

inside

Vol. 10 No. 5, May 2018

# HOKIESPORTS

The Official Publication of

Virginia Tech Athletics

## YOUTH SERVED AT spring game

Young players like Phil Patterson and others made numerous big plays for the Hokies all spring, creating excitement for this fall



### WHAT'S INSIDE

Tremaine and Terrell Edmunds make history, becoming first pair of brothers to go in first round of an NFL Draft









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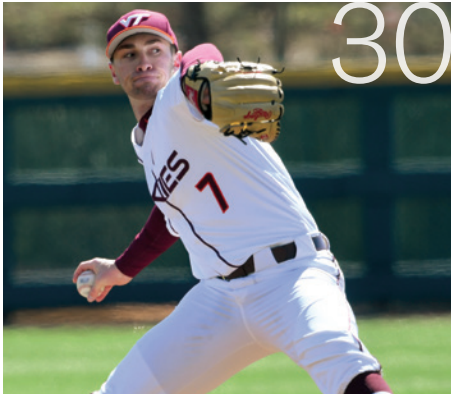
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# ENGLISH FIELD AT UNION PARK SHINES IN GRAND OPENING

The Virginia Tech baseball program held its grand opening for English Field at Union Park on a perfect April 14 evening, and more than 3,400 fans were in attendance — a regular-season attendance record for the facility. The Virginia Tech Athletics Department held a ribbon-cutting ceremony before the game, and the event allowed the Virginia Tech Athletics Department and Director of Athletics Whit Babcock to recognize several Union Bank & Trust executives, including CEO John Asbury and former CEO and current Board of Directors member Billy Beale, all of whom played an instrumental role in the company's commitment of \$3.5 million toward the \$18 million renovation of the facility. The project moved the main seating area closer to home plate, created luxury suites and an outdoor club area and built a new press box and game operations space. Also, a new video scoreboard was installed, and a new clubhouse for the Tech baseball team was built on the ground floor of the James C. Weaver Baseball Center. The Hokies' baseball home now ranks as one of the best in the ACC.

# THE STUDENT-ATHLETE EXPERIENCE

"I'm thankful for what a scholarship from Virginia Tech means, and getting an education from Virginia Tech will be a game changer for me."

**JD Mundy**  
Sophomore, Roanoke, Virginia

"Without the help and support of Hokie Nation and its generous donors, I simply wouldn't be here. I'm a Glasgow, Scotland native, and opportunities like this just wouldn't have come along if it hadn't been for the generosity of the people that support the program. I'm forever in debt to the people that donated."

**Neil Gourley**  
Redshirt Senior, Glasgow, Scotland



# The Donor File

Jason T. Fisher

**HOKIE CLUB LEVEL:**  
Golden

**CURRENTLY RESIDES:**  
Arlington, Virginia

**GRADUATION YEAR:**  
2007

**FAMILY:**  
Father (Thomas Fisher/  
deceased), Class of 1967;  
Mother (Becky Fisher)

**OCCUPATION:**  
Restaurateur (Don Tito,  
Don Taco, Barley Mac,  
Living Room, The G.O.A.T.)



**Q: Do you have any tailgating traditions? If so, tell us your best.**  
**A:** Always the same group for the past 22 years (I was 10 at the time, so the type has changed, but they're family to me). Also, I know the exact time to leave lot 1 or 2 to make it in just in time for "Sandman." (I'll never share, though.)

**Q: What motivates you to give back to Virginia Tech Athletics?**  
**A:** I'm a philanthropic person by nature. When you get down to brass tacks, yes, the Hokie Club provides a lot of entertainment for us fans, but also provides millions in scholarships for student-athletes who may not otherwise be able to afford them.

**Q: I'm a Hokie Club member because ...**  
**A:** It's important to the success of Virginia Tech Athletics, and that, in turn, is important to me.

**Q: My favorite Virginia Tech sports are ...**  
**A:** Football, basketball and wrestling.

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

**Q: My all-time favorite Virginia Tech student-athlete from another sport is ...**  
**A:** Lindsay Biggs, former Virginia Tech basketball sharpshooter!

## Q&A

**Q: A Hokie is ...**  
**A:** Whether you're born into the Hokie family, married into it, are a current student or graduate, or have even been to a game and immediately fallen in love with all that comes with being a "Hokie" and associated with Virginia Tech ... you know pretty quickly what I'm talking about.

**Q: The Hokie Nation is real because ...**  
**A:** All of my non-Virginia Tech friends refer to alumni and fans as "cultish." I take that as an extreme compliment. I've been wearing a Virginia Tech hat or shirt in Brazil, Serbia or Colombia and had "Go Hokies" yelled at me. That is NOT a bond all schools have.

**Q: What is your best memory of Virginia Tech Athletics?**  
**A:** A tie between going to the national championship game in 1999 with my dad, and Tyrod's last-second touchdown pass against Nebraska for the win.

**Q: How did you get involved with the Hokie Club?**  
**A:** My parents had been platinum Hokies consecutively since 1992. After college, I couldn't make it back as much. Plus, not wanting my mom to carry that burden, we sadly stopped our Hokie Club membership. Virginia Tech has always meant so much to me, so now that I'm fortunately in a position to help out financially to something I'm so passionate about, I jumped at the opportunity. Also, the marketing work and the Drive for 25 has done an amazing job of re-engaging young, professional alumni.

**Q: What caused you to become a fan of Virginia Tech?**  
**A:** Going to my first game with my dad in 1990. It was cold, rainy, and I still fell in love immediately and haven't missed a game since.

**Q: Do you have any game-day superstitions? If so, what are they?**  
**A:** Other than six hours of anxiety leading off to every kickoff ... none that I can think of.

**Q: Describe your perfect day at Virginia Tech.**  
**A:** A late September home game, when the trees are orange and maroon, a day walking around campus and tailgating with old friends from school, a 3:30 p.m. kickoff, followed by a stress-free Hokie win.

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MARISSA DAVEY | SENIOR | CHEMICAL ENGINEERING

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## NEWS&NOTES by Jimmy Robertson

### Edmunds brothers make history at NFL Draft

Tremaine and Terrell Edmunds made history at the 2018 NFL Draft held April 26-28 when both former Virginia Tech players were selected in the first round of the draft, which took place at AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas.

The duo, who hail from Danville, Virginia, became the first pair of brothers to be selected in the first round of an NFL Draft. They also join their older brother, Trey, in the NFL — Trey Edmunds plays for the New Orleans Saints.

“Honestly, it’s a blessing,” Terrell Edmunds said. “[Thursday night], when we got back to the hotel and all the family was there eating, we were like, ‘This really just happened.’ It was a blessing for me, a blessing for my family, a blessing for my community and a blessing for my school. It was an amazing moment. We’re all excited, and now it’s time to get back to work and start everything over. Now we’re here, and now we’ve got to make a statement for ourselves.”

The Edmunds brothers, along with the three other former Tech players drafted, also continued a streak for the Tech football program — at least one player has been drafted every year since 1993.

Widely projected to be a first-round pick, Tremaine went to the Buffalo Bills, who traded up in the first round and selected him with the 16th overall selection. Tremaine earned third-team All-America honors by The Associated Press and first-team All-ACC honors this past season after registering team bests in tackles (109), tackles for a loss (14) and sacks (5.5) from his backer position. He became the first Tech linebacker to be chosen in an NFL Draft since 2010 when the Tampa Bay Buccaneers selected Cody Grimm, who played whip linebacker in his career, in the seventh round.

Playing the third position of his career this past season, Terrell went to the Pittsburgh Steelers, who took him with the 28th overall selection.

The third-team All-ACC choice, who first played cornerback at Tech and then spent the 2016 campaign at rover, recorded 59 tackles and two interceptions this past fall.


“That’s history, man,” Tremaine said after his brother was chosen. “My emotions after I heard that ... it was like my heart started beating real fast. To see the smile on my brother’s face, to see the smile on my whole family’s face, it meant the world to me — and I know it meant the world to my family.”

For the fifth straight year, an NFL team drafted a Virginia Tech defensive back. In fact, in 19 of the past 20 years (with the exception of 2013), an NFL team has drafted at least one Tech defensive back.

“A lot of my friends are diehard Steelers fans, so I always grew up hearing them talk about the Steelers, talking about the tradition and everything,” Terrell said. “I just know that the fan base is amazing, just from last night [April 26] after my name was called. All the fans congratulated me, and when I was at the airport, everyone came up to me, shook my hand. All the smiles and hugs and love that I had there ... that was amazing.”

Three other Virginia Tech players were drafted by NFL teams, as defensive tackle Tim Settle went in the fifth round to the Washington Redskins, offensive lineman Wyatt Teller went in the fifth round to Buffalo and cornerback Greg Stroman went in the seventh round to Washington. Teller thus joins Edmunds in Buffalo, while Settle and Stroman play for the team whose home resides less than an hour from their home in Manassas, Virginia.

The five players drafted were the most by the Virginia Tech program since five were drafted in 2010.

In addition, several other former Virginia Tech players signed free-agent deals with NFL teams. Cornerback Brandon Facyson inked a deal with San Diego, while mike linebacker Andrew Motuapuaka signed with Jacksonville and receiver Cam Phillips signed with Buffalo. Also, center Eric Gallo inked a deal with Philadelphia, and kicker Joey Slye has scheduled tryouts with Tampa Bay and Cleveland. 



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**EDITORS DESK** by Jimmy Robertson

## Spring successes continue fueling Virginia Tech Athletics momentum

There are some in the sports profession who argue against the concept of momentum.

In fact, noted ESPN.com writer Bill Barnwell tried to make that argument in an article several years ago, calling it an abstract idea that gets molded only to fit the narrative of whatever a person wants. He even called it “no-mentum.”

Whit Babcock is not in that camp. The Hokies’ director of athletics often uses the phrase “continued momentum” in various meetings, interviews and such, which obviously means that he believes firmly in momentum. And truthfully, the latest accomplishments by the Hokies certainly give him the evidence to contradict Mr. Barnwell.

The Hokies — almost quietly — have rolled along this spring. Big victories, wins over rival Virginia and NCAA berths create cause for celebration, and this space serves as a written standing ovation.

Consider what has transpired over the past three-plus months since Feb. 1:

- The men’s basketball team won at then-No. 2 UVA and later secured an NCAA bid
- The men’s track and field distance medley relay team won the national title
- The women’s basketball team advanced all the way to the WNIT final
- Jared Haught made it to the finals of his weight class at the NCAA Wrestling Championships, and the wrestling team came in eighth.

- The softball team swept a three-game series from UVA
- The lacrosse team set a program record for wins, beat UVA for only the second time in program history and earned its first NCAA berth
- The women’s golf team earned its first NCAA tournament berth
- The men’s tennis team beat UVA for the first time since 2003 and earned an NCAA bid
- The Hokies only need a point from either of their track and field teams to clinch the Commonwealth Clash for the second straight year

And for good measure, the annual Spring Game was exciting, at least in the second half. The Hokies got some big plays from their running game, a few receivers made some really nice catches, and Tech’s youthful defenders made some plays. The game created some excitement in anticipation of the upcoming season.

“We saw some individual improvement. We saw some team improvement,” Tech head coach Justin Fuente said afterward. “We have a long way to go. This might be the most important summer of any team I’ve ever coached in terms of what we need and moving forward considering our youth and inexperience. Of my years, this might be the most important next several months of our lives. We will get our guys ready for that and keep moving forward.”

This spring represents a stark contrast to this time a year ago when the Hokies’ spring Olympic sports struggled. In fact, only the men’s and women’s track and field teams enjoyed any type of success, with both winning the ACC team title and Irena Sediva going on to win a national championship.

As a result of the struggles, the Hokies finished 40th in the Learfield Directors’ Cup, which uses a points-based system that places an emphasis on varsity sports that qualify for NCAA postseason competition. The finish marked a two-place drop from the previous year and a five-spot decline from 2014-15.

Yet Tech now appears to be in shape for its best finish ever, eclipsing its 35th-place ending in 2014-15. The Hokies came out of this winter in 20th position in the standings — *before* factoring in women’s golf, men’s tennis, lacrosse and men’s and women’s track and field.

Occasionally, Tech’s lack of a team national championship comes up in conversation, but for Tech to get to that point, it needs to be competitive first against Virginia and then within the ACC. Twenty-eight team championships in 13 years in the ACC — and potentially two straight Commonwealth Clash victories — certainly proves that the school’s sports are trending in a positive direction.

Tech has 22 varsity sports, and most people only know about football and men’s basketball — and maybe women’s basketball and baseball. Most of those 22 sports are doing well, and one gets the feeling that Babcock hired the right people to turn around the volleyball (Jill Wilson) and baseball programs (John Szeftc).

“We’re very pleased with our across-the-board success,” Babcock told The Daily Press’ David Teel in a recent article. “I don’t know if you’re ever satisfied, but I love the momentum and the way it looks and feels right now.”

There is that word again — momentum. The Hokies hope to continue riding the momentum, even if some people don’t believe in it.

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**BEHIND THE MIC** with  
Jon Laaser

## Spring (Mind) Cleaning

I've had a lot on my mind lately, as my personal and professional lives have attempted to harmoniously coexist at a high rate of speed. As I prepare to close out my third athletics year at Virginia Tech and tie the knot in late May, I was hoping you would bear with me, as I unclutter many of the things that have kept my head spinning these past few months.

### Post-spring football

I have realized that I am excited about the upcoming football season in much the same way I was prior to my first season in Blacksburg in 2015. There are clearly differences between the makeup of the team that will take shape for this upcoming season and the one from Coach Beamer's final year, but I also see similarities in the enthusiasm that only comes from a youthful roster.

In many ways, we've applied revisionist history to that 2015 season. It was successful in the extension of the Hokies' bowl streak and continued dominance of rival UVA, but also didn't live up to the preseason expectations of many. The biggest reason for that was injuries, primarily to quarterback Michael Brewer and cornerback Kendall Fuller. There were certainly others, but I remember, in my first round of interviews in this role, brimming with excitement about an all-sophomore receiving corps of Isaiah Ford, Cam Phillips and Bucky Hodges, a shutdown tandem in the secondary of Fuller and Brandon Facyson, a two-deep defensive line and Brewer returning for his second and

final season. Those injuries and others took out a lot of the steam throughout the course of the year. That doesn't mean that preseason excitement was unfounded, however.

So where is the comparison to this season? I look at that year, and then all that followed—Justin Fuente being hired and bringing in what seemed to be the missing piece offensively in dual-threat quarterback in Jerod Evans. Evans allowed that receiving trio to flourish in Fuente's first season at the helm, and the Hokies won the Coastal Division and posted their first double-digit win campaign since 2011. The success of that team led to the departure of Ford, Hodges and Evans, so the Hokies retooled the offense, while the defense dominated in 2017, with the Edmunds brothers, Ricky Walker, Tim Settle and Greg Stroman leading the way. All of those players have moved on save for Walker, and now we arrive at this coming season, one I believe possesses all the excitement, and volatility, of youthful possibility—on both sides of the ball.

We rightfully will enter camp with a keen eye on the replacements for some of those departed stars, but at the same time, truly begin to see what a football team constructed by Fuente and his staff ideally looks like. I noticed during the Spring Game that, even with a handful of expected impact receivers sidelined, plenty of playmakers still existed. Hezekiah Grimsley and Phil Patterson stood out, but Sean Savoy also reminded us of his ability. Add in Damon Hazelton, Eric



Tech's offense featured some much-needed playmakers in the Spring Game, including tailback Deshawn McClease, who rushed for a 49-yard touchdown in the game.

Kumah, Tre Turner and others who sat out with injuries, and you start to see the vision that offensive coordinator Brad Cornelsen has been pointing to since this staff's arrival—using a group of eight, nine, 10 receivers whom you have confidence in to catch the football. The aforementioned group, coupled with a trio of talented tight ends, gets you there.

Josh Jackson doesn't profile in the same way as Brewer, but as Fuente has eluded to, there are levels above that to which Jackson can strive with a bevy of playmakers around him. The running backs intrigue me as well, and although the line lost Wyatt Teller and Eric Gallo, I think the group is as deep as it's been in a number of years.

There will be question marks on the other side of the ball, but hey, we've got Bud Foster, and in Bud we trust! We also have

a lot of talented players who committed to this program because of that defensive tradition. The initial glimpses that we got of his newly constructed defense during spring practice were promising. Dylan Rivers made tremendous strides at mike linebacker, and to my eye, stood out during the Spring Game, along with a handful of young cornerbacks and emerging defensive linemen. Like the offense, many integral expected pieces missed the game and much of spring, but I came away encouraged about what the group will look like come August.

So I head into the summer in a place of excitement for this program. Who will step up? Who will have a breakout year? Which veteran has waited his turn to emerge? To me, watching the cupboard get stocked with talent and speed leads to fun offseason conversations and hopefully some fall surprises.

### Baseball in Blacksburg has a bright future

I took the opportunity to get more involved with baseball this spring, and I couldn't be more bullish on the program's potential. I think Whit Babcock made a home run hire in John Szeft. In the handful of games I called for ACC Network Extra, Szeft's team played the game with fundamental integrity and intelligence. The Hokies' record hasn't reflected a meteoric rise in the standings, but that was unrealistic. His first-year team was competitive night in and night out. Give it a little time, and I firmly believe baseball will be rising in Blacksburg.

And if the environment for the Grand Opening of English Field at Union Park is the barometer, this place has the potential to be a spirited baseball town again. I was fortunate enough to call that game, during


which I said, "History won't remember the outcome of this game ... but it will recall the significance of this night in regard to Virginia Tech baseball." I absolutely believe that. The design of the ballpark is stunning and perfectly encapsulates Tech—Hokie Stone accenting the grass-lined third-base side, along with state-of-the-art media facilities to allow Tech to be on the cutting edge both on the field and in the press box. The sky is the limit, and the investment made in the facility and the program will prove to be a shrewd one in the not-too-distant future.

On a personal note, getting back in the baseball booth has been amazing. I think, in life, there are a lot of times when we leave things behind and forget how much we enjoyed them. Broadcasting baseball is one of those things for me. It feels like home when I am there, and I intend to do as much as I can to contribute. That goes for the ACC Network as well, as that is about to begin building into a source of pride for Tech, too. There are a lot of talented people whom you probably don't know by name putting in a tremendous amount of behind-the-scenes work to make it happen. A lot of exciting things are coming, for sure!

### Here comes the wedding

Which brings me to May 19, a day for which my bride-to-be, Renée Blessington, has a countdown hanging below our television. Our wedding day. As with all significant life events since I have been a part of Hokie Nation, I have received countless well wishes, as we have worked toward this day. And as always, that outpouring of love has been overwhelming. However, in this instance, it is overshadowed by my ability to overwhelm myself—in a good way.

I've made all the requisite marriage jokes, and I've done my share of grumbling about the wedding planning, but the truth is I've never been more eager for any event in my life. I'm 38 years old. I've had my personal missteps and mistakes, and if you're like me at all, you can understand that there are times when you can't help but question whether you'll find the person who completely gets you—your personality, ambition, flaws, and everything else. Renée is that person for me. She is fierce protector, warm encourager, tough-love motivator and angel, all rolled into one very diminutive package. Point is, I'm counting down to May 19, too, because she is the missing piece to having the life for which I have always dreamed. It can't get here soon enough, and I am also grateful that so many Hokies will be there to share the day with us.

Alright, with that, I have a marriage license to procure and a baseball game to call. Congratulations to all Hokies for their accomplishments this past year! I can't wait to see what's in store for us. Until then, my friends, get outside! It's finally above 60! 

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**VIRGINIA TECH SAAC with**  
**a productive 2017-18 academic year** *by Natalie Forbes*  
**Senior Director, Student-Athlete Development**

The Virginia Tech Student-Athlete Advisory Committee, more commonly known as “SAAC,” is comprised of two to three individuals from each team selected to represent their teammates and fellow student-athletes. They are the leaders of their teams, and the “voice” of the student-athletes. They hold the responsibilities for communicating with the administration on the campus, conference, and national levels.

This group meets twice monthly to discuss a variety of topics related to the student-athlete experience. At each meeting, various athletics department staff members have the chance to attend and connect with the student-athletes. Some staff members simply introduce themselves and provide information about their role in athletics, while others provide insight on legislation, events and other items pertinent to the student-athletes. Each meeting allows the administration to communicate with the student-athletes and find ways to improve the overall student-athlete experience.

SAAC at Virginia Tech is led by an executive team of four student-athletes whose responsibility is to plan and lead the meetings and facilitate discussion among their peers. This year, the executive team consists of M.J. Ulrich (president), a senior swimmer; Jaila Tolbert, a junior on the volleyball team; Mary Claire Byrne, a redshirt junior on the lacrosse team; and Harrison Pierce, a senior on the swim team. Ben Lundgaard, a men’s soccer student-athlete, also held a position on the executive team during the fall semester prior to his selection in the 2018 MLS Draft.

This year, Virginia Tech SAAC, led by this team of four, has been involved in community outreach, mental health awareness, event planning, and various campus, conference and national legislation and initiatives.

At the beginning of the 2017 fall semester, SAAC set out to organize and facilitate community outreach opportunities to participate in as a group. During the holiday season, the members participated in the Salvation Army “Adopt-A-Family” project. This partnership allowed them to raise money and purchase gifts for a local family in need. During the spring semester, the group created a project called “SAAC


Gives Back,” where each week during the month of April, they held a “play day” in the athletics facilities for a local pre-school. The student-athletes organized games and activities to facilitate with the children for about an hour each week.

SAAC is involved not only on a campus level, but also plays a role in both conference and national initiatives. In the fall of 2017, two Virginia Tech SAAC representatives attended the Atlantic Coast Conference SAAC meeting. This allowed student-athletes from all 15-member institutions to interact and discuss various legislation affecting the student-athlete experience.

In addition to the role played by SAAC on a conference level, Virginia Tech student-athletes’ voices are being heard nationally. Tolbert was selected to represent the ACC as a member of the Division I National Student-Athlete Advisory Committee. This role allows Tolbert to give input on national legislation and improve the student-athlete experience not only on her campus and in her conference, but also nationwide.

Virginia Tech SAAC tackled various projects outside of outreach and legislation during the 2017-18 academic year, one of which focused on breaking the stigma of mental health and the importance of campus communities providing resources for student-athletes in need of support. The group created a short video highlighting the prevalence of mental health concerns for student-athletes and illustrated the work being done and resources provided by Virginia Tech to address mental health issues.

SAAC’s final project of the year was the role they played in planning and facilitating the Virginia Tech athletics end-of-the-year awards show, “The Gobblers.” They worked with the student-athlete development staff to plan the “pre-show” portion of the evening, assisted in planning the entertainment and live performances that would take place, and served as the award presenters for the event.

The role of SAAC as a means to serve the Virginia Tech student-athlete population and bridge the gap between the administration and student-athletes is integral to creating and maintaining a positive student-athlete experience. 



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7/8-14	Niagara Falls / Montreal / Quebec. ....	1195			



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# KREBS the latest former football player to give back to TECH ATHLETICS



*Chris Krebs learned a lot as a player and as a student, and that helped him overcome adversity in his professional career. Now he wants to pay it forward and help others.*

*by Jimmy Robertson*

Even after starting four different companies, losing everything twice and once being relegated to sleeping in abandoned houses, Chris Krebs refuses to let anything tame his entrepreneurial spirit.

“My aversion to risk is very high,” the former Virginia Tech football player said.

Each time he was knocked to the proverbial mat, Krebs got up, wagered on a new idea and bet heavily on himself again. Fortunately, his latest venture is paying off handsomely—both for him and subsequently for Virginia Tech Athletics.

Krebs’ success in the business world recently led to him making a major pledge commitment to the athletics department. The financial resources will be used specifically to benefit the football program, and in recognition of that support, the safeties/rovers position meeting room will be named in his honor. In addition, an etched glass rendering of his face will be a part of the Merryman Center’s “Pride and Joy Wall” of former players who give back to the program.

“I put a lot into my studies and in my athletic career while I was at Tech, and I know that the coaches, the fans on the athletic side and the professors on the academic side put a lot into me,” Krebs said. “I had this ingrained sense of self and also a sense that, as Kevin Spacey once said, to send the elevator back down. Now that financially I’m able to give back more, it seems like it should be a mandatory event in my life that I give back and let kids have the same opportunity that I had to go to this type of amazing university.”

Krebs became the latest in a list of former Virginia Tech football players to give back recently to the athletics department—a group that includes Steve Johnson, Jeff King, Andre Davis and others. Also, current defensive coordinator Bud Foster gave back through his foundation this past October.

Krebs, a native of Burke, Virginia who played his high school ball for James W. Robinson High, served as a backup rover and played on certain special teams for the Hokies during his career. He lettered all four seasons from 1998-2001, and he played in 39 games.

Krebs graduated from Virginia Tech with two degrees, earning undergraduate degrees in management science and information technology and also finance. He plans on contributing to the Pamplin College of Business as well.

“I’ve been almost best friends with Tom Tillar [former vice president of alumni relations] this whole time,” Krebs said. “From my senior year, we started a friendship that turned into a mentorship. Now he’s back with the Pamplin College of Business [as the special assistant to the dean], so now I’m going to start giving to them, too. He’s followed me throughout my career from day 1. Not only to respect the university and the degrees that I have, but the fact that he re-engaged back in the Pamplin College of Business, I’m going to re-engage.”

Krebs’ professional career has been a rather interesting one. An internship on Wall Street with Robertson Stephens, an investment bank based in San Francisco, started him in a career in investment services. Once he graduated from Virginia Tech, he worked for John Hancock—albeit briefly.

The entrepreneur in him got the best of him, and he started his own company called Premier Imaging, with cutting-edge graphics technology. Then he lost everything at the age of 24. He started again, getting into importing gourmet Italian espresso out of Stuart, Florida—and lost everything again.

Not sure when or how to make his next move, he happened to touch base with former Tech linebacker and good friend Alex Markogiannakis, who was working for a company called Plan-It Granite and Marble, a Northern Virginia-based company that offered different types of granite stone for kitchens and bathrooms to various builders, designers and remodeling customers. He told Krebs that the company needed sales reps, so Krebs jumped at the opportunity. Within a year, he became the company’s No. 1 sales rep.

A private equity group in Charlotte wound up buying the company, which ultimately became heavily leveraged, but in the summer of 2008, the real estate market plunged, and the group decided to close the doors of Plan-It Granite and Marble.

Krebs decided to bet on himself. He formed an LLC and took his clients with him, servicing them in the way that he knew how and keeping overhead costs low to manage the process and receivables—and make money while doing it. In 2010, a group, seeing value in that company, bought him out.

He quickly jumped back into the fray, starting NOVUS Building Services in March of 2011. The company, based in Sterling, Virginia, sells and installs countertops, tile flooring and backsplashes for both new buildings and remodeling projects. The company, with 60 employees, is doing quite well, with projects up and down the East Coast.

“You become an expert in what you do if it’s going to become your base of operations, or you have to make logical decisions based on historical data and then you invest in people and not necessarily just in the product,” Krebs said. “I had to learn some really tough lessons. I’ve been in the checkered line with Vanna White, Wayne Newton, and Pamela Anderson, and then I’ve slept in abandoned houses, too. I’ve done it all, and pretty much everything in between. So it’s given me a base of logic that I use not only in my personal life, but in my business.”


Krebs credits his success to what he learned at Virginia Tech, both in the classroom and from his experiences on the Tech football team. He still remembers things that head coach Frank Beamer, defensive coordinator Bud Foster and position coach Jim Cavanaugh told him and other players. He particularly focuses on the little things with his employees because he knows, as Beamer often said, everything else falls into place if one takes care of the little things.

In essence, that is why he gives back, as a way of thanking not just the athletics department and football staff, but the entire university for everything he learned during his time at Virginia Tech. He felt that calling to pay it forward.

“I think it’s imperative, and it’s a privilege,” Krebs said of former players giving back. “The net effect was that I have people that will

corner me for hours and talk about the 1999 season and what it was like. I have people that will break off a conversation ... these are guys that are powerful, and I don’t mean just money. I mean, power people that say, ‘I can remember what I was doing when you guys did this.’ Or ‘What was Vick like? What was DeAngelo Hall like? What was Beamer like? What did you learn from him?’ These were executives, powerhouses. We’re talking billionaires here. That’s the net effect that I get to participate in even as a non-starter [on the football team].

“I got to participate in that, and the lessons learned at that level ... it’s like getting a doctorate in metaphysical and process and procedure. You learn how to work ... You learn how to work through pain. You learn how to work through adversity. You learn how to logically step through solving a problem. You can apply the same lessons to business or to a poor personal marriage or to your children’s growth. It all equates, and in order to ensure that the future athletes, male or female, get that opportunity, I feel like I’m expected and I’m willing, and I feel like it’s a privilege to help contribute to that growth.”

Krebs plans to return to Blacksburg in October to see the Hokies take on Notre Dame—back to the place that got him to where he resides today. Back to the place that he and so many others call “home.” 

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# Jackson, Willis lead the way at QUARTERBACK coming out of spring

by Jimmy Robertson

In one respect, the Virginia Tech football team has a quality situation at the all-important quarterback position.

After all, the Hokies return a starter in Josh Jackson. One of their backups, Ryan Willis, played 15 games over the course of two seasons at Kansas before transferring to Tech at the start of spring practice last year. Another backup, Hendon Hooker, enrolled at Tech in January of 2016 and took a redshirt season this past fall. And highly touted Quincy Patterson, a quarterback recruit from Chicago, comes to Blacksburg in July.

So now it's just a matter of choosing a starter among that group.

Jackson goes into summer workouts arguably leading the pack, but he isn't a lock to be the starter even though he threw for nearly 3,000 yards and 20 touchdowns as a redshirt freshman this past season. Head coach Justin Fuente and offensive coordinator Brad Cornelsen expect competition at every position every day, and they want to see more big plays out of the offense.

That means Jackson needs to produce more in the passing game. In 2017, Tech only had two passing plays of more than 50 yards and only five of more than 40.

"I think he's [Jackson] taken another step in understanding what we are trying to accomplish because he's as bright a guy as I've coached," Fuente said, assessing Jackson's spring. "I think he's taking a step forward, but there's still room for him to be pushed. I think he still needs to fall more in love with the process.

"He needs to fall more in love with preparing. He does a good job of that, but I think there's another level of detail that he can reach in his level of preparation — but I've been really pleased with him."

spring  
2018 (in numerical order)

- 2 Hendon Hooker (6-4, 216, r-Fr.)
- 5 Ryan Willis (6-4, 221, r-Jr.)
- 17 Josh Jackson (6-1, 216, r-So.)
- 18 Chase Mummau (6-2, 200, r-So.)

Quarterbacks



Jackson found himself being challenged by Willis toward the end of spring practice. Willis threw for more than 1,700 yards and nine touchdowns as a true freshman at Kansas and threw for more than 800 yards and three scores as a sophomore.

He arguably stole the show in the Spring Game, throwing for 262 yards and two scores. That included a nice 83-yard scoring toss to receiver Sean Savoy.

"Yeah, I think he's excited to get out there," Fuente said after the Spring Game. "It's really tough on kids. A redshirt year is difficult, and it's even harder when it's in the middle of your career and when you've had a chance to play, and then you've got to sit back and know you've got no chance of playing. I think he handled it really well. It was a productive year for him.

"There's no question he's excited to get out there. He's more athletic than I think maybe we thought based on the way he can run around and move. He's got some talent at throwing the football. Making some strides ... he's got a long way to go in terms of our comfort level with him operating day in and day out."

The same could be said of Hooker, who possesses a lot of the physical attributes that one wants to see in a quarterback and yet battles inconsistency. His lack of experience showed at times this spring, and he finds himself playing "catch up" in his competition against two guys with college experience.

"He's handling it really well," Fuente said. "He's focused on continuing to get better. I mean, no jobs are taken. We are going to play the best people, and all our guys know that. The best guys are going to get out there to play."

As expected, Fuente wasn't ready to name a starter or even a leader in that competition following spring practice. He and Cornelsen plan to spend the next four months watching, studying and evaluating, as all the players go through summer workouts and August practices in preparation for the season opener against Florida State on Sept. 3.

The good news is that the Hokies appear to have several talented options with the potential to lead this program to wins. Now, it's just a matter of seeing which one of can emerge to the front of the pack. **VT**

# Array of RUNNING BACKS still competing for time heading into summer workouts by Jimmy Robertson

Many people view the Spring Game as a glorified scrimmage with little to be learned, and certainly that argument could be made.

But Deshawn McClease's 49-yard touchdown run provided Tech's coaching staff with some validation. The coaches desperately want more big plays from the running game and spent much of the spring working on ways to get those — and at least on this play, they got exactly what they wanted.

McClease took a handoff from Josh Jackson, ran up the middle, cut to the left and out-ran Devon Hunter to the end zone for the score. That didn't happen a lot a year ago when only one of Tech's tailbacks — Coleman Fox — recorded a rush of more than 25 yards. So finding those big plays in the running game was a point of emphasis this spring.

"I thought we got a lot better this spring," Tech running backs coach Zohn Burden said. "All spring, we tried to improve our yards after contact and make plays at the second level [against linebackers and defensive backs]. We want to take those 5- to 10-yard carries and turn them into touchdowns. I thought we showed some of that in the Spring Game."

With the exception of Travon McMillian, who transferred following the season, Tech returned its entire lineup of running backs for spring practice, including McClease, who led the Hokies in rushing this past fall with 530 yards. Steven Peoples, Jalen Holston and Fox also returned, and they spent much of spring practice battling it out for a possible starting role.

McClease started one game in 2017 — the Hokies' bowl game against Oklahoma State — and he certainly made the most of it, rushing for 124 yards on 18 carries and averaging 6.9 yards per carry. Burden wants to see more of that type of production this fall.



"He's gained 10-15 pounds, and now he's up to 190," Burden said of McClease. "That's the heaviest he's been. That will allow him to be more physical and hopefully stay healthy. If he does that, I think he could have a good year."

Burden held Peoples out of much of spring practice to keep him healthy after he missed six games this past fall. As for Holston, he missed much of the offseason and the first part of spring with an injury, but he returned toward the middle of spring and received some valuable reps to further his development.

"I thought he had a good spring," Burden said of Holston. "He knows what we're asking of him, and we need for him to keep improving on the small things, but he's coming along. He's trending upward."

Fox, Terius Wheatley and freshman Caleb Steward round out the group. Fox looked

impressive in several early scrimmages, and he scored a touchdown in the Spring Game. Wheatley needs to get bigger and stronger, and Steward needs to get healthy. He provides the Hokies with an element that they currently lack — a bigger back with speed — so getting healthy and in top shape this summer remains critical for him.

"Strength and conditioning is going to be huge for us this summer," Burden said. "A guy like Terius Wheatley needs to put on weight, and it's the same with Caleb and Jalen and McClease. It's a long season, and they're not huge guys, so that's [strength and conditioning] going to be important."

Tech's staff appears to be settling in with a running back-by-committee approach again unless a lead back emerges between now and the season opener Sept. 3. That approach worked fairly well a season ago when the Hokies rushed for more than 2,200 yards.

Yet the coaches want more — and the good news is that, coming out of spring practice, they feel that this group is capable of giving them exactly that. **VT**

spring  
2018 (in numerical order)

- 13 Jalen Holston (5-11, 217, So.)
- 16 Coleman Fox (5-11, 187, r-Jr.)
- 24 Terius Wheatley (6-0, 193, r-Fr.)
- 30 Caleb Steward (5-11, 209, Fr.)
- 32 Steven Peoples (5-9, 221, Sr.)
- 33 Deshawn McClease (5-9, 190, r-Jr.)

Running Backs



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# Big, talented OFFENSIVE LINE in good shape at conclusion of spring practice

by Jimmy Robertson

The Virginia Tech football team entered spring practice with questions at several positions, but coming out of it following the annual Spring Game, the staff arguably felt the best about the situation along the offensive line.

Line coach Vance Vice went into both the offseason and spring practices searching for replacements for departed three-year starters Wyatt Teller and Eric Gallo. Those two combined for 81 career starts, and Teller earned first-team All-ACC honors for his play this past fall.

Complicating the situation, Vice decided to move right tackle Kyle Chung from his spot on the right side to the center position to replace Gallo. Chung had played both center and guard throughout his career before beating out Tyrell Smith for the right tackle job this past season.

Replacing a longtime starter at center, especially one as steady as Gallo, is never easy. Chung, though, never missed a beat. Looking energized after gaining a sixth year of eligibility because he missed nearly two past years with injuries, he played well, and he anchors the line heading into summer workouts.

“I did not have any reservations,” Vice said about moving Chung to center. “I know what his goals are and what he’s trying to do, and I know he’s better suited for those goals inside than out there on the edge [at tackle]. After the year he had, he’s a seasoned vet now for whatever that’s worth. He brings the work ethic and leadership, and he hasn’t missed a step.”

The other two returning starters are right guard Braxton Pfaff and left tackle Yosuah Nijman. Pfaff started all 13 games this past season and enters this fall as a consistent, even underrated, player. Nijman, who worked a lot at right tackle this spring, bulked up to 322 pounds, and more importantly, he looks healthy after missing four games late in the season with an injury.



Vice’s top task, thus, was finding two new starters, and several players performed well enough to put themselves in the mix. The contingent of D’Andre Plantin, Silas Dzansi, Christian Darrisaw, T.J. Jackson and Smith drew accolades for strong play this spring.

Plantin, a rising redshirt junior, played in seven games this past fall, including the final two. Parker Osterloh, who subbed in when Nijman was injured, battled injuries down the stretch, which allowed Plantin to receive some reps, and Plantin held up well.

Vice decided to move Plantin to left guard for spring practice, and he held up well there, too. Perhaps more impressively, he became a vocal leader for a group not noted for speaking out.

“Obviously, he’s a tremendous talent, and I’m encouraged about which direction he’s going and another thing that spurred that a little bit is that he’s healthy now,” Vice said of Plantin. “He had some wrist and some hand stuff there for a while, and now he feels good. He had a great offseason in the weight room, doing his job in there. Just growing into the spot, he’s definitely on schedule [offensive] line-wise. This is his time now, and he’s taking advantage of it.”

Dzansi, a redshirt freshman, received most of the first-team reps at left tackle—a rather unusual development for a freshman—and both Darrisaw and Smith worked mostly as backup tackles, with Darrisaw on the left side and Smith on the right side.

Smith nearly won the right tackle job this past August, but suffered an ankle injury that

hindered him, allowing Chung to move ahead of him on the depth chart. He looked like a different player this spring—and he should. Like Plantin, he is a rising redshirt junior, so the time to step forward is now.

“I’m very encouraged with what I’ve seen this spring, getting more to where he was last spring and through the summer,” Vice said of Smith.

As per his custom, Vice moved linemen to different spots throughout spring. Tackles played guard spots, and guards moved to tackle. Some guards got reps at center. Injuries happen (see Nijman and Osterloh), and Vice always wants his best five players in a game at all times, so that means learning which players can play certain positions effectively.

It also means that what fans saw in the Spring Game may not be what they see this fall.

“It’s very beneficial [to switch guys to different spots] right now because we’re a young room,” Vice said. “Being able to ... for [Kyle] Chung to be back and to be able to honestly play all five [positions] ... he can, [Braxton] Pfaff can, Tyrell [Smith] can, and that just gives you quite a bit of depth to mix and match. It gives me the opportunity with some of these young guys to leave them at one position. Tell them to just learn this right now, and then we’ll expand on that as we mature.”

Others battling for playing time include Zachariah Hoyt, a rising redshirt sophomore who figures to be Chung’s backup at center, along with rising redshirt freshman guard Lecitus Smith—who came to Tech as a tight end—and rising redshirt sophomore Austin

## spring 2018 (in numerical order)

- 50 Patrick Kearns (6-5, 292, r-So.)
- 51 Gene Kastelburg (6-0, 297, r-Fr.)
- 52 Austin Cannon (6-2, 314, r-So.)
- 53 Aiden Brown (6-2, 289, r-Fr.)
- 54 Lecitus Smith (6-3, 309, r-Fr.)
- 56 Joe Kane (6-2, 276, Fr.)
- 60 Silas Dzansi (6-5, 312, r-Fr.)
- 61 Kyle Chung (6-3, 310, r-Sr.)
- 62 D’Andre Plantin (6-5, 312, r-Jr.)
- 63 Daniel Bailey (6-3, 300, r-Jr.)
- 65 Matt Christ (6-3, 277, r-Jr.)
- 66 Louis Mihota (6-2, 274, Fr.)
- 68 Connor Kish (6-2, 303, r-Jr.)
- 69 Yosuah Nijman (6-7, 322, Sr.)
- 70 Kevin Kish (6-2, 290, r-Jr.)
- 71 T.J. Jackson (6-6, 335, r-So.)
- 72 Brennon Garrison (6-1, 292, r-Fr.)
- 74 Braxton Pfaff (6-5, 308, r-Sr.)
- 75 Zachariah Hoyt (6-5, 302, r-So.)
- 76 Jarrett Hopple (6-7, 312, r-So.)
- 77 Christian Darrisaw (6-5, 297, Fr.)
- 79 Tyrell Smith (6-3, 300, r-Jr.)

## Offensive Linemen




Cannon, one of four offensive linemen who spent time at Fork Union Military Academy before coming to Tech (Nijman, Dzansi and Darrisaw).

That time probably helped each of them get into the mix earlier in their careers than those who arrive straight out of high school.

“Coach [John] Shuman does an unbelievable job of the development of young guys, and one thing that I can guarantee when I get guys out of there is that they have seen hard, and they’ve been through tough,” Vice said. “That’s probably the biggest characteristics I gained from those guys. We have quite a few now, quite a few of the names we have talked about already, have benefitted from being there. Right now, the newest one is Christian Darrisaw, and I’m excited as I can be about him, and of course, Silas is getting better every day.”

That was pretty much the consensus opinion of everyone in the group. For the first time in quite some time, the Hokies feature a talented and deep offensive line—and big, too. In fact, 13 of the 20 offensive linemen on the Hokies’ roster weigh more than 300 pounds.

Given their youth at the skill positions on offense, particularly at receiver, the Hokies may need to lean on that offensive line to open holes in the running game. Judging from what was seen this spring, this group appears ready to deliver. 



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# Several tight ends ready to be **PRODUCTIVE** this fall

by Jimmy Robertson

Not long after he arrived in Blacksburg, James Shibest analyzed his tight end position, and he quickly realized that he was going to need to find some personnel for the Hokies to accomplish what they wanted to do on offense. That, in turn, resulted in a couple of tailbacks playing in an H-back type of role.

Fortunately, the position is in much better shape these days.

The Hokies lost Colt Pettit off last season's squad, but Pettit served mostly as a blocker in goal-line and short-yardage situations and played sparingly. The roster coming out of spring practice featured an upperclassman [Chris Cunningham], an underclassman who played this past fall [Dalton Keene], and two underclassmen who took a redshirt year [Drake Deluliis and Cole Blaker].

In short, the position features a combination of experience and youth.

"We almost got the tight end room about where we want it," Shibest said. "We had to use Sam [Rogers] and Steven [Peoples], really tailbacks, in that kind of role when we first got here.

"But Chris Cunningham, I can't say enough. He continues to get better and better. Dalton Keene as a true freshman did an awesome job, and he'll continue to improve. Now you got Drake [Deluliis] coming up that's finally got

some reps in spring and getting better every day. You've got James Mitchell [an incoming recruit from Big Stone Gap, Virginia] coming in, too. You don't know if physically he'll be ready ... but that room is starting to look better and better."

Cunningham and Keene combined to catch 19 passes a year ago, with Cunningham recording the group's lone touchdown reception. Keene led the way with 10 catches, while Cunningham caught nine.

Shibest expects them to be used a little more extensively this fall. They certainly saw more passes thrown their way during spring practices. In fact, in one scrimmage, Cunningham hauled in a pass and sprinted approximately 50 yards for a touchdown.

The Hokies' youth at receiver also may necessitate the tight ends becoming more involved in the passing game.

"I'm certainly pulling for it," Shibest said. "I think this spring they have gotten the ball more than they have ever had. A guy like Drake [Deluliis], who has really great height and can kind of use his big, tall body, has good ball skills. You start leaning that way. We usually try to sneak them out in play action and stuff like that and usually can create some big plays. You'd like to spread it out as much

as we can and get it to the guys that can go make plays out there."

Deluliis may be one to watch. The 6-foot-5, 240-pounder hoped to be a part of the Hokies' offense as a true freshman this past fall, but a hamstring injury prevented him from playing, with the exception being the Boston College game. He received a medical hardship waiver after the season.

Shibest wants to see Deluliis get stronger, so that he can use him in a multitude of ways.

"This summer is going to be big for him," Shibest said. "He's put on about 10 pounds, and he's getting stronger. I think we can put him outside, but he's going to be more valuable if we can do a little bit of everything with him."

The Hokies are in good shape at the position coming out of spring practice. Hopefully what transpired this spring carries over to the fall — both in terms of continued improvement and enhanced production.



**spring**  
2018 (in numerical order)

**29** Dalton Keene (6-4, 242, So.)  
**42** Cole Blaker (6-3, 242, r-Fr.)  
**85** Chris Cunningham (6-2, 241, r-Jr.)  
**89** Drake Deluliis (6-5, 240, r-Fr.)  
**91** Vince Zduoba (6-3, 242, Jr.)

**Tight Ends**



## RECEIVERS a talented group, but still searching for consistency

by Jimmy Robertson

Normally, spring football provides a little clarity for coaches, as the team heads into summer workouts, August practices and ultimately the upcoming season.

Unfortunately, the Hokies left spring practice with probably as many questions as answers at the wide receiver positions, as they attempt to replace the program's all-time leader in both receptions (236) and receiving yardage (3,027).

"A lot of work to do," Tech head coach Justin Fuente admitted of the receivers following the Spring Game.

Cam Phillips' production and overall consistency would be hard to replace anyway, but Tech entered spring practice without several top contenders because of injuries, including C.J. Carroll, Eric Kumah, and Damon Hazelton. Not only that, Tech lost a ton of leadership this spring, with Carroll and Henri Murphy, who suffered a spring-ending injury midway through spring practice, being the lone two seniors among the receivers.

Their absences, though, created opportunities for some of the younger receivers, and certainly all was not lost. In fact, Tech's receivers made the big plays in the Spring Game, with Sean Savoy catching an 83-yard touchdown pass, Phil Patterson making an incredible one-handed grab, and Hezekiah Grimsley catching several passes.

They gave a glimpse of what could be, provided the group becomes a little stronger physically and a lot more consistent.

"Obviously, we didn't get to practice with several of them," Fuente said. "We'll get healthy, and we show up every day and work hard and improve. Those three guys got better. I was proud particularly of Hezekiah

and Phil, in terms of their dedication to improving every single day. Still have a long way to go, but they were very productive."

Patterson missed most of this past fall with an injury, but he came back toward the end of the season and showed some flashes of being a really good player. He caught seven passes for 59 yards in the bowl game.

The same applies for Grimsley, a player whom the staff thinks highly. The rising sophomore caught five passes in each of the Hokies' last two games. Tech's staff moved him a couple of different times this past season because of injuries, but for the most part, the coaches kept him in the slot role this spring, and he appears to be well suited for that spot.

"It was kind of unfair to him [last season], but we want to put him in one spot and leave him there," Fuente said. "There's a lot that goes into playing on the inside. He's got some physical maturation in terms of physical strength, but he likes it in there. He's just a slender guy, so it's going to take a longer time to get him as strong as he needs to be to play at this level.

"In short, there's plenty of fundamental work, technique work and strength work that he's made strides in, but he needs to keep working."

Fuente is spot on — the Hokies just need to get healthy at these positions. Adding Kumah and Hazelton into a mix with Patterson, Grimsley and Savoy gives him five potential big-time threats, with Carroll and Murphy providing help and leadership.

Those seven would allow talented freshmen like Tre Turner and Kaleb Smith an opportunity to ease into roles, learning from those ahead of them on the depth chart.

Then again, one just never knows, especially with injuries. This past season, Savoy and Grimsley played prominent roles as true freshmen because of injuries and a lack of depth.

"We need some of those guys to grow up, mature and be there every single day, and that's the value they can add to this football team with being here every single day," Fuente said. "And we have to get to that point to give ourselves a chance. So we need to get guys healthy so they can know what to do and be ready to play."



**spring**  
2018 (in numerical order)

**6** Hezekiah Grimsley (6-0, 182, So.)  
**8** Phil Patterson (6-2, 193, r-So.)  
**11** Tre Turner (6-2, 179, Fr.)  
**12** Henri Murphy (5-10, 190, Sr.)  
**14** Damon Hazelton (6-2, 217, r-So.)  
**15** Sean Savoy (5-9, 190, So.)  
**35** Peter Muskett (6-2, 194, r-Fr.)  
**37** Nicolas Conforti (5-11, 192, r-Fr.)  
**38** Kaleb Smith (6-2, 210, Fr.)  
**39** Sean Daniel (5-9, 180, r-Jr.)  
**46** Nick Reisenweaver (6-1, 182, Fr.)  
**47** Corey Thomas (6-4, 225, Fr.)  
**83** Eric Kumah (6-2, 217, Jr.)  
**86** C.J. Carroll (5-8, 173, r-Sr.)  
**87** Tre Coghill III (5-10, 169, r-Fr.)  
**88** Justin Hairston (6-0, 171, r-Fr.)

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# Hokies still searching for answers at a couple of SPECIAL TEAMS spots

by Jimmy Robertson

Most Virginia Tech football fans have spent the spring fretting over the situations at the linebacker, receiver and cornerback positions, but they also need to keep in mind that the Hokies lost one of the best punt returners in school history and their field-goal kicker.

Greg Stroman averaged 11.3 yards per punt return and returned two for touchdowns this past season—and four in his career. A four-year starter at the spot, he leaves quite the void, and one that special teams coach James Shibest spent much of spring practice trying to fill.

Among those who worked at the spot included Sean Savoy, Hezekiah Grimsley and Bryce Watts.

“His [Stroman’s] ability to field the ball and his decision making, that’s the first thing,” Shibest said. “We got to find a guy we can trust who can do those things back there, with ball security reasons.

“Whoever is back there, we are going to put the guy we trust back there first, whether he can make a play or not. That’s going to be the first thing. We are still working. A lot of the

guys have not done it at the college level, and it will be interesting.”

The situation at kicker is a little more settled, with Brian Johnson and Jordan Stout battling it out. Johnson, though, at least played this past season when Joey Slye was injured, and he made three of his four field-goal



## Punters

- 91 Oscar Bradburn (6-1, 202, So)
- 92 Jordan Stout (6-2, 192, r-Fr.)

## Kickers

- 92 Jordan Stout (6-2, 192, r-Fr.)
- 93 Brian Johnson (6-1, 182, r-So.)

## Snapper

- 97 Oscar Shadley (6-0, 251, Fr.)

## Special Teams

attempts. He also kicked off 12 times, placing six in the end zone for touchbacks.

Stout, however, possesses a powerful leg. So Shibest envisions the competition continuing up to the season opener against Florida State on Sept. 3.

“Field goal-wise, I think the competition will go through fall camp,” Shibest said. “Some days, they look really good and have ability, but being able to go out there in front of 70,000 people and perform ... I’m glad Brian had the opportunity to do that late last year and get some experience with that. A good start with them guys helps as far as confidence and stuff, but them guys do have ability. It’s just a matter of going out on game day and executing that now.”

The Hokies also broke in a new long snapper this spring, as longtime snapper Colton Taylor graduated. Oscar Shadley graduated from Golden Gate High School in Naples, Florida early and enrolled at Tech in January, and he performed without a hitch this spring.

The Hokies do return punter Oscar Bradburn, who excelled this past season. Actually, the team played very well in all phases of special teams in 2017, but coming out spring practice, they remain a work in progress in several areas. Those areas are worth watching once practices resume in August. VT



# First-team DEFENSIVE LINE solid, with *young talent* starting to *emerge* behind it

by Jimmy Robertson



At the conclusion of this past season, Tech’s staff started thinking about the future, and in looking ahead to the 2018 season, defensive coordinator Bud Foster and defensive line coach Charley Wiles expected the line to be the strongest part of the defense since four starters returned.

But burly Tim Settle, a second-team All-ACC selection this past fall, made the decision to pursue NFL riches, thus leaving a gaping hole—both literally and figuratively. The 335-pound Settle finished with 12.5 tackles for

a loss and four sacks in 2017, so this spring, Wiles needed to find a replacement for him out of the relatively unproven group behind Settle.

That process actually began quickly after Settle made his decision, as Tech’s staff decided to move Vinny Mihota from end to tackle even though Mihota missed the final two games of this past fall and the entire spring with a torn ACL.

“We get Vinny Mihota back in the fall, obviously, and Vinny has committed to

moving inside,” Wiles said. “[That] will be good for Vinny because, for him moving forward, that’s probably his future—for him to get drafted and to have a pro career.”

That move left Wiles looking at a first-team unit of Mihota, leader Ricky Walker, ends Trevon Hill and Houshun Gaines, who played well in two starts in place of Mihota. It also allowed him to focus on building much-needed depth during spring practices.

Wiles was able to accomplish that second feat to a certain degree, as he came out of this spring feeling good about the performances of several players, starting with tackles Jarrod Hewitt and Xavier Burke.

Hewitt, in particular, stood out. A redshirt freshman in 2017, he played in 10 games and finished with 13 tackles, but he admittedly was too heavy. A former powerlifter in high school and an avid weightlifter in general, Hewitt bulked up to close to 300 when he arrived at Tech, and that took away from his quickness.

This winter, he slimmed down to 285, while maintaining his strength—and the difference showed on the field this spring.

“Really pleased with the strides that Jarrod Hewitt has made,” Wiles said. “Jarrod knows he’s got to be a great-effort kind of kid to get the very most out of his abilities, and he’s got that kind of attitude. He’s attacked the weight room in the offseason. He looks great. He’s one of those guys that needs to stay in that 280 to 285 [-pound] range, and that’s what he’s done.

“He’s really, really strong. Coach [Ben] Hilgart has done amazing things with him and just the way he looks. He’s real fit right now, and he had a good spring.”

As for Burke, he came to Tech as a tight end, and then the staff moved him to defensive end. Then they moved him again, this time to defensive tackle, where he spent most of this past season. He’s finally adjusted to the position and played with more of a motor this spring than in the past.

Wiles hopes to find a fifth defensive tackle once the season starts. That person may be incoming recruit Cam Goode, a 300-pounder from Maryland who enrolls in July. For the time being, Walker, Mihota, Hewitt and Burke comprise the two tackle positions.

“I feel really good about those four guys,” Wiles said.

At the end positions, Hill and Gaines give Wiles two quality starters. Hill finished sixth on the team in tackles this past season with 46 and tied for the team lead in sacks (5.5). Gaines played in 12 games, but really showed his talent in starts against Virginia and

Oklahoma State. He recorded eight tackles combined in those two starts and had a sack in each game.

“Houshun performed really well last year,” Wiles said. “He loves football, he loves the process, he loves lifting, and he loves watching film. He’s a great kid to coach because of that, and because you can sit in there [in the position meeting room] and really watch ball with him and talk ball, and he loves that. He’s got a great motor, and he’s really just gotten so much better since he’s walked on campus. He’s probably been our most consistent performer all spring at the end position, for sure.”

Arguably, the most exciting part of the defensive line is the potential of the young defensive ends behind Hill and Gaines. The group of Emmanuel Belmar, Zion Debose, Nathan Proctor and TyJuan Garbutt all showed flashes of big-time playmaking ability this spring.

Belmar possesses a slight edge because of experience. He played in 10 games this past season as a redshirt freshman, recording four tackles, including one for a loss. He even started the Virginia game because of an injury to Hill, though Hill came in and played.

Belmar came to Tech as a linebacker, but after a couple of seasons at defensive end, he appears to have taken to the position.

**spring**  
2018 (in numerical order)

- 8** Ricky Walker (6-2, 304, r-Sr.)
- 11** Houshun Gaines (6-3, 240, r-Jr.)
- 18** Raymon Minor (6-2, 245, r-Sr.)
- 35** Zion Debose (6-1, 247, r-Fr.)
- 40** Emmanuel Belmar (6-2, 245, r-So.)
- 43** Xavier Burke (6-3, 283, r-Jr.)
- 45** TyJuan Garbutt (6-1, 244, r-Fr.)
- 46** Eli Adams (5-11, 237, Fr.)
- 47** Darius Fullwood (6-3, 278, r-Jr.)
- 55** Jarrod Hewitt (6-1, 285, r-So.)
- 58** Nathan Proctor (6-2, 240, r-Fr.)
- 94** Trevon Hill (6-3, 245, r-Jr.)
- 96** Jimmie Taylor (6-2, 266, r-So.)
- 98** Robert Porcher (6-1, 260, r-Fr.)
- 99** Vinny Mihota (6-5, 284, r-Sr.)

**Defensive Linemen**

“Emmanuel Belmar, amazing, from one year,” Wiles said. “A linebacker coming in, last year really was a big learning experience for him ... and how much better he is his second go around. He’s played fast, been a playmaker for us. Emmanuel has been so much more mature all the way across the board in everything.”

Debose, Proctor and Garbutt all took redshirt seasons this past fall, and all gained 20-25 pounds of muscle. They all resemble each other in that that they stand 6-1 or 6-2 and weigh between 240-250 pounds. They also display quickness coming off the edge.

They also show a willingness to learn and be coached. That, in combination with their physical traits, bodes well for both them and the Hokies. They just need to learn and to be a little more consistent in all phases—technique, fundamentals, and things of that sort.

“We’ve got a lot of defense in right now in a short period of time, and we’re going to do it again this summer and do it again this fall,” Wiles said. “Just hearing it over and over again and watching tape ... what’s good is there isn’t a lot of bad habits, but they do have ability. Not anything that’s really special, but the normal process that we’re seeing with these guys ... just inconsistent play. I see some flashes that gives you encouragement and then just all of the inconsistencies, really. We’ve just got to close that gap and get real consistent performance.”

Walker and Mihota go into summer workouts as the senior leaders for these guys and for the entire defensive line. So for sure, this unit features a lot of young players.

But this young talent deserves watching—both this fall and in the future.

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# LINEBACKERS *improve,* but neither position **solidified** as HOKIES *head into* summer

by Jimmy Robertson

Following the Spring Game, Tech defensive coordinator Bud Foster received questions about the defensive line, then the linebackers and then the secondary.

And he answered all of them pretty much the same way—the Hokies are young and inexperienced, with unproven players at numerous spots.

“I sound like a broken record,” he said, laughing.

For sure, each position on Tech’s defense features its share of youth and inexperience, but none more so than Foster’s two linebacker positions, where he went about replacing Tremaine Edmunds and Andrew Motuapuaka this spring. The latter was a three-year starter who compiled more than 300 tackles in

his career, while the former wound up being a first-round NFL Draft pick.

At the mike linebacker position, Rayshard Ashby went to the forefront in the battle to replace Motuapuaka. The rising sophomore played in 13 games this past fall, but all that action came on special teams. Still, he showed an ability to be that leader for which the position calls.

“I think Rayshard separated himself from who he is competing with at the mike,” Foster admitted.

At the conclusion of spring practice, Rico Kearney was at No. 2 on the depth chart at mike linebacker followed by Daniel Griffith and Zack Treser.

The backer position is a little more unsettled, as the trio of Dylan Rivers, Jaylen Griffin and Alan Tisdale were battling for the job. Like Ashby, Rivers played a lot of special teams a year ago, and he played a meager amount of snaps in the North Carolina game, so that experience gives him an edge—but only a slight one.

“I thought Dylan was solid,” Foster said. “That position to me is still a little wide open. I thought Dylan had a really good spring game, though. I always like to use that game because it’s a little different than practice. All of the sudden, you’ve got 40,000 people there, and it’s a little different environment and a true game atmosphere. Kids respond a little differently.

“I thought he [Rivers] played pretty well, pretty solid, in that environment. But it’s [the position battle] wide open.”

Foster wants to see more consistency among a group of players playing at arguably the most important spot on Tech’s defense. The backer needs to be able to stop the run, play in coverage, blitz and basically do anything else that may be needed.

But Foster sees talent at the spot in addition to Rivers. Griffin took a redshirt season this past fall and got bigger and stronger, checking in at 242 pounds at the most recent weigh-in. He wasn’t afraid to mix it up in rush defense, and he improved in pass coverage, but more importantly, he showed the toughness that Foster wants to see in all his defenders.

“Jaylen is a guy that’s big and physical,” Foster said. “I thought he showed some toughness. He hurt his elbow in one practice and didn’t miss a practice, which made a big-time statement to me about him and about his toughness and caring about this football team. I thought that was a big statement, just how he responded to that.”

Foster also spoke highly of Tisdale, a freshman who enrolled at Tech in January. Tisdale looked a little lost at the beginning of spring practices, but he got better with each and every rep. Now he’s put himself in the conversation.

Foster came out of spring practice feeling good about the two positions, but with only a few solid answers. Fortunately, the season doesn’t start tomorrow, as the Hokies now enter summer workouts before beginning practices again in early August.

For this group, though, summer workouts are important. Every day offers an opportunity to get better—something that each one of them needs to do.

“The biggest challenge we have is what we do over the next 3.5 months,” Foster said. “I really do think that’s where our football team over the past couple of years has improved. You’re battling time as much as you’re battling opponents this time of year, and that’s where we can separate ourselves from our opponents. That’s what these guys need to do, in my opinion.”

# Getting **HEALTHY** biggest summer task for **FREE SAFETIES,** **ROVERS** and **NICKELS**

by Jimmy Robertson



Following the season, those on the Virginia Tech staff expected the free safety, rover and nickel positions to be positions of strength for the 2018 season—and they may very well end up being that.

But coming out of spring practice, Tech defensive coordinator Bud Foster faced a tad bit of uncertainty with these spots.

Well, he actually faced that going into spring ball. For starters, Terrell Edmunds made a surprising decision to forgo his senior season and make himself available for the NFL Draft, which created an unexpected opening at the free safety position. And steady reserve Deon Newsome, who started three games this past fall, graduated.

Then Mook Reynolds, who worked mostly at the nickel position this past fall, missed spring practice with an injury, and Divine Deablo re-injured the foot that he injured early this past fall, and missed the rest of spring ball. Plus, starting rover Reggie Floyd went down with an injury and sat out the final four practices, including the Spring Game.

So where are the Hokies at these three positions?

“Reggie just rolled his ankle, and we didn’t want to risk it,” Foster said. “We know what he can do. Divine, yeah, he missed some time,

re-injuring that foot, and that’s critical for us and important for us because I think he’s got the capabilities of being a really dynamic football player. He’s got everything you’re looking for, as far as being long and athletic and tough, but it’s hard to show those things when you’re on the sideline with a broken foot. Hopefully, we can get him back and be ready to roll.”

The final few spring practices consisted of Khalil Ladler holding down the free safety spot, along with freshman D.J. Crossen. Walk-on John Jennings and Shawn Payne worked a lot at the rover position, and sophomore Devon Hunter took care of things at the nickel spot.

Ladler brings much-needed versatility, with the ability to play both free safety and rover. Last year, he started the final two games after Edmunds went down with an injury, and he finished with six tackles combined, including a key goal-line stop in the final seconds of the Pittsburgh game.

“Khalil is a kid that I trust and is dependable and is going to communicate and get us lined up,” Foster said. “He’s going to do some good things for us.”

Foster expects to get Floyd back at that rover position, and he hopes to get Deablo

back to play free safety. That would give him three players at two different spots with playing experience, and it would allow him to play Crossen on special teams, while slowly working him at either rover or free safety to prepare him for his future.

“If Divine can come back, then Ladler can back up both spots, and I feel good about that because he’s smart and can do those things,” Foster said.

The nickel position figures to be handled by both Reynolds when he returns and Hunter, who played well this spring. The prized recruit in the 2017 recruiting class, Hunter battled injuries at times and spent time adjusting to a position change, which limited his effectiveness this past fall. Thus, he played in 10 games as Floyd’s backup at rover, with nearly all of his action coming on special teams.

But Hunter appears to be a good fit at his new nickel spot. At 220 pounds, he brings a physical presence to stop running backs and to rush the passer. He still needs to improve in coverage.

“Devon played very, very well,” Foster said of Hunter’s spring. “Obviously, it’s a new position for him, but I think he showed some gamesmanship that the position needs. He shows an ability to make some plays. He has the size to be a good blitzing and some of those things and be physical at the point of attack. I like his future.”

The bottom line at these positions coming out of spring practice is this—the Hokies need to get healthy. If that happens, then for sure, those guys can be the playmakers that this defense needs.

## spring 2018 (in numerical order)

### Free safeties

- 9 Khalil Ladler (5-11, 189, r-So.)
- 17 Divine Deablo (6-3, 212, r-So.)
- 20 D.J. Crossen (6-1, 191, Fr.)

### Rovers

- 21 Reggie Floyd (6-0, 221, Jr.)
- 27 Shawn Payne (6-3, 190, r-Sr.)
- 42 John Jennings (5-11, 173, Sr.)

### Nickels

- 6 Mook Reynolds (6-0, 185, Sr.)
- 7 Devon Hunter (6-0, 218, So.)

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## Youth and inexperience the top stories, as Tech staff continues search for CORNERBACKS

by Jimmy Robertson

Some of Hokie Nation's focus after the conclusion of the 2017 season centered on replacing standout linebackers Andrew Motuapuaka and Tremaine Edmunds.

But replacing team MVP Greg Stroman deserves just as high of a priority ranking.

Stroman's departure, along with that of fellow starting cornerback Brandon Facyson, left two huge vacancies for a Tech pass defense that allowed just three 300-yard passing games this past fall. Stroman led the team with four interceptions—including one that he returned for a touchdown—and 11 pass breakups, while Facyson broke up five passes.

So cornerbacks coach Brian Mitchell went into the offseason and this spring practice looking for replacements. He fully expected Adonis Alexander to be part of the solution, but the rising senior missed nearly all of spring practice with an injury and to focus on academics, leaving a group of inexperienced and thus untested guys learning on the job.

As far as experience goes, Jovonn Quillen possessed the most among the players who received plenty of reps this spring. Quillen, a rising junior, has spent nearly all of the past two seasons playing on special teams and made

a name for himself on those units, too.

But on defense, he has bounced between several spots in the secondary before finally landing at cornerback. It took him a couple of years to make the transition to playing defense, as he spent most of his prep career at Hampton High School in Hampton, Virginia at the quarterback spot.

"There's a transition," Mitchell admitted. "You're talking about a kid that played quarterback in high school and lined up in the middle of the field [on defense], and they told him, 'See ball, get ball' because he was so dynamic as an athlete.

"When you start talking about the verbiage that we have in this scheme and then the techniques that go along with it, I mean, there is a learning curve that's going to go along with that process, and I think he's getting to the point now where he's comfortable with what we are doing down in and down out.

"Last year, we didn't ask that much of him because we had Stroman, Facyson and Alexander - guys that had been veterans in this game. But now it's his turn to step up and carry the mantle, and he's doing a good job of being assignment sound."

The other player who received quite the initiation at the position was Bryce Watts. Like Quillen, the rising sophomore spent nearly all of his time on special teams a year ago as a true freshman, playing in all 13 games.

Watts brings what every defensive backs coach wants—pure speed. He won the state title in the 100-meter dash during his senior season at Toms River North High in New Jersey, and he showed some of that ability this spring. In one scrimmage, he intercepted a pass and returned it for a touchdown.

Watts, though, needs to get bigger and stronger. He only weighs around 170 pounds.

"[He's] a young man that has grown tenfold since the start of last camp to this spring session," Mitchell said. "He's a kid with tremendous gifts—I mean, he's a 100-meter champion from New Jersey. He's got that speed, and I think he's relied on that, but now you're starting to see him master the techniques as well and master our scheme, which is not easy to do as a young player.

"You need mental reps, you need physical reps out there day in and day out, and he's doing a great job of just being a playmaker for us. We're going to ask our corners to do exactly

what Greg Stroman, Brandon Facyson, Kendall Fuller and all of those guys before them have done, and that's to challenge wide receivers day in and day out."

Others who received a lot of work this spring included Tyree Rodgers, a rising redshirt sophomore who played in seven games this past fall, and true freshmen Jermaine Waller and D.J. Crossen, both of whom enrolled at Tech in January. The 6-foot-1, 191-pound Crossen played just as much at rover as cornerback, if not more.

"We didn't miss [on] athleticism," Mitchell said of the early enrollees. "Both kids have great football IQ. I mean, they're going to be welcome additions to our future. The work ethic is there, but just seeing bright-eyed ... you know, kids that should be getting ready for prom right now or graduation are here on campus right now ... where they [now] have a chance to help us in the fall."

An X-factor at cornerback comes in the form of Caleb Farley, the star of last year's spring game—as a receiver. Farley, though, spent most of his time at cornerback before being moved to receiver for the final few practices and was set to play receiver this past fall before tearing his ACL in August. He missed the entire season.

This past winter, head coach Justin Fuente decided to move Farley back to cornerback, with the possibility of also working him as a receiver this fall. The 6-2, 200-pounder first

**spring**  
2018 (in numerical order)

- 3** Caleb Farley (6-2, 197, r-Fr.)
- 5** Bryce Watts (6-0, 171, So.)
- 26** Jovonn Quillen (6-0, 187, Jr.)
- 28** Jermaine Waller (6-1, 179, Fr.)
- 36** Adonis Alexander (6-3, 207, Sr.)
- 39** Tyree Rodgers (6-1, 185, r-So.)

**Cornerbacks**

needs to get his knee healthy, as he missed all of the scrimmage work this spring.

"Having him back on our side of the ball, I'm excited," Mitchell said. "Another big, long, rangy kid that can run and challenge wide receivers day in and day out—why wouldn't I be excited? It's just going to add to DBU [Defensive Back University] and give us an opportunity to go out there and play great defense."

Tech also gets some help later this summer in the form of junior college transfer Jeremy Webb. The 6-3, 190-pound Florida native played at ASA College in Brooklyn, New York this past fall and earned all-conference honors before signing with the Hokies.

Mitchell hopes to get him up to speed quickly.

"One, to bring some maturity to our group," Mitchell said when asked what Webb will bring to the cornerback positions. "I mean, there's a big gap between Bryce Watts and Adonis Alexander. We don't have but one junior in that slot right now, and that's [Jovonn] Quillen. Tyree Rodgers is going to be a redshirt sophomore. Bryce will be a true sophomore. We will have [Jermaine] Waller, a true freshman, D.J. a true freshman, and Nadir Thompson [an incoming recruit], a true freshman.

"Webb is going to give us the opportunity to bring some maturity there, bring some experience at a different level and hopefully some gamesmanship, where he can get out there and win a starting job."

All that being said, the Hokies need a healthy and focused Alexander to lead this group throughout the summer and into the fall. The lone senior in the bunch, he possesses the most experience, having played in 34 games (15 starts) in his career and recording seven interceptions.

The Hokies have a lot of intriguing pieces at the cornerback positions, but they come with questions. Can Watts be a shutdown specialist? Can Quillen keep improving? Will the freshmen develop enough? What about Farley's knee, or Webb's ability to learn the scheme in a short time period?

Hopefully, those answers come in early August—and hopefully they're positive. Tech's 2018 pass defense strategy hinges largely on that.



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Most collegiate student-athletes find themselves immersed in their sports, and even their off-field or off-court hobbies center somewhat on that.

Yet occasionally, one finds that student-athlete with some rather eclectic interests.

Say someone who plugs his earphones in and listens to podcasts on politics and philosophy instead of music or sports while walking across the Drillfield to class. Or someone who dreams of salmon fishing in Alaska. Or someone who wants to learn to play the electric guitar. Perhaps someone who loves listening to Tom Petty and collects his vinyl records—even though Petty’s first album was released 20 years before this person’s birth.

“I’m an old soul,” Connor Coward admitted.

Which, of course, is perfectly fine. There is absolutely nothing wrong with being good at your sport and interesting to boot.

Hokie Nation knows Coward as the anchor of the Virginia Tech pitching staff in the first year of the John Szefc era, and with seemingly each passing outing, Coward makes more of a name for himself. He leads the Hokies in practically every pitching category, which provides the evidence for the theory that his 2-5 record is more a reflection of run support than his actual pitching.

That he pitches so well often surprises Major League Baseball scouts when they watch him. After all, he only stands around 6-foot and weighs around 200 pounds (think Greg Maddux), and he only occasionally touches 90 miles per hour on the radar guns. He serves as a contradiction for the sought-after mold of a future big leaguer—6-5, 220 and bringing the gas at 95 mph-plus.

Yet Coward simply does exactly what his coaches want most of the time—he gets guys out. Perhaps some of that comes from his native Pittsburgh disposition, that gritty toughness inherent in those who come from the Steel City and therefore embrace a bulldog mentality. Perhaps it comes from genetics, as his father played college basketball at Grove City College, a small school north of Pittsburgh.

Whatever the reason, this season isn’t a fluke. Coward got ACC hitters out last year, too.

“I would just say knowing that I’m good enough to be here,” Coward explained of his success. “That was something that I struggled with, my first year, especially. I just didn’t have the confidence to go in there and say, ‘Hey, these guys aren’t Babe Ruth. They’re college kids, just like me. They’re looking to meet girls and have fun on the weekends and go out and be a regular kid.’

“Once I got over that, I thought, ‘Hey, I can pitch with these guys if I can work both halves of the plate. I don’t need to be perfect every single pitch.’ I think that helped me with my confidence a lot.”

Coward never lacked such confidence before, especially when he played at Seneca Valley High School in Pittsburgh. A tremendous golfer, he decided to focus on baseball instead, and he made the varsity team as a sophomore at the critical position of shortstop. He moved to the mound as a junior when the team’s ace hurt himself—and he alternated between the two positions the rest of his career.

He received interest from a lot of schools, but never really considered himself an ACC player. When recruiters made trips to Seneca Valley, they came to watch Sam Fragale, the team’s slugger and top position player. Coward had not heard of Virginia Tech until Fragale, a year older than him, committed to the Hokies.

“Really, I never focused much on college baseball,” Coward said. “In high school, I didn’t follow it much. When he committed to Virginia Tech, I thought, ‘Good for Sam! He’s a heckuva player. He deserves that.’ I didn’t think I was that caliber of a baseball player just because Sam had been the guy for so long.”

Unlike a lot of baseball players who simply view college as a means to professional baseball, Coward viewed college more traditionally—as an avenue to his long-term future. Business intrigued him as much as baseball, and engineering, too.

Virginia Tech eventually afforded him the opportunity to combine all his favorites. Previous Tech head coach Pat Mason and pitching coach Robert Woodard started showing as much interest in him as they had shown in Fragale and entered into the mix for his services. Though friends and neighbors, Coward and Fragale were not a package deal.

*Continued on page 32*

**COMPELLING COWARD**  
the ace of  
**• TECH BASEBALL STAFF •**

**Connor Coward**  
*has delivered numerous big-time performances on the mound for the Hokies over the past two seasons, but his interests go way beyond the baseball diamond*

*by Jimmy Robertson*

“

*I’ve been to a lot of schools and I’ve been to all the ACC schools pretty much, and I still think this is the most beautiful campus on the East Coast. I really believe that. That was one part that really sold it for me.*

Connor Coward on his decision to come to Tech

”





Continued from  
page 30

the campus in general,” Coward said. “I had taken a few visits to ACC or ACC-caliber schools. The one thing that stood out about Virginia Tech ... I’ve been to a lot of schools and I’ve been to all the ACC schools pretty much, and I still think this is the most beautiful campus on the East Coast. I really believe that. That was one part that really sold it for me.

“I didn’t know if I wanted to come into engineering or business. I was interested in both, and obviously Pamplin [the Pamplin College of Business] is a top-50 business program in the country and engineering is in the top 10 or top five in the country. I couldn’t miss with either one, and obviously, with baseball, they had just hosted the regional the year before I committed [in 2013] and they were a top-20 team, so they were an up-and-coming program in the most competitive conference in the country. I had the potential to play all four years, which I’ve done.”

Coward struggled, though, during the first two of those four years. He pitched in 32 games combined and recorded ERAs above 7 each year. His confidence took a predictable tumble in his first ACC start when he lasted just 22 pitches against Duke.

But his career turned last year during a relief outing against Florida State — ranked No. 1 at the time. He pitched four innings and

Coward’s decision eventually solidified itself when he came to Blacksburg for a visit. He, like many others, found out quickly that if you want to pursue business or engineering among friendly folks surrounded by a beautiful setting, then you need to come to Southwest Virginia.

“It was a mix of academics, baseball and

allowed just a hit, as Tech rallied from a 10-7 deficit to get the victory. Coward himself got the win and subsequently worked himself into the weekend rotation.

Three weeks later, he received the start against then-No. 4 Clemson. Nearly 5,000 fans gathered at Clemson’s Doug Kingsmore Stadium, but Coward managed to hang in there, allowing just four earned runs in 6.1 innings. He struck out eight.

“It was loud and rowdy,” Coward said. “I went seven innings, and that’s when I realized, ‘OK this is the biggest stage in the ACC. They have the best team in the ACC. They have the best pitching staff and the best hitters. If I can compete at that level and go seven and be in the ball game, I can pitch anywhere.’ I think that’s what turned it around for me.”

Coward finished his junior season with a 5-4 record and a 4.75 ERA. He tied for the team lead in wins, and he led the team in both starts (12) and innings pitched (72). Some speculated that he would be selected in the Major League Baseball First-year Player Draft, but that never materialized.

Truthfully, he spent little time thinking about the draft. Not being drafted actually took the decision out of his hands, and in essence, left this “old soul” with what he wanted all along — a chance to play baseball for the Hokies for another season, while also allowing him to get closer to a degree in marketing.


“The degree I’m working on now will be worth a lot more than a signing bonus some day,” Coward said. “So I’m pleased with where I’m at as far as academics. My priority was always school first. I think I’m in a good spot to achieve what I wanted to achieve here.”

Coward may get drafted this June — his numbers certainly warrant that — but for now, only the current season receives his intense focus. That and his relentless pursuit of that diploma. A freshman year spent

taking biochemistry classes and a major change thus left him a little behind academically, so Coward plans on getting his degree next fall when he completes his final two courses.

And what about professional baseball? It obviously intrigues him, but Coward wants to shore up his “plan B.” He has been talking with a certain prospective employer about an insurance sales position, and he plans on using the fall to study for the LSAT [law school admission test], as he contemplates attending law school.

It would only make sense. In addition to his other unique interests, he also once served as the captain of the debate team in high school, and he belongs to a political debate organization on campus.

Regardless of which career path he chooses, this old soul with an array of intriguing interests has given himself options. Other student-athletes would do well to follow suit. 

## GETTING TO KNOW ... CONNOR COWARD

### Q: What would be your dream vacation, and why?

**CC:** I would say, because my dad and I have talked about it forever, Alaska during the summer to go salmon fishing. That’s one thing I want to check off the list. If you take one of those boat tours through the Bering Sea and look at the glaciers, it’s absolutely gorgeous.

### Q: If you could play any other sport, it would be which one, and why?

**CC:** Golf, 100 percent. I have such a respect for the game. I follow golf pretty closely. You just don’t understand how difficult that is. I get nervous when I have the pairing behind me watching my tee shot. I couldn’t imagine having thousands of people staring right at you, and on top of that, the shots they make. If I made one of those shots, it would make my whole round. They do that every single shot. But yeah, I would definitely be a golfer. That’s a very unique skill that I would love to have.

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

**CC:** I’m an old soul. I don’t listen to any new music, virtually any. My favorite artist is Tom Petty. I’m a huge Tom Petty fan. I own all of his vinyls. I have all his music, and all the older magazines of him from the 80s and 90s. I went to his concert this past summer a few months before he passed away. He was in Pittsburgh on June 9, and my dad and I went. We had pretty good seats. That was one of the most memorable moments of my life. I also like Red Hot Chili Peppers, The Rolling Stones, Aerosmith, AC/DC — that genre of music, really.

### Q: If I could live anywhere, it would be ...

**CC:** If everything worked out perfectly, I’d love to be close to Pittsburgh again. But other cities I’d really be interested in going to would be Charlotte. I’ve heard Charlotte is a very nice area, and Austin, Texas. I have a friend of mine that works down there, and he loves it.

### Q: What is your favorite thing about being a VT athlete?

**CC:** My teammates. I’ve said it a million times, for all the struggles and prices you pay for being a student-athlete at any level, let alone this high of a level, for the early mornings, the late nights, the travel, the hardships on your body ... it’s all worth it when you have a group of 34 other guys that you have a bond with that is unlike anyone else on campus. You go through a whole lot with those guys, and to be able to come out on the other end of it makes you have a special bond with some great guys.

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# RUNNING

STRAIGHT TO

*Rachel Pocratsky has been dominating on the track, while also pursuing a degree in civil engineering. Her achievements in both have her pointed toward a bright future in whichever direction she decides to choose*

by Jimmy Robertson

# SUCCESS



Workers continue to spend much of the spring putting the finishing touches on the \$18 million Rector Field House/softball hitting facility project, with the Rector portion including a permanent lobby with trophy cases, a new throws area, additional spectator seating, an additional training room, new lighting and more.

As she and others trained on the track during the construction process, Rachel Pocratsky couldn't help but watch and feel an urge to offer a suggestion or two to the workers, engineers and architects involved.

Such is the mindset of a person pursuing a degree in civil engineering, with its emphasis on designing and building.

"I don't know much about this, but I feel like I could be telling them what they should be doing and what they should not be doing," Pocratsky laughed.

Typical of an engineering major, Pocratsky has built a nice little academic resume, as she prepares herself for a future in the construction world. She's also developed a rather impressive track career, one with plenty of room for future growth.

The junior from Gaithersburg, Maryland anchors the Tech women's track and field team as a middle distance runner. In fact, she has been rather dominant at nearly every middle distance this season, recording 11 wins combined, including relays, at various meets throughout the indoor and outdoor campaigns heading into the ACC Outdoor Track and Field Championships in Miami.

In some respects, that comes as no surprise. Many runners are actually great at running but lack the passion to put in the work that it takes to win. Pocratsky, on the contrary, actually *loves* it.

That love actually started when she played soccer as a kid. Her coach put her in the midfield, which forced her to scurry around for 90 minutes—and thus revealed her passion. She kept soccer as her main sport until she got to middle school when her father, Carl, got her into running as a way of remaining in shape. As a freshman in high school, she endured one of life's epiphany's, which came courtesy of a torn ACL in her knee suffered on the pitch during the season.

"I was two weeks into the track season, too, and I was really excited because I was feeling in really good shape, but then when that happened, I was out for a while," she said. "I realized when I was sitting on the sidelines at soccer games in the spring, still recovering, that I was like, 'I don't really miss this as much as I was excited to see how I'd do in track.' So then, I was definitely way more excited the next year when I was able to do track again."

Pocratsky came back in a big way, establishing herself as a dominant runner in the Washington, D.C.-Maryland area. She twice won the 800 at the WCAC (Washington Catholic Athlete Conference) Championships, and later in her high school career, she finished in the top 10 in the 800 at the prestigious AAU Junior Olympics and the New Balance Nationals.

When it came time to look for colleges, she focused first on academics, but a nagging urge to try track at the collegiate level wouldn't go away. She looked at all the big schools, including Duke, Virginia and Penn State, the alma mater of both of her parents. The two Pennsylvania natives strongly encouraged their oldest daughter to make State College her home for four years.

## track and field spotlight **rachel pocratsky**

A visit there, though, left her unimpressed.

"I don't know," she said. "It wasn't really what I was expecting. I think we went on maybe a not-so-nice day. It was kind of cold, and there was a lot of construction going on at the time, so it just wasn't the Penn State that they were telling me about. I don't know. It just wasn't what I was looking for at the time, and it was even bigger than here, so I was like, 'Uh, this is a little too big.'"

Pocratsky had been emailing college track and field coaches to gather information and to gauge interest. She had been attracting a little attention, but the recruiting process for Olympic sports is different from that of major sports like football and basketball. A lot of Olympic sport coaches lack the budgets to attend meets, visit high schools or go to a prospect's home, so they mostly rely on email or social media correspondence with a person of interest.

Pocratsky's strategy was quite simple. She emailed coaches and waited for a response.

"If they responded, 'Yeah, you can come to my office,' then I'd go see them," she said. "If not, then I'd just look around the school and see if I liked it anyways."

Fortunately for the Virginia Tech track and field program, distance coach Ben Thomas and assistant Eric Johannigmeier happened to be

in town when Pocratsky emailed them, and they quickly responded, inviting her to the office for a visit. Dave Cianelli, Tech's director of track and field and cross country, also invited her to stop by.

In fact, they were among the first to respond to her, as she started the process. That, and their genuine interest in her, quickly won her over.

"They were really nice about it," she said. "They were the first school that was really interested in me, and it just kind of went from there. They kept in really good correspondence with me and showed a lot of interest. And it was a big engineering school, which is what I wanted to do. There were a lot of benefits."

"I also liked the atmosphere here. Everyone was really nice, and I liked the big school aspect also. I wasn't trying to go to too small of a school, and this was the right distance from home. It wasn't too close, but not too far. It had a lot to offer."

Pocratsky had a lot to offer, too, and the Hokies took advantage, as she earned All-ACC honors during both the indoor and outdoor seasons as a freshman, doing so in the 800 in the indoor season and the 1,500 in the outdoor season. She earned All-ACC honors during both seasons as a sophomore, with both coming in the 800, and she helped the Tech women win the ACC's outdoor team title.

She spent most of those first two seasons looking at Hanna Green's backside, though, as Green simply dominated middle distance events during her career. Green departed Tech's program last year as a five-time All-American and a six-time ACC gold medalist. She finished as an NCAA runner-up in the 800 on three occasions.

The two certainly pushed each other over the past two years, and that made each better. As Pocratsky continues dominating in her own right this winter and spring, she carries with her even more respect for Green's approach to training and running.

"A lot," Pocratsky said when asked what she learned from Green. "There was a teammate rivalry because we were always going back

*Continued on page 36*

*Everyone was really nice, and I liked the big school aspect also. I wasn't trying to go to too small of a school, and this was the right distance from home. It wasn't too close, but not too far. It had a lot to offer.*  
**Rachel Pocratsky on her decision to come to Virginia Tech**



***RUNNING*** *Continued from page 35*

and forth in the same events. But training with her and seeing that she was always pushing the pace, always out in front, always trying to get better, was always really good to have. Now that she’s gone, I realize that I have to make that for myself, but because I was able to see her example, I know where I need to be.”

Pocratsky took the baton from Green this winter and delivered, easily winning the gold medal in the 800-meter run at the ACC Indoor Track and Field Championships in February—the first gold medal of her career. She qualified for the NCAA Indoor Championships in March and brought home her first All-America honor, finishing sixth in the 800.

Roughly two months after that event, she went all Green in her summarization of the race. In other words, she wasn’t satisfied because she didn’t take home the gold.

“Honestly, it was disappointing,” she said. “I was hoping to place higher, but I got boxed in from the beginning—but definitely still exciting because I had never gotten to race at the national level because of bad circumstances, I guess. One bad race is all it takes.

“But definitely gratifying to race against all those girls that perform at such a high level and getting to talk to them and meet them and getting a chance to run on a stage that most people don’t get a chance to do is pretty cool. I’m definitely looking forward to more of those.”

Hopefully, more of those come in June when the NCAA holds its outdoor track and field championships in Eugene, Oregon. It’s there—the mecca of track and field—where she wants to continue the Hokies’ legacy in distance running.

Thomas has coached more than 30 All-Americans since arriving at Tech with Cianelli back in 2001. He guided the distance medley relay team of Vincent Ciattei, Greg Chiles, Patrick Joseph and Neil Gourley to the national title this past March—the Hokies’ first national championship in distance running.

Could Pocratsky continue the trend and provide Tech with its first individual national title in distance running?

“She’s had a pretty amazing ascent in 2.5 years,” Thomas admitted. “She’s a late bloomer physically, but I’m most impressed with her mental toughness. She’s tough and unafraid as a racer. She’s also had a year and a half of consistency in training, too. She came in having done very little training in high school and kind of afraid to train too hard. Now she’s a very confident racer, and nobody outworks her in workouts.

***GETTING TO KNOW ...*** RACHEL POCRATSKY

**Q: What would be your dream vacation and why?**

**RP:** Probably Australia. I love the beach. I’ve always loved it, and I’m not the person who is going to be on the beach tanning all day. I’m the one who’s in the water for the majority of the time. I’ve just always liked it, and Australia is beautiful. There is so much there. I would love that. I’d love to go scuba diving and see the coral reefs and all that, but also the area and all the different animals. It’s really cool.

**Q: If you could play any other sport, it would be which one, and why?**

**RP:** Probably gymnastics. It’s insane what they’re able to do. I know people obsess over it only during the Olympics for the most part, but if I could do the kind of flips and things that they do on any day I wanted to just because I was excited or something, that would be pretty cool.

**Q: If I could live anywhere, it would be ...**

**RP:** Probably California. I’ve heard a lot about San Diego, but I don’t know that I’d want to live in the city necessarily. If there were some place like San Francisco that was maybe a little warmer, that would be ideal. I’ve heard Santa Barbara is beautiful. I guess I like the West Coast.

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

**RP:** Maybe Taylor Swift. Her past CD, when it came out, I played it on repeat for five days straight. It was during finals this past semester, and it was what was keeping me going. She’s also just a really cool person it sounds like.

**Q: I chose Virginia Tech because ...**

**RP:** This place is so welcoming, and I saw a lot of opportunity here. When you go to Virginia Tech, pretty much anywhere we go for a track meet, there is always someone saying, ‘Go Hokies!’ There is always a connection somewhere it seems like, and that’s such a huge resource that I knew I’d be able to use throughout the rest of my life.


“I’m excited for her. I feel there’s still a lot of successful racing ahead of her.”

Barring injury, she figures to be just as dominant next season as a senior, perhaps even more so. Not that she thinks that far ahead, but she remains aware that she possibly faces difficult choices—to pursue a professional track career, or to jump into a potentially lucrative job as a civil engineer.

Pocratsky is on track—no pun intended—to become one of the rare students to graduate in four years with a degree in engineering, even after changing her major from mechanical engineering to civil. Her internship with Grunley Construction in Washington, D.C., this summer hopefully will give her insight on her future fate.

“I’m interested to see how that will be,” she said. “I think it will be good. I actually will be up and around, walking around the job site, inspecting to see if everything is moving well and also looking at papers and signing off on them. It’s just a lot more hands-on, and you can see your work coming into play more than what I was getting out of mechanical [engineering].”

Engineers like to joke that scientists dream about doing great things, but engineers actually do them. In some respects, that rings true.

Pocratsky certainly has done great things so far—both on the track and in the classroom. And for sure, more is in store. 

Rachel Pocratsky is coming into her own during her junior season, earning All-America honors for the first time in her career at the NCAA Indoor Track and Field Championships.





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# PLAYING HIS PASSION

*After excelling on the junior circuit, Mark Lawrence Jr. started his collegiate golfing career at Auburn, but after a brief stop there, he decided to transfer, and his career is now really taking flight in Blacksburg*

*by Jimmy Robertson*

By definition, a superstition is not based on reason or logic or fact. Yet in the golfing world, golfers totally buy into the effectiveness of various superstitions in an attempt to gain an edge on the game.

For instance, Tiger Woods always wears a red shirt for the final round of a tournament. So, too, does Patrick Reed (who won the Masters, by the way). Jack Nicklaus, arguably the greatest golfer of all time, only played when he had three coins in his pocket, believing the number 3 to be a lucky number.

Lee Trevino refused to use yellow tees because he thought yellow symbolized cowardice. Davis Love III used currency as a ball marker, but only coins minted in the 1960s, as he believed any coins minted after 1970 to be bad luck. Ben Crenshaw only used balls with the numbers 1 through 4 on them because anything higher would result in scores that equaled that number.

All those guys were successful professionals—and Mark Lawrence Jr. hopes to follow a similar path.

Virginia Tech's top golfer certainly resembles the pros, as he may be as superstitious as one gets. He only uses a green sharpie to write on his ball (as a way to honor a deceased friend whose high school's primary color is green). He marks the ball with a quarter, and the head must be up. If he hits a perfect first drive on the range while warming up, he immediately puts his driver in his bag. And he always has to find and fix his ball mark, lest the golf gods hold it against him.

"I have a ton of superstitions," Lawrence said, smiling. "I have a lot more than that. There are a lot of little things that I do, and when I don't do them, I'm like, 'I've got to do that.'"

Much to the dismay of more analytical types, Lawrence's results are proving that maybe superstitions actually work. Less than two seasons into his career at Virginia Tech—after transferring from Auburn University—the Richmond native ranks as one of the best golfers in program history.

He seemed destined for great things in the sport shortly after his birth. At the age of 3, he broke out his plastic set of kids' clubs and started mimicking golfers on television, while his dad, Mark Sr., watched Sunday afternoon final rounds.

Of course, most of his love for golf came from his dad, who was—and still is—a heckuva player, with a Virginia State Golf Association [VSGA] Amateur Championship in 1980 to his name to prove it.

"I'm just a really competitive person, and I just love the competition," the younger Lawrence said. "And then, I like the fact that no matter how hard you work or whatever you do, you'll never be perfect, so you have to learn to adapt and look at it from a different perspective.

"You can have a perfect game in other sports. A perfect game as a quarterback is all completions and four touchdowns. Or you can have a perfect game in baseball. You can't have a perfect game in golf. I don't know, I just like the fact that there is something going on every round. It's different."

Lawrence's golf awakening came during his freshman year of high school. He got into a playoff at the state championship tournament, and on the first playoff hole, he hit his approach to within a foot of the hole. The subsequent birdie propelled him to the first of three individual state titles.

He went on to dominate the junior golf circuit, winning three consecutive Virginia State Junior Amateur Match Play Championship titles, and he finished as the runner-up at the VSGA Amateur Championship—the same tournament his dad won. He lost to former Tech golfer Maclain Huge in 2015 before heading to Auburn, where he committed as a sophomore in high school.

"I was looking at a bunch of different places," he said. "The coach down there is a really good guy, and I liked him a lot. They had great facilities, and Jake Mondy from Blacksburg was there, and I kind of looked up to him growing up because he dominated

## **golf spotlight mark lawrence jr.**

the state in junior golf for a while. It just felt like it was best for me to do that."

His stay on The Plains, though, lasted for just a year. He played periodically in the Auburn lineup, but was 11 hours from home, away from his parents and his friends, and in the summer of 2016, he decided to come back to the Commonwealth.

Fortunately for Hokie Nation, he chose Blacksburg.

"Auburn just wasn't the best fit for me," Lawrence said. "I wanted to be closer to home and be able to work with my dad when I needed to and talk to him. I needed a change and was very fortunate to be able to come here, and things have gone pretty well."

Lawrence admitted that his golf swing—and game, in general—was a bit of a mess at the time of his transfer. His rounds at Auburn only counted about half the time when he played, and for a guy often used to winning, he only managed one top-10 finish there.

The presence of Tech assistant coach Brian Sharp, who had struck up a relationship with Mark Sr. while on the recruiting circuit, also factored into Lawrence's decision to come to Tech. The elder Lawrence liked Sharp and felt the longtime assistant and former Hokie great could help his son.

Sharp's calm, patient disposition turned out to be exactly what the competitive Lawrence needed. The two worked on Lawrence's game, and last spring, he led the Hokies in stroke average (71.5). He recorded two top-five finishes and received an individual bid to the NCAA West Lafayette Regional, where he came in 12th.

"In less than a year, Coach Sharp got me pretty much to where I am now," Lawrence said. "That says all it needs to right there."

"He gives me far too much credit for a lot of this stuff," Sharp said. "We talked about making a couple of changes, and it was more me explaining where I thought he needed to be—but he did all the work. I didn't hit a single practice ball for the kid. I wasn't the one spending hours hitting balls and putting and doing all the work that was necessary. I was just a sounding board."

Last summer, Lawrence enjoyed the best two-month span of his life. In June, he won the VSGA Amateur Championship, avenging his 2016 loss to Huge. In doing so, he matched his dad's 1980 feat, and they became the only father-son duo in the tournament's 104-year history to win titles.

The victory came as no surprise to Sharp. Lawrence visited with Sharp a week before the tournament just to fine tune some things, and Sharp saw little to fine tune.

"I told him, 'The way you're hitting the golf ball right now, you should go down there and expect to win,'" Sharp said.

The victory meant a lot to both dad and son, but especially the younger Lawrence. Each time he had played in the tournament, he sought the trophy beforehand just to get a glimpse of his dad's name.

"The amount I've learned from him is unbelievable," Lawrence said of his dad. "Pretty much every thing aspect of how I mentally attack a round of golf and my mindset with shots, what I need to do, where I need to avoid, I learned that from playing with him and watching him. Probably the biggest thing I've learned from him is how to score."

Mark Sr., who played in the 1981 U.S. Open at Merion Golf Club outside Philadelphia, is a short-game guru—even once earning compliments from longtime former PGA Tour player Dave Stockton, a two-time major winner and another short-game guru. For years, Mark Sr. staved off his son on the course because of his ability to hit wedge shots close to the hole. As he got older, the younger Lawrence came to appreciate his dad's game and took note.

*Continued on page 40*



## PLAYING HIS PASSION

Continued from page 39

On the final hole, the two were all square, but Lawrence got a bit unlucky, hitting a wedge shot well past the hole, which left him with a slick downhill putt. He wound up losing the hole, as Redman advanced.

The loss still stings, but time and maturity have allowed Lawrence to learn from the experience.

"I gained a lot of confidence and belief in myself," he said. "I always felt like I was good enough to compete with anyone, but just being able to do that and compete with the best players in the world kind of helped me solidify that belief."


Lawrence plans to return to both tournaments this summer and hopes to carry his spring successes into them. His 71.20 average this spring marked the best of his career.

Then he returns to Tech in August for his final season. Work remains for this young man, who wants to add an ACC championship to his illustrious resume before heading off to pursue PGA Tour dreams. Every golfer dreams of playing at that level—and Lawrence appears to have the game required to reach it.

"Most of the guys that do well that you see on TV live it and breathe it," Sharp said. "That's the biggest thing in most of their lives ... I just feel like he [Lawrence] has enough. You have to be able to hit it far, and he can certainly do that. Then, can you chip and putt? And he can certainly do that."

"That's my plan," Lawrence said of making the Tour. "It's going to take work, and you've got to get lucky here and there."

Given his talent, Lawrence probably doesn't need luck, but rest assured, he plans on continuing his superstitions.

You know, just in case. 

Lawrence's length off the tee combined with his improved short game nearly enabled him to win the prestigious U.S. Amateur held at revered Riviera Country Club outside of Los Angeles this past August. He made it all the way to the match play semifinals against Clemson's Doc Redman.

### GETTING TO KNOW ... MARK LAWRENCE JR.

**Q: What would be your dream vacation, and why?**

**ML:** I'd probably want to go over to Scotland and play Carnoustie, St. Andrews, Muirfield ... all those courses over there. Just go over there with my dad. My best friend, Mike, and my buddy, Will, us four go over there for a week and just go travel around and play all those courses.

**Q: If you could play any other sport, it would be which one, and why?**

**ML:** Probably soccer. I played one year of indoor soccer with a bunch of my friends from back home. A lot of them are at Tech now, and they were all on the soccer team in high school, so we ended up winning the indoor league—and I was, by far, the worst player on the team. But it was so much fun to play.

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

**ML:** Probably Jack Nicklaus. To have 18 majors and six green jackets would be pretty cool. I'd probably wear all six of them in one day.

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

**ML:** I'm not a huge music person. When I flip on the radio, I like to listen to country music, and that's pretty much it. Honestly, I have no idea who is singing most of the songs. I usually turn on ESPN Radio or a sports podcast.

**Q: What is your favorite thing about being a VT athlete?**

**ML:** Just being able to be with all the guys all the time, and the team camaraderie. It's just a fun atmosphere for us.

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*Dr. Gunnar Brolinson, one of Tech's team physicians, and a group of international doctors and researchers recently received FDA approval for a blood test to be used to diagnose concussions*

by Jimmy Robertson

## TECH ATHLETICS involved in *creating*

Sixteen years hasn't dimmed Dr. Gunnar Brolinson's memory of the conversation.

Trying time and time again to secure grant money to study helmet safety and start concussion research—and failing each time—Brolinson called one of the organizations to whom he applied for funding just to get a full explanation for the denial.

“This is a junk diagnosis,” he was told. “This is junk science, and this will never be funded.”

That conversation took place in 2003. Fast forward 15 years, and Brolinson, who doubles as a Virginia Tech Athletics team physician and the vice provost for research at the Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine, laughs at the memory, particularly after the extraordinary news that he received in mid-February related to the topics.

Years of research, resources and devotion paid off handsomely, as Brolinson received an email from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration that granted the approval for the marketing of a blood test to be used to evaluate mild traumatic brain injury (mTBI)—commonly referred to as concussion.

“For the first time, we have a blood test panel that helps us make a clinical diagnosis of mTBI [mild traumatic brain injury] and will be

the ‘go-no go’ test for whether we’re going to order a CT scan or not,” Brolinson said. “So it’s pretty cool. It’s really exciting, and we couldn’t be happier to be a part of that research.”

The news sent shockwaves through the medical industry, as Brolinson and a team of doctors and researchers from around the world found a solution to a major medical issue. Sports fans know all about the issues surrounding concussions in athletics, particularly football, and look at the issue through that prism, but concussions can affect anyone—from the kid who falls while riding his bike to the adult in a car accident to the military service member in combat.

Making an accurate diagnosis of a concussion always has been the difficult part. In many cases, a person remains conscious and shows few symptoms, or the symptoms present themselves later (headache, dizziness, etc.). Often, a person doesn’t realize he or she has been concussed. So often, doctors play a bit of a guessing game.

Doctors never want to miss a diagnosis, so in the case of concussions, they frequently order a CAT scan, often referred to as CT scans, of the brain. CT scans don’t always work, though, and they are expensive and expose people to radiation.

That, Brolinson said, leaves doctors, “licking their finger and sticking it in the wind” to try to determine if a CT scan is warranted

for a particular patient presenting to the emergency room with a history of head trauma.

“The brain is the most complex organ in the body, and we don’t have a blood test for it,” he said. “And it’s the only organ in the body that we don’t have a blood test for. When you’re making a clinical diagnosis, you want to have as much information as you possibly can. The problem with a concussion is that the blood test is missing.”

Until now.

In August of 2013, a company named Banyan Biomarkers, with headquarters in San Diego and Alachua, Florida, approached VCOM, the Virginia Tech Sports Medicine office and the Virginia Tech Biomedical Engineering Department about joining a pilot project that called for the creation of a biomarker panel of the brain—and offered to provide much of the funding. Without getting too technical, biomarkers may consist of molecules, cells, tissues or other body fluids and can be used to see if a patient has a particular disease or condition—in this case, concussion.

Banyan officials knew about Tech’s work with helmets and concussions and realized Virginia Tech’s involvement made a lot of sense after visiting the athletics facilities and VCOM’s research labs. After all, Brolinson and Dr. Stefan Duma, a professor of biomedical engineering and sciences at Virginia Tech, along with Mike Goforth, who serves as the AD for sports medicine, had been studying helmet safety and concussions for 15-plus years. With head coach Frank Beamer’s blessings, they had been using Tech’s football players to collect information, so they possessed mounds and mounds of research on the topics.

Brolinson and his team wholeheartedly agreed to be a part of the project, and they started compiling data on several biomarkers. The data from the pilot project was used in part to create a large multi-site international project, with doctors/researchers from all over the world compiling data—all with the hopes of formulating a blood test that would help to determine if a CT scan was needed for a patient with head trauma and to assist in the diagnosis of a concussion.



*Dr. Gunnar Brolinson and Mike Goforth, Tech's associate AD for sports medicine, have played instrumental roles in concussion research since 2003.*

## revolutionary blood test for CONCUSSIONS

Carilion—a huge supporter of and partner with Virginia Tech Athletics—jumped into the mix as well. Brolinson and administrators and doctors at Carilion New River Valley Medical Center in nearby Radford used emergency room patients with a history of head trauma as test cases to gather information.

All told, these researchers, including Brolinson and those helping him, examined and amassed information from more than 2,000 subjects. After more than three years spent researching and gathering information, Brolinson and the group found two proteins that leak into the blood stream within minutes of a blow to the head—and thus they created a blood test that searches for those proteins. The group submitted all their findings to the FDA for approval, and 10 months later, in February, the FDA granted that approval for the marketing of the test.

“Now that this test has been FDA approved, a lot of manufacturers can get behind it because they know there is money to be made,” Brolinson said. “If we develop the test kit that allows this test to be done rapidly, accurately, and inexpensively ... that’s who is going to win. That’s the next thing that is to happen. I don’t know if it’s going to be a year, 18 months or two years, but now that it has FDA approval, there is going to be a rush of people to try to develop the device that is going to be the most successful test kit.”

The test represents a win on so many levels. Obviously, it gives doctors an accurate diagnosis, but it also eliminates the need for so many CT

scans, which in turn results in a cost savings for the patient. Plus, fewer CT scans means less exposure to harmful radiation, particularly for children.

Emergency rooms figure to receive the first of the test kits, but those who work in sports medicine—like Goforth—want the test kit on the sidelines of sporting events as soon as possible. Right now, though, they will need to be patient.

The test itself, in its current form, takes 3-4 hours to administer and requires a lab. A sure diagnosis of a concussion helps, but obviously sports medicine staffs want a concussion diagnosis sooner than 3-4 hours.

Essentially, they want to find out right away. For example, they seek a way to administer a test to a football player during a game if he takes a blow to the head and find out the results immediately to get him back in competition, or hold him out of competition in the event of a positive diagnosis.

“We are still not where we need to be yet on this topic,” Goforth admitted. “We need to develop this technology to the point that we can do a simple finger prick test on the sideline to determine if a concussion did actually occur. This would be huge because it would eliminate the guessing game about a return to play and would hopefully all but eliminate the possibility of an athlete returning to play with a concussion.”

*Continued on page 44*



revolutionary blood test  
Continued from page 43

Goforth isn't downplaying the accomplishment, though. Not by any stretch.

"For years, we have all been working to identify the question," Goforth said. "At least now we can finally focus on a treatment answer."

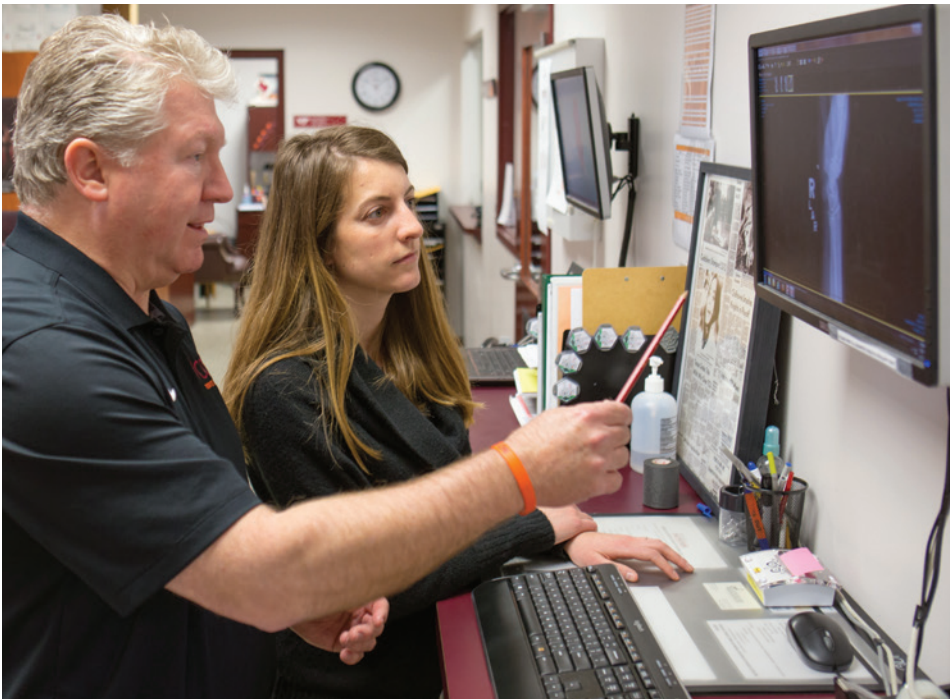
A veteran of sports medicine, Brolinson plans on pushing for that exact type of test to which Goforth refers. He also plans on continuing to push the envelope in his research.

In fact, he and a geneticist at VCOM are in the process of studying a genome to determine a way to find out if humans are predisposed to chronic traumatic encephalopathy—better known in sports circles as CTE. This degenerative disease of the brain continues to be found in people with a history of repetitive brain trauma, and more specifically, in football players.

"I think there is a small group of people that are probably genetically predisposed to CTE—and those are people that probably shouldn't be playing contact sports," Brolinson said. "So it'll be, 'You're going to play tennis or be a swimmer or play golf.' There are lots of things that can be done in athletics if you're one of those people predisposed genetically."

"I'm really excited about the potential of having a test that could accurately predict that kind of risk. Just because it hasn't been

With the concussion blood test approved, Dr. Gunnar Brolinson and his team at VCOM are now setting their sights on researching certain genomes to determine if people are pre-disposed to CTE.



done before and people haven't figured it out doesn't mean it can't be done."

Brolinson has kept that type of attitude since arriving in Blacksburg in 2002. Not long after his arrival, he started visiting the various departments around campus looking for projects that intrigued him, and he ran into Duma. He, Duma and Goforth all clicked. They all loved sports, and when Duma met a guy at a conference in Puerto Rico with a sensory contraption that he thought might work in a football helmet, they all decided to hop into the helmet safety and concussion game.

They only needed seed money—a rather cumbersome task when many considered it "junk science." But Dixie Tooke-Rawlins, the dean of VCOM at the time and now the president, graciously agreed to give them \$50,000, and they kicked off their quest.

Today, Duma's work on helmet safety has received international acclaim and represents the industry standard, not just in football, but in other sports. And now, Brolinson and his group have created a revolutionary blood test to diagnose concussions.

Both certainly make the world a safer place—while also overcoming misconceptions and proving patience and persistence can win.

"That's really one of the great lessons that sports teaches us," Brolinson said. "When you get knocked on your tail, you just get up and keep playing. That's the great lesson of this. Patience is really key, and you have to be working with great teams of people. We have great people at Virginia Tech."

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