’t get back on the softball team, I wasn’t coming back. I don’t feel like I would have enjoyed it as much.”

Richardson sat out last season while meeting NCAA transfer requirements, though she practiced with the team. So after missing a season and then sitting out last season, she saw her first game action in nearly three years when she took the field in the Hokies’ 2017 season opener against Indiana State on Feb. 10.

Her return was a successful one, too, as she recorded two hits, scored a run and earned a save while pitching in relief. That game served as an appetizer of the season to come—at least until the injury.

Richardson was one of just two Tech players this season—Gonzalez being the other—to earn an ACC Player of the Week honor. That award

“

I always wanted to come back to Tech because I loved the school. I’ve always loved the school. I took advantage of it my freshman year, but I knew that if I came back, I would not feel right if I didn’t play softball because that’s what I came here for. To come and not play, that would have been weird.

Richardson on returning to Tech

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came following her series against Georgia Tech when she hit .667 and led the Hokies to two wins.

“I had a whole different mindset coming into this year, knowing that this year could be the last one that I play softball,” she said. “I really felt like I had something to prove ... I knew that I had it in me.”

“I’m very proud of her,” Thomas said. “A lot of people don’t know her story. They just think she showed back up. It’s a pretty special story because she accepted the fact that there were some failures there and wanted to work hard and be the best she could—and she’s done it.”

Richardson’s path to stardom certainly has been non-traditional. Yet this season more than validated her decision to return to Tech.


Her on-field exploits spoke for themselves. However, with another year of eligibility remaining, she has decided to graduate this summer with a degree in human development and a minor in sociology and then

pursue a career in the medical field. She plans on working this summer as a nursing assistant and later may seek a master’s degree in health care management.

“I have this thing about getting my master’s because no one in my family has gone to college, so I think it would be cool to get a master’s,” she said. “But I also think I’d like to get my RN [license as a registered nurse]. I love the hands-on part.”

Those are details to be worked out. While in high school, Richardson lacked a game plan for her future, but Virginia Tech has provided her with a sense of purpose and clarity—in spite of her winding road.

“I’m at peace,” she said. “I’m fortunate to have gotten another chance.”

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Most sports fans view distance runners as a collective strange breed because, after all, who truthfully enjoys running 100 miles a week? Really, it takes a unique mindset to find happiness in such a knee-torturing, blister-inducing sport.

Yet that mindset extends beyond the sport. Even at Virginia Tech, former great Tommy Curtin's idiosyncrasies included raising rats and drinking exotic teas, and the current crew has been known to do crazy things, such as chatting about the silliest of topics during those incessant long runs and dying their hair an alluring array of colors.

So imagine the surprise when Drew Piazza, one of those current runners, walked in for this interview with only the last few wisps of dyed blond remaining in his hair from an impulsive moment during the indoor season. He looked rather normal ... for a distance runner.

"I'm thinking about going platinum," he said, laughing. "Maybe silver. I'm trying to talk the guys into it."

Truthfully, he ought to try a golden hue. Such a metallic choice fits the description of his transition to Virginia Tech—and subsequently serves as the color of the medal he hopes to win at the upcoming NCAA Championships.

Piazza, a transfer from the University of New Hampshire, nearly won Virginia Tech's first national championship in distance running, claiming a silver medal in the 800-meter run at the NCAA Division I Indoor Track and Field Championships held in College Station, Texas in early March. He led the race with 50 meters to go before UTEP's

Emmanuel Korir slipped past him at the finish line, besting Piazza by just 14-hundredths of a second.

In other words, Piazza lost in the amount of time that it takes him to turn a page in one of his civil engineering textbooks.

"When I was in first, I'm thinking to myself, 'Holy crap, this could actually happen,'" Piazza said. "Then the kid out-leaned me at the line.

"Most people would be sad, but I started hysterically laughing. I couldn't believe I had gotten second and almost won at nationals. This is unbelievable ... I wasn't necessarily surprised. It was more like, 'Wow, this is happening. I'm actually in this. This is really cool to be a part of.' I was happy with it, but I really wanted that win."

Happy describes the reaction of distance coach Ben Thomas and Dave Cianelli, Tech's overseer of the track and field and cross country programs, when discussing Piazza, who wasn't exactly someone whom they intensely pursued. Thomas knew vaguely of Piazza just from having competed against UNH at different meets, but gradually got to know him better when Piazza reached out early last summer, as he sought to leave UNH and search for a better track and field situation.

In actuality, Piazza knew little about Virginia Tech, at least originally. His research centered on "name" track and field programs, like Penn State, Oregon and Georgetown. But his fact-finding expedition led to a new discovery.



“
This time, I think it's anyone's game. There is definitely a possibility of one of us getting a national title. It's time.

Drew Piazza on the possibility of him or one of his teammates winning Tech's first national title in distance running.

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"I did some research on track results, and Virginia Tech names kept popping up over and over," Piazza said. "I'm like, 'I've never heard of these guys.'"

Piazza received his release from UNH, as per NCAA directives, and then emailed coaches at Penn State, Oklahoma State, Virginia and the Hokies. Thomas, at the NCAA Outdoor Track and Field Championships at the time, responded by telling Piazza to expect contact from assistant Eric Johannigmeier.

The two hit it off, primarily because Piazza wanted to continue his pursuit of a civil engineering degree, and Johannigmeier holds a bachelor's and a master's degree in the subject. That, combined with the Hokies' success in track and field, resulted in Piazza moving to Blacksburg.

"It just seemed like the perfect match—and it is," he said.

The decision and the move marked the latest in an interesting career path. Piazza, who grew up in New Hampshire before moving with his mom to Danvers, Massachusetts to be closer to her job in Boston, played soccer as a kid and really wanted to pursue that at the Division I level. He viewed track simply as conditioning to prep himself for the soccer season.

Unfortunately, he received little Division I interest, but a couple of schools pitched to him the idea of walking on to their respective track teams. He decided to go that route with the intent of walking on to a

soccer team as well. UNH offered him the best opportunity of track, soccer and engineering, so he decided to enroll there.

"I came on hoping to try out for the soccer team, and it just never happened," he said. "I don't really know exactly why. In the back of my head, I kind of wanted to run track because I knew I could improve. In high school, I didn't take it as seriously as I did soccer.

"As soon as I didn't try out for soccer [in college], I knew I was going to make it my goal to run fast in track."

He went on to win five America East Conference championships, and he finished ninth in the 800 last year at the NCAA Indoor Track and Field Championships. Yet he aspired for more, which prompted him to come 11 hours south to Blacksburg and join a nationally ranked men's program that won the ACC's outdoor title last year and the league's indoor crown in February.

Normally, it takes time for transfers to acclimate themselves to their surroundings, but this Northeastern young man quickly became a Southerner at heart. His extroverted, fun-loving nature meshed perfectly with Tech's current team, which includes a bunch of dudes who like to have a good time.

"They definitely push each other, but they also tend to get along really well," Thomas said. "When I first started talking to Drew, I instantly

Continued on page 44



Continued from page 43

liked him. I thought he'd fit in. I felt like I was speaking to one of my guys the first time that I talked to him, just in terms of what was important to him and the things that were important to us." "I'm a little bit of a weird guy," Piazza said. "I kind of do random stuff sometimes. I probably have fun with it too much. Then I realized that this team is just like that, too."

"I got here the first few days, and on a long run, they're talking and laughing and doing all these stupid things. I'm like, 'This is literally perfect for me.'"

He adjusted quickly on the track, too. During the indoor season, he set the school record in the 600-meter run, and here in the outdoor season, he holds the school mark in the 800, running the event at the Virginia Challenge in a time of 1:46.02 and besting teammate Patrick Joseph's previous mark. He also was a part of the 4x800-meter relay team that recently broke the school record at the Penn Relays.

Piazza's time in the 800 ranks as the best in the ACC so far this spring, with Joseph's top time of 1:46.47 ranking second. Each may stand as the other's top competitor in the run for gold medals.

"Patrick Joseph is one of the most competitive people I know," Piazza said. "Running with him and against him makes both of us better. The reason we ran so

fast during indoors is because we both had each other. Not just me and Patty, but Vince [Ciattei], Neil [Gourley], Wak [Daniel Jaskowak] ... all of them. To have those guys day in and day out ... makes you more competitive and makes you want to do more. We won the ACCs indoor, and it wasn't because one of us ran a great race. It was because all of us did this together."

These days, Piazza and the group keep working toward the pinnacle—a national championship. No Tech distance runner, male or female, has won an individual national title, and the group hopes that one of them ends that trend, whether it be Piazza, Joseph, Gourley, or Hanna Green on the women's side.

All four of those runners earned All-America honors during the indoor season. So, too, did Jaskowak and Ciattei as part of the distance medley relay team that won a silver medal.

In other words, this outdoor season may represent the distance program's best chance to bring home a gold medal.

"I think it definitely is," Piazza said. "If everything goes right and the training goes exactly as to how I think it's going to go. I think I, or Patty, can definitely win a national title. I think Neil and Vince have a shot in the 1,500."

"There isn't that one kid who is faster than everyone else who can win it. This time, I think it's anyone's game. There is definitely a possibility of one of us getting a national title. It's time."


Piazza may be the best possibility of the group before he runs off to his future, which includes another year of classes at Tech to finish up his civil engineering requirements. Civil engineering serves as a secondary plan for him, though. He desperately wants to run professionally and make a U.S. national team.

But his focus remains first and foremost on the task at hand. As his college career winds down, he simply wants to win, regardless of the name of the meet, though especially the final one—the NCAA Championships.

"Drew happens to be running during a time when some of the fastest guys ever in the NCAA are running," Thomas said. "That's what he's up against, but he likes the challenge."

"He's confident, but he's put in the work to be confident. The confidence comes from being able to stay consistent to bring it every day. He's not losing to anybody. If he loses, it will be because somebody beat him and not because of something he did or didn't do."

"That feeling after a great race is the best feeling you will ever get, I'm telling you," Piazza said. "You hurt yourself so much for that one moment, but that one moment is so worth it. When you cross the finish line and realize what you've done, you're on top of the world for that little bit of moment ... I love that about the sport."

Hopefully, Piazza gets to experience that feeling. If he does, he'll become a hero to Hokie Nation forever—regardless of his hair color of choice. 

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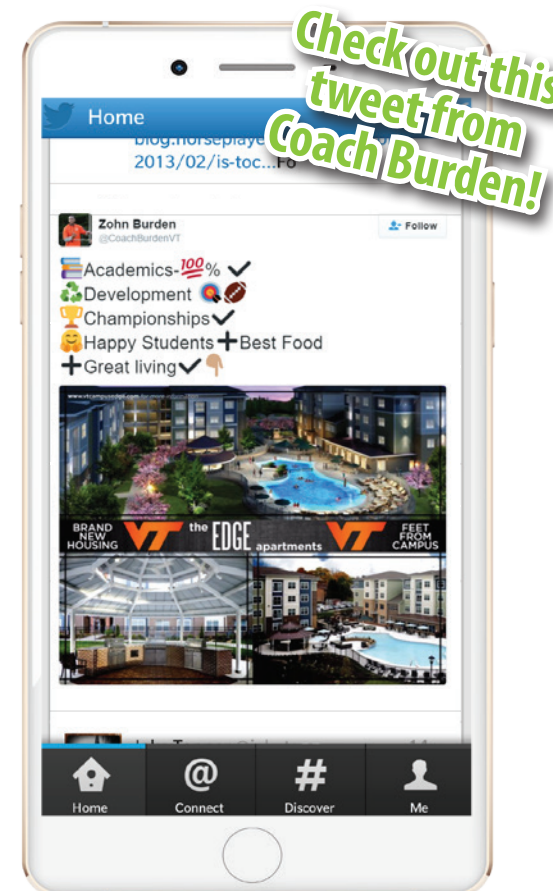
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