

inside

Vol. 10 No. 2, October 2017

# HOKIE SPORTS

The Official  
Publication of  
Virginia Tech  
Athletics



WHAT'S INSIDE

Check out features on football player **WYATT TELLER**, men's soccer standout **MARCELO ACUNA**, women's soccer senior leader **MADI CONYERS** and talented women's swimmer **KLAUDIA NAZIEBLO**

**JUSTIN BIBBS** and the **men's team** are seeking a **second straight bid** to the NCAA Tournament, while **REGAN MAGARITY** and the **women's squad**, too, pursue a **second consecutive** postseason berth

2017-18  
**BASKETBALL  
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## A MEMORABLE DAY DESPITE A LOSS TO CLEMSON

The most-anticipated weekend of the college football season for Virginia Tech fans started with College GameDay's first show in Blacksburg in more than a decade and continued with a perfect afternoon for tailgating. The Saturday night scene at Lane Stadium, with "Enter Sandman" and fireworks – as seen in this photo – was simply epic. Unfortunately, the day ended on a down note, as the Hokies fell to defending national champion Clemson, but for sure, the build-up to the game created memorable experiences for a majority of Tech fans, many of whom figure to be back later in October, as the Hokies continue their pursuit of yet another Coastal Division crown.



TECH

## THE STUDENT-ATHLETE EXPERIENCE

"Donors giving back to Hokie Athletics so that I have the opportunity to earn an education is a blessing. I'm thankful for the donors, coaches and everyone who has helped develop me into the man I am today."

**Andrew Motuapuaka**  
Redshirt Senior, Virginia Beach, Virginia

"All of the hard work that I have put in through the years, not just on the field, but in the classroom, has paid off. I have succeeded and will continue to succeed because of the people who have helped me along the way. Their investment has paid off, and it's a blessing to know that I have made my loved ones proud. I cherish my opportunity, and I'm grateful to receive a scholarship to attend Virginia Tech. I'm grateful to those who made it possible."

**Cam Phillips**  
Senior, Laurel, Maryland





# The Donor File

## Sandra Cupp (Sandy) Davis

**HOKIE CLUB LEVEL:**

Golden Benefactor  
and Hokie Ambassador

**CURRENTLY RESIDES:**

Blacksburg, Virginia

**GRADUATION YEAR:**

2008 (honorary alumna)

**FAMILY:**

Husband: William C. (Jack) Davis;  
Corgi: Cuddles

### Q&A

**Q. A Hokie is ...**

**A:** one of the luckiest people on earth not only to have a degree from VT, but also to be a part of the Hokie Nation, whether a graduate or not.

**Q. The Hokie Nation is real because ...**

**A:** Hokies carry their membership in the Hokie Nation in their hearts!

**Q. What is your best memory of Virginia Tech athletics?**

**A:** My "best" memories keep expanding by equal or even better wins, including winning over West Virginia in the last few seconds, all wins over UVA and Miami, when the fans took the court after beating Duke, "The Kick" that won the Peach Bowl, and these are only a few, with more to come.

**Q. How did you get involved with the Hokie Club?**

**A:** Years ago, when I worked at a local bank, two Hokie Club representatives met with me and asked the bank to purchase a contract for a scoreboard ad. The bank's budget could not carry the expense of a five-year commitment, but I was so impressed with the staff that I personally joined the Hokie Club with a \$25 membership fee, which is what my budget allowed at that time.

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

**A:** I was first on campus at age 14 for a week of 4-H activities. I fell in love with the campus, returning at every opportunity, and I

was captivated by that special feeling of being a tiny part of the Hokie Nation – long before fans became referred to as the Hokie Nation. When the excitement of basketball games, football games, tournaments and bowls were added to the equation, I became a solid fan!

**Q. Describe your perfect day at Virginia Tech.**

**A:** I have experienced so many good events at Virginia Tech, but I will share one particular time that made me think of what a perfect day at Virginia Tech would be. Walking down the stairway at Burruss Hall, I looked about that great building and thought about the history of all the people who have been in that structure. Going outside, it was somewhat quiet on that beautiful spring afternoon, even though there was activity everywhere that I could see. It was peaceful and busy at the same time, and I was reminded of the blessings that the students were experiencing to receive their education at this university, while the faculty and administration were also so fortunate to be here – and this symbolized a perfect Virginia Tech day to me.

**Q. What motivates you to give back to help Virginia Tech Athletics?**

**A:** It is exciting to watch the games, and even more exciting to win, but the student-athletes are the motivation. I enjoy seeing their growth when the coaches not only mold their God-given talent, but they know our athletes personally and accept fully their role in enriching and developing the athletes' character, and in guiding their use of the scholarship opportunities that the donors make possible.

As a businessperson, I recognize and appreciate how our athletes contribute to the recognition and growth of the university and in no small way contribute to the economic development, not only to the university, but also throughout the Commonwealth. Providing scholarships and state-of-the-art facilities are my greatest personal motivations.

**Q. I'm a Hokie Club member because ...**

**A:** I can make a difference by supporting the Hokie Club, and the events are fun! I think all alumni and friends of the university should be members because all of us together can make a huge positive difference.

**Q. My favorite Virginia Tech sports are ...**

**A:** football, basketball and track.

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

**A:** I can't choose just one.

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

**A:** Again, I can't choose just one. 



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### **Barton the recipient of Carilion Clinic scholarship**

Laurie Barton, a sophomore on the Virginia Tech women's cross country and track and field teams, was named the recipient of the prestigious 2017 Carilion Clinic Scholarship for Virginia Tech Athletics in an announcement that came before Virginia Tech's football game against Clemson on Saturday evening. The Clemson, South Carolina native—coincidentally enough—is pursuing a degree in human nutrition, foods and exercise and plans to become either a physical therapist or a chiropractor.

"I'm so grateful for Carilion Clinic's generous contributions toward my scholarship," Barton said. "I definitely would not be here without it."

Carilion Clinic, a partner with Virginia Tech Athletics who purchased the naming rights to Carilion Clinic Court at Cassell Coliseum two years ago, hands out a scholarship each year to a deserving Tech student-athlete or athletes with plans for pursuing a career in the medical field. Last year, Carilion Clinic handed out scholarships to lacrosse player Tara Feehan and volleyball standout Lindsey Owens, two who graduated in May with degrees in biology.

Barton also excels on the track and on the course. She finished fifth in the 800-meter run at the ACC Outdoor Track and Field Championships this past May, and she also came in seventh in the 800 at the ACC's indoor meet. This past summer, she claimed a silver medal in the 800 at the USA Junior Outdoor Championship. That qualified her for the Pan American Junior Championships in Trujillo, Peru in July, and she came fifth at that event.

### **Former Tech football player, volleyball player give back to Tech athletics**


Former Virginia Tech football and men's basketball student-athlete Jeff King and his wife, Katie, who is a former Tech volleyball standout,

recently made a generous pledge to Virginia Tech athletics. The couple committed to making a major financial gift to Tech athletics to go evenly toward the funding of scholarships in football, men's basketball and volleyball.

A key member of Tech's first ACC championship team in 2004, Jeff King caught a touchdown pass in a 16-10 win at Miami that clinched a conference title in the Hokies' inaugural season playing in the ACC. A four-year football letterman from 2002-05, he caught 58 passes for 724 yards (12.5 avg.), with 12 touchdowns, including six scores as a senior.

King is also among an elite group of Hokies who competed in both football and basketball at Tech. He saw action in 16 games for the basketball squad in 2005 after the conclusion of the 2004 football season. A 2005 NFL Draft pick by the Carolina Panthers, he went on to play seven seasons in the NFL and currently works as a scout for the Chicago Bears.

Katie King (formerly Katie Esbrook) earned first-team All-ACC honors and All-ACC Academic Team accolades as a senior in 2006 when she was also an AVCA All-America honorable mention selection. The Barrington, Illinois native was a four-year letterwinner and played in 435 career matches for the Hokies. She ranks third all time in Tech history with 461 total blocks, fourth in career hitting percentage (.324) and seventh in career kills (1,285).

"We are very grateful for Jeff and Katie's generosity to Tech athletics," Tech Director of Athletics Whit Babcock said. "It's so encouraging to see young alums like Jeff and Katie giving back to their alma mater. While they were both very accomplished athletes at Tech, it's wonderful to see a continuing trend of former greats like Steve Johnson, André Davis, Lisa Pikalek Karlisch and now the Kings making a very tangible decision to help benefit current and future Hokies." 



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## EDITORS DESK by Jimmy Robertson

# Magical season over, Williams now figuring out 2017-18 squad

Like most head coaches, Buzz Williams isn't much for self-pity. He astutely knows that his fellow ACC colleagues and their teams feel no mercy toward him or the Hokies.

And with that in mind, he and his staff are well into the task of molding the 2017-18 squad without a couple of prominent pieces, as they gear up for the season opener that tips off in roughly a month.

A brief recap: in year No. 3 of Williams' tenure, the Hokies enjoyed an incredible and thrilling end-of-the-season run, one which ended with a bid and subsequent loss to Wisconsin in the NCAA Tournament. The NCAA appearance truly was a stunning accomplishment that happened two years after the program finished in last place in the ACC for the fourth straight season.

This spring, Williams probably felt pretty good about the possibilities for this season. Yes, Zach LeDay and Seth Allen graduated, but a talented core of players returned. Plus, Kerry Blackshear Jr. returned from an injury, and Williams and his assistants signed their best recruiting class, a trio led by forward Nickeil Alexander-Walker.

But then, the Hokies' horrible luck with injuries reared itself yet again. Ty Outlaw tore his ACL, marking the third straight year in which the Hokies have lost a player for the season (Ahmed Hill, Blackshear). And then Khadim Sy inexplicably transferred—after starting 28 games as a freshman. Also, Chris Clarke continues to rehab from a torn ACL suffered last February, and Williams remains unsure of his status for the coming season.

Now Williams and his staff find themselves in a familiar position—trying to cobble together yet another winner.

"We're so depleted so early in the year that we've been doing [preseason] workouts of three kids at a time," Williams said. "That's the first time that's happened in my career. I think there are going to be a lot of moving parts, not only from figuring it out, but like every year, every team is new."

The good news is that, well, Williams and his staff *have* been in this position. Last year, in fact.

Clarke tore his ACL in the second overtime of a Feb. 12 game against Virginia. Tech entered the game with a 16-7 record, including a 5-6 mark in the ACC—hardly NCAA Tournament locks. Clarke's injury took away the Hokies' best rebounder and most versatile player, and yet the Hokies won that game and won four of six to close the regular season. They won a game in the ACC tournament, and with 22 wins, received the NCAA bid.

Williams and his staff deserve an unbelievable amount of credit. He warranted being named the ACC Coach of the Year, an honor that understandably went to Georgia Tech's Josh Pastner. Williams and the assistants embraced the midseason challenge of finding a way for the Hokies to win, and more importantly, got the players to buy into that way.

Williams himself loves guards and interchangeable parts, so you get the feeling he almost relished making Tech a perimeter-oriented bunch, as the Hokies launched and

made 3's at an incredible rate. They led the ACC—the best conference in the nation—in field-goal percentage and 3-point field-goal percentage. Let that sink in.


Now they face another monumental task, molding a team without Allen and his multiple game-winning shots, and LeDay, the heart and soul of the team. There is no Outlaw, no Sy and no opportunity to replace them.

Tech will be perimeter-oriented again, almost by default. Fans may expect similar outcomes to those at the end of last season, but Williams believes that last season's late-season run is unsustainable. The Hokies need to be better at rebounding and defending.

His biggest concern may be getting his players to believe just that and not look at the last 10 games of last season as the blueprint for future successes. That is tough because the Hokies won with that blueprint.

"I think failure is much easier to work through than success," Williams admitted. "I think failure tends to make you stronger, and success tends to make you weaker, and I don't know that 'weaker' is the exact word. I think it's content—and that's dangerous."

Even with all these challenges, Williams and the assistants aren't feeling sorry for themselves. They all hug the opportunity with both arms.

Tech fans can have confidence in knowing that these guys will figure out what works for the 2017-18 Hokies to be successful. They usually do—and their track record has proven it. 



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## Timing is Everything

The more I seek to understand my own personality, and the overall path that I took to get here, the more I realize that most everything boils down to one common denominator. Timing is everything. It dictates how well or how poorly our relationships in life begin. It lays some opportunities in front of us and renders others impossibly lost behind us.

It is the reason that, as we prepare to enter the crossover season for football and basketball—known within my office as “the whirlwind”—I become more conscience of the seemingly perfect blend of situations that timing has afforded me ... and you.

This is not because of where I feel the respective prospects lie for Justin Fuente’s and Buzz Williams’ programs. While I expect both continue on a relatively rapid upward trajectory, it remains phenomenally difficult to predict the future in terms of wins and losses. Too much fragility exists to do so, as we recently witnessed with Ty Outlaw’s injured knee and Divine Deablo’s now-mending foot. All that you can do as program leaders is to put yourself in the best possible situations through recruiting and culture to give your program repeated chances. Both are clearly doing that.

However, this is not a column about opportunities for wins, but rather fortuitous timing in regard to relationships. As I reflect on my own life, I see the breaks that timing afforded me, and also some of the challenges it presented. I also see times in my life when others benefitted from being around me, and certainly to the opposite extreme of that, occasions where I became a negative impact

on people who looked to me as a mentor.

At the beginning of my career, I came across the extremely good fortune of interning at a radio station (KFAN) in Minneapolis at a time when the collective staff featured young, energetic and somewhat electrifying people. When I go back to visit now, most of those people remain. They remain wonderful people, having advanced in their lives and careers, and in some cases, ascending to the top levels of our industry. Yet I wonder, if the 21-year old version of me walked through their door now, would I have same experience? Probably not. Other examples of fortuitous timing come to mind—ones that benefitted me and yet the outcome might have been dramatically different a moment sooner or later.

On the other end of the spectrum, I also remember when I hired a young intern to learn from me over the course of the 2013 season—a season that also happened to be a time period when my personal life and a long-standing relationship fell apart. It impacted this young person who viewed me as a mentor. I know through memory that I became difficult to be around, and my bitterness in other areas spilled over to dampen his love of baseball and this profession. I forever regret that summer, not for the impact on my life, but the impact on his. I learned from it, and I took away a valuable lesson. When you benefit from timing, take everything possible from it. When you don’t, there will be other chances. Make the most out of it.

You only hope to be associated with people on the ascent, both personally and

professionally—and not necessarily ascending up a wins list. It means on their way up in life. You want to be with people who continue to grow and gain wisdom and sophistication, while you attempt to do the same. It is why I always say that I remain tremendously grateful for having the opportunity to work with Coach Beamer in his final season. Without that opportunity, I never would understand fully Virginia Tech—and not just in a purely football sense.

But at the same time, I hadn’t enjoyed the opportunity to grow along with him. When we met, he and his career were nearly fully formed, as was his family and the circle that surrounded him. Bill Roth evolved with him, but not me. Coach always remained gracious to me, and I cherished that time with him, but timing never always gives us everything that we desire.

Meanwhile, I have that chance with Justin Fuente and his family. Our Tech Talk LIVE! desk generally gets occupied by one of his three young daughters during commercial breaks. His wife, Jenny, attends on a weekly basis. When we talk off the record, we engaged in honest conversations regarding the future. That goes for football, but even more so in regard to family and adapting to the lives we now lead. Many steps remain for both of us, and that is exciting.

Double down that sentiment when it comes to Buzz Williams. I often hear, ‘Wouldn’t it be great to work with Coach K, Roy Williams, or insert name of any future hall of fame coach?’ I always say, ‘I’ll take Buzz.’

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Justin Fuente's leadership and wisdom have been beneficial not only to his players, but also to those who work with him on a regular basis.

It is not just because of Coach, but also because of the culture that he fosters. Recently, I attended the program's Hokies Hoops & Heels event, and he introduced his staff and their significant others. As he listed off the names, I felt the same way I did back in Minneapolis in the KFAN bullpen. There is a youthful energy within the group, uncertain steps to be taken, literally in the case of some of the newborns to the family, and figuratively, as it pertains to the direction of the program—all of it carefully orchestrated to blend the timing in all of our lives to this specific point.

Williams is, of course, the biggest part of this, and as he includes me in things and teaches me along with his players and staff, I observe him. I've never been around someone

so transparent and conscience of his/her own development. The tangible things, we all see—climbing win totals, interest in and exposure for the program, and the remaking of the environment at Cassell Coliseum.

But I take the most notes on the intangible things—the meticulous nature with which he treats his marriage, careful never to allow his level of attention to descend; his personal growth mirroring the development of his four children, all at somewhat different stages of their adolescence, and the maturity that they have. Sometimes, I believe that rubs off on him rather than the other way around.

Have you noticed the physical changes in Coach Williams? Have you noticed a relatively calmer sideline demeanor? Have you noticed the evolution of every one of the program's

events? I have, and it is not lost on me.

So I have no idea about the coming months. Will Fuente guide the Hokies back to the ACC Championship Game? I don't know. Will Williams lead the Hokies past Kentucky, or Iowa, or Ole Miss? I don't know that either. There are too many variables to which we don't have assigned values.

But I've been in the wrong place at the wrong time enough to know when I'm in the right one at the right moment. To steal a line from Williams, "It isn't about me." Hokies, we have two leaders whose programs mirror the growth of their families, and to me, there isn't anything much more exciting than that.

So enjoy the ride, because in these moments, timing seems to be on our side! **VT**

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# Tech athletics recognizes first-time letterwinners at Letter Jacket Ceremony

by Reyna Gilbert-Lowry, senior associate AD for student-athlete development

On Sept. 20, 2017, more than 90 winter and spring sport student-athletes and support area students (managers and trainers) were recognized at the annual Letter Jacket Legacy Ceremony held at Lane Stadium. The Virginia Tech Department of Athletics sponsored the event in conjunction with the Virginia Tech Monogram Club. For those unfamiliar with the Virginia Tech Monogram Club, it is a membership organization that seeks to honor, connect and recognize former and current letterwinners and their commitment to Virginia Tech Athletics.

Since 2015, the Virginia Tech Athletics Department has presented letter jackets to first-time Monogram winners from the winter,



Former Tech great Bimbo Coles (left) recently delivered the keynote address at a ceremony honoring more than 90 first-time letterwinners.

spring and fall sports at the department's bi-annual Letter Jacket Ceremony. This new tradition has allowed first-year letterwinners to see firsthand the value that the department places on their commitment to athletics and also enhances their experience as member of the Virginia Tech Athletics community.

During the ceremony, letterwinners were presented with their letter jackets and acknowledged by their head coaches, with numerous members of the department administration in attendance. Former men's basketball standout and Monogram Club member Bimbo Coles also provided a keynote address for the evening.

After a record-setting career as a Hokie and lengthy career in the NBA, Coles revealed that some of his greatest sports moments were

spent wearing maroon and orange.

"When I was in college, I was so focused on what I had to do with basketball," Coles said. He encouraged the group to take their blinders off and enjoy the journey.

As for what it means to become a member of the Monogram Club, Coles responded, "The stitching is made up of your blood, sweat and tears."

In February, the department once again will sponsor the recognition ceremony for first-time letterwinners from fall sports, as well as cheerleaders, HighTechs and student workers in the department's HokieVision office. This is just one of the many ways that the Virginia Tech Department of Athletics is committed to providing a first-class student-athlete experience.

## The following received letter jackets

### Athletic Trainers

Will Ellison  
Elizabeth Snyder  
Josie Hyman  
Marley Trone  
Seyi Olusina  
Rachel Harlow  
Nikki Turner  
Eric Behrmann  
Claudia Altman  
Margaret Wells  
Jill Wise

### Baseball

Dylan Hall  
Keegan McGinnis

JD Mundy

Jake Rosen  
Graham Seitz  
Andrew Webb  
Marcus White  
Connor Yoder

### Lacrosse

Sydney Gagnon  
Mary Clare McCarthy  
Abby Wilson  
Kendall Welch  
Payton Beach  
Taylor Caskey  
Kara Reichert  
Hannah Kurisky

Isabel Obregon  
Marissa Davey

### Men's Basketball

Khadim Sy  
Ty Outlaw

### Men's Golf

Sarit Suwannarut  
Mark Lawrence Jr.

### Men's Swimming and Diving

Hassler Carroll  
Chris Outlaw

### Men's Tennis

Henrik Korsgaard  
Alex Ribeiro  
Feliksas Sakalauskas  
Abraham Asaba

### Men's Track and Field

Brandon Thomas  
Matthew Baker  
Kevin Cianfarini  
Greg Chiles  
Michael Davenport  
Matthew Reinhart  
Fitsum Seyoum

### Softball

Taylor Barnes  
Taylor Clark  
Carrie Eberle  
Hannah Jones  
Alyssa Clarke (manager)  
Jordan Nichols (manager)

### Women's Basketball

Kaela Kinder  
Kendyl Brooks  
Diandra DaRosa

### Women's Golf

Jessica Spicer

### Women's Swimming and Diving

Jenna Beattie  
Baillie Cameron  
Miranda Eberle  
Reka Gyorgy  
Chloe Hicks  
Grace Kowal  
Eleanor Matheson  
Leah Rogers  
Margarita Ryan  
M.J. Ulrich

### Women's Tennis

Fallon Delp  
Luisa Uscocovich

Natalie Novotna  
Shene Disbergen  
McKenzie Collins  
Nancy Ghanem

### Women's Track and Field

Laurie Barton  
Arlicia Bush  
Eszter Bajnok  
Emma Thor  
Kajsa Wennberg



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MEN'S BASKETBALL  
PREVIEW

# HOKIES

## SEARCHING FOR AN ENCORE



*The Tech men's basketball team enjoyed a memorable 2016-17 season that ended with an NCAA Tournament bid and now the Hokies face arguably a bigger challenge – sustaining their recent success*  
by Jimmy Robertson



# MEET THE NEWCOMERS

## WABISSA BEDE

6-1, G, Fr.

Cushing Academy  
North Andover, Massachusetts

- Named the NEPSAC Class AA Player of the Year as a senior
- Listed as the No. 66 prospect nationally by Rivals and No. 73 by ESPN
- Chose the Hokies over Butler, Minnesota, UMass and La Salle
- Averaged 26.3 points, 11.3 rebounds and 6.3 assists per game as a junior
- Averaged more than 20 points per game as a senior



## NICKEIL ALEXANDER-WALKER

6-5, F, Fr.

Hamilton Heights Christian  
Toronto, Canada

- Listed as the No. 21 prospect nationally by ESPN
- Played for Canada's U-18 Americas team
- Chose Tech over Maryland, Southern Cal, Baylor and Auburn
- Averaged 14.9 points, 3.7 rebounds, 3.6 assists and 3.2 steals per game as a junior
- Averaged 20 points and 4 rebounds per game as a senior



## P.J. HORNE

6-6, F, Fr.

Tift County High School  
Tifton, Georgia

- Led Tift County to the Class 7A Georgia state championship as a senior
- An all-state choice by the Atlanta Journal-Constitution
- Named to the GACA all-star team and was the MVP of the all-star game with 28 points and 14 rebounds
- Averaged 25.3 points and 11 rebounds per game as a senior
- Averaged 16.2 points and 7.5 rebounds per game for his career



Unlike a lot of society today, Buzz Williams places a lot of value in the written word, and he devotes an extraordinary amount of time sending handwritten notes to former players, colleagues in the profession, friends and others.

But after watching his Virginia Tech men's basketball players fight, scrap, claw, sweat and work their way to 22 wins, a 10-8 ACC record, and an NCAA Tournament at-large berth last season, Williams felt a simple thank-you note to his players and their parents wasn't quite enough. So he and his full-time staff members embarked on a "thank-you tour," traveling to the hometowns of each of the Hokies' returning players to say "thank you" in person to them and their families.

"The 'thank-you tour' wasn't for publicity," Williams said. "It wasn't that anyone in America hadn't done this. It wasn't for Twitter.

"It was important to me that Jeff Reynolds [Tech's director of scouting/game management] said 'thank you' to that mom, and it was important to me that Cara [Jacobson, director of administration] said, 'I love you' to that mom who she was leaving tickets for every

game, and none of that stuff ever occurs to me.

"I could talk about it all day. There were so many lessons from it. There was so much thankfulness that derived from it. The combination of the wisdom and the thankfulness has helped me mature as a person and a leader."

Sitting in his office roughly three weeks before the team's first practice in preparation for the upcoming 2017-18 season, Williams reflected both on last year and his brief three-year tenure in Blacksburg. He took over a program that had finished in last place in the ACC on three straight occasions, and in his first year, extended that to four.

But two years later, the Hokies were playing in the NCAA Tournament. They overcame injuries (Kerry Blackshear Jr., Chris Clarke), a rugged schedule and a midseason change in philosophy to make their third NCAA appearance since 1986.

Of course, now comes the hard part—sustaining the success. And three weeks before practice started, Williams admitted he wasn't quite ready.

"I think we have so much work that we have to do between now and then," Williams said.

"I don't think we've established any level of functionality, any level of identity. I think we have too many guys who think what we were last year is what we'll be this year. We need all of the time to get up to speed."

The program's first order of business is replacing Zach LeDay and Seth Allen, who combined for nearly 30 points, 10 rebounds and 4.5 assists per game last season. Both came off the bench—a testament of their willingness to do whatever it took to win games.

They each played a distinct role, though LeDay probably will be the harder of the duo to replace. The 6-foot-7 post player served as the heart and soul of the team in addition to being a producer, as he averaged 16.5 points and 7.3 rebounds per game. He averaged 25.3 points per game in the postseason.

"You can't argue that Zach was tough, emotional—90 percent of the time in the right way—only cared about winning, wanted to do what it took to win," Williams said. "His production in comparison to what it looked like ... you would think it wasn't the same person. Part of it is that I'm getting old, and part of it is those guys who have no choice left in their career, I seem to connect with the best, but he had such a drive to prove that, 'I know I'm undersized, but I'm way better than you think.'"

*Continued on page 16*



# HOKIES SEARCHING FOR AN ENCORE

Continued  
from  
page 15

Williams figures to use a committee to replace LeDay, starting with the return of Blackshear. The 6-10 Florida native, who shot 55 percent from the floor as a freshman in 2015-16, returns after missing last season with an injury.

Nick Fullard, a 6-10 transfer from Belmont Abbey, becomes eligible, and Williams and his staff added freshman P.J. Horne, a 6-5 forward from Tifton, Georgia. Those two enter into the equation as well.

But Williams would feel much better about the situation with the return of a healthy Clarke. The 6-6 forward averaged 11.4 points and 7.3 rebounds per game before tearing an ACL in the Hokies' double overtime win over Virginia on Feb. 12. He missed the rest of the season, and his status for this season remains somewhat cloudy.

"I don't know when or if Chris will play," Williams said. "I think when you're talking about an ACL injury that late in the season ... Ernest [Eugene, Tech's team trainer] and our doctors are phenomenal, and Chris is gifted from a body standpoint.

"But as we have done with Ahmed [Hill,

who missed the 2015-16 season because of an injury] and Kerry, I just value who these guys are and their futures, and I'm overly protective. It's not when the doctor releases you. It's when I can go to sleep at night, and go, 'I'm doing right by your future.'"

Complicating matters is the injury to Ty Outlaw, who burst onto the scene late last year after Clarke's injury. Outlaw averaged nearly 14 points per game in the Hokies' final eight games. He shot 62 percent from the floor in that span, including 64 percent from beyond the 3-point arc.

But Outlaw tore his ACL in a pickup game in July. He will miss the 2017-18 season.

"It [Outlaw's injury] changes the complexion of our team," Williams said. "You like how the year ended, and you liked how he was trending going into his fifth year. To tear your ACL in an open gym in July, and you don't even know you tore it ... I just hate it for the kid."

The Hokies, for sure, are in much better shape on the perimeter, especially with the

return of Justin Robinson, Justin Bibbs, Devin Wilson and Hill. Robinson started all 33 games last season and averaged 10.4 points and 4.8 assists per game, while Bibbs likewise started all 33 games and averaged 9.2 points, 2.8 rebounds and 1.6 assists per game. In addition, Bibbs morphed into the Hokies' best perimeter defender.

"I think Bibbs has had his best summer," Williams said. "Guys going into their senior year, they start working at a more anxious level."

In his first year back from the injury, Hill started 28 games and averaged 11.4 points per game. He shot 45 percent from the floor, including 37.3 percent from beyond the 3-point arc. As those familiar with the men's basketball program know, Hill sets the standard when it comes to work ethic.

Wilson took a redshirt year last season while playing on the football team, but he returns and adds both experience and talent. He has played in nearly 100 games at Tech, and like Bibbs, he, too, plays hard and tough on defense.

Three others are in the mix — 6-1 guard Tyrie Jackson, who took a redshirt year last season and freshmen Wabissa Bede and Nickeil Alexander-Walker. The latter two, along with Horne, comprise a recruiting class that many services rated among the top 20 nationally, and Williams expects all three to contribute this season pending how they progress on defense.

Therein lies Williams' second major challenge for the 2017-18 Hokies. In addition



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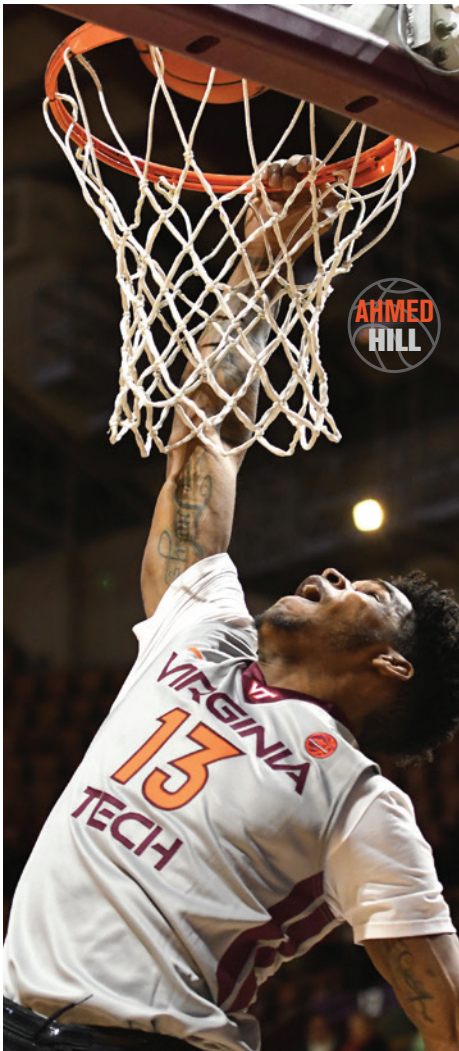
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to finding a way to replace the production of LeDay and Allen, he needs for his team to be substantially better on defense.

Last season, the Hokies ranked 10th in the ACC in field-goal percentage defense (44.5), 14th in 3-point field-goal percentage defense (36.3), 14th in blocked shots (2.76) and 14th in steals (3.97).

Tech won last season because it averaged nearly 80 points per game, and it led the ACC in both field-goal percentage (48.9) and 3-point field-goal percentage (40.3). The numbers on offense compared to the numbers on defense represented a striking contrast, and it begs a question.

Can success be sustainable playing this way? “Absolutely not,” Williams said. “It is not sustainable, and we will have to make distinct improvements defensively.”

Williams said the Hokies often played solid defense during the initial possession. But Tech’s inability to get rebounds—the Hokies ranked last in the ACC in rebounding (32.3) and rebounding margin (-2.4)—led to second-chance points. Tech got out-rebounded in 16 games last season, and it won just seven of those.

Of note, Tech got out-rebounded in seven of the nine games that Clarke missed after tearing his ACL.

“I thought he covered up some of our rebounding deficiencies,” Williams said. “Then you look at how we played the last nine games without Chris, we were not the same team.

“For sure, as a coach, I think, looking back, we could be better. We will be better. There are ways we can improve as teachers. As of September, we’ve been accountable for the best ways of that.”

Complicating matters for Williams, especially without Outlaw and possibly without Clarke, is the Hokies’ schedule. Tech plays non-conference games against St. Louis and possibly Washington or Providence at Madison Square Garden. The Hokies also play non-conference games against Iowa, at Ole Miss and at Kentucky.

“Dumb,” Williams said. “You can just write that.”

Williams said that much of the non-conference schedule was done earlier last season—long before the injuries to Clarke and Outlaw—and he agreed to play at Kentucky, a contender annually for the national title, as a way to enhance the Hokies’ potential NCAA Tournament chances.

“I don’t think that you can put it in a formula, but I do think there is an unspoken, analytical when those people [the NCAA selection committee] look at your schedule and know that you could have played XYZ University and you decided not to spend your school’s money and play them and you went to Kentucky and got beat,” Williams said. “I told Jeff [Reynolds] that I don’t have peace playing XYZ University, and I don’t have peace playing at a neutral site because that’s preventing our fans from potentially having an opportunity to see us play, and I don’t want a third neutral-site game.

“So let’s take all the variables out. What’s the hardest thing? Play on the road and win on the road. OK, let’s go there. Well, who’s the best team with the best environment? Kentucky. So OK, let’s go play them.”


Tech returns several integral parts from last season’s NCAA Tournament team, and it added several talented components. There are certainly worse positions to be in when facing maybe the toughest schedule in school history.

Yet there are many unknown variables, as the season gets ready to tip off in less than a month—Clarke’s knee, Blackshear’s leg, the freshmen and their adjustments, and the improvement of the post players.

“I don’t know that the texture, the vibe, the flow of this year’s team will be the same as last year’s,” Williams admitted. “I don’t know if you can reproduce all of that.”

The Hokies’ 2016-17 campaign was, indeed, memorable. The team overcame misfortunes, won close games and played exciting basketball.

Williams insists the Hokies won’t look exactly the same this upcoming season. Though true, they may not have to look the same.

If they’re even close, they hopefully can get to where they ultimately want to go. 

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WOMEN'S BASKETBALL  
PREVIEW

# BUILDING ON YEAR 1

*The Virginia Tech women's basketball team made postseason play in Kenny Brooks' first year as the head coach, and a core of returning players combined with several newcomers have him and his staff optimistic about this season*  
by Jimmy Robertson

Sitting in one of the comfortable chairs within the Virginia Tech women's basketball conference room on a September morning—shortly before heading out to go recruiting—Kenny Brooks took some time to reflect on his first season as the Hokies' head coach.

Rest assured, he wasn't sleep deprived, and he didn't need therapy, but what he surmised about his inaugural season in Blacksburg certainly came across as a surprise.

"I felt we were an NCAA-caliber team," he said succinctly. "If we had gotten a couple of more breaks, and if we had had a little more depth, I thought we could have been an NCAA-caliber team."

Brooks certainly knows what an NCAA team looks like, as he guided James Madison to six NCAA appearances during his time as the head coach of the Dukes. Yet his statement came as a surprise since he inherited a Tech program without an NCAA bid in 11 years.

Thanks to four seniors on the 2016-17 team, the Hokies earned a WNIT bid and advanced to the Elite Eight. Despite a lack of depth and a couple of injuries, the Hokies won 20 games overall—the program's first 20-win season since 2005-06.

"I didn't expect 20 wins," Brooks admitted. "What I couldn't determine was their heart."

"What I found out very quickly was that, especially the starting five, they had a high basketball IQ, and they were experienced. They knew how to play well together. They meshed extremely well, and that allowed me to do more than I thought I would be able to do as far as offensive schemes."



“We just didn’t have the depth, but to get to 20 wins ... if you had told me before the season that we’d get to 20 wins, I would have told you that you were crazy. You just couldn’t measure the heart, and those kids had heart.”

Now Brooks and his staff face the next challenge—sustaining last season’s success—and that may be an even tougher task than molding last year’s team.

Life without Vanessa Panousis, Sami Hill, Sydney Cook and Tara Nahodil begins, as those four combined for 32.9 points, 16.0 rebounds and 4.0 assists per game last season. Panousis left as Tech’s all-time leader in 3-point field goals (269) and free-throw percentage (84.6), and she also finished in the top 10 at Tech in career scoring (1,379) and assists (341).

Not only do the Hokies lose all that production, but they also lose the experience and the leadership from the trio. In fact, those four played in more than 400 games combined in their careers at Tech. In contrast, the rest of the Hokies’ returning roster hasn’t even played in 300.

Yet the cupboard isn’t exactly bare. Tech returns its leading scorer from the 2016-17 season and its leading rebounder, and both Chanette Hicks and Regan Magarity serve as catalysts for the Hokies’ 2017-18 hopes.

Magarity—already named the team’s captain—returns after a breakout season in which she nearly averaged a double-double, coming in at 13.5 points and 9.6 rebounds per game. The 6-foot-3 post player set a Tech single-season record with 316 rebounds, and she finished with 15 double-doubles, including a school-record seven in a row at one stretch.

“I’ve had three WNBA draft picks and three more that have gone on to WNBA camps—and she’s as good as any of them,” Brooks said. “She’s very skilled. She’s been taught the game a certain way. We’re trying to give her a little different flair to where she can do different things—like a Dirk Nowitzki [of the NBA’s Dallas Mavericks]. She’s smarter than most. She may not be as athletic as most, but she can out-smart them with angles and fakes and stuff like that.

“I knew she was a good player by her numbers, but I didn’t know she was this good of a player. If I had 10 of her, I’d be in business.”

As for Hicks, she isn’t far from that level herself. The junior point guard led Tech in scoring at 16.1 points per game last season, and she also dished out 178 assists—the most ever by a Tech sophomore.

She also made a name for herself as a defender, registering a Tech single-season record 123 steals. She ranks third on Tech’s all-time list for career steals—a mark she should break this season, barring something unforeseen.

That said, Brooks wants to see improvement from Hicks.

“I’ve never had a point guard as athletic as Chanette, but I also need her to be one of the better point guards I’ve had,” Brooks said. “I’ve told her that. She’s the most athletic point guard in the ACC. I need her to be one of the best point guards in the ACC, and that’s not only taking care of herself, but that’s taking care of her teammates—setting up her teammates, encouraging her teammates and being a leader on the floor.”

The other major contributor returning for the Hokies is someone whom Brooks knows quite well—his daughter, Kendyl. Last season, he wanted her to take a redshirt year, but the Hokies’ lack of depth forced his hand, and she wound up surprising everyone. *Continued on page 20*

## MEET THE NEWCOMERS

### TAYLOR EMERY

5-10, G, Jr.  
Freedom High/Gulf Coast State College  
Tampa, Florida

- Chose Tech over Oklahoma State and Ole Miss
- Was the national junior college player of the year in 2016-17
- Averaged 19 points per game in her lone season at Gulf Coast State
- Spent a season at Tulane (6.2 ppg) before transferring to Gulf Coast State



### CELESTE AKORO

6-2, C, Fr.  
O’Fallon Township High  
O’Fallon, Illinois

- Chose Tech after originally committing to Buffalo
- Missed her senior season with an injury
- Averaged 7 points and 6 rebounds as a junior, but led the area with 115 blocked shots
- Averaged 11.3 points and eight rebounds as a sophomore, with 103 blocks



### AISHA SHEPPARD

5-9, G, Fr.  
St. John’s College High  
Alexandria, Virginia

- Chose Tech over Virginia, Syracuse, Louisville and Dayton
- Listed as the No. 34 prospect in the nation by ESPN HoopGurlz
- Averaged 13.7 points per game as a senior and was named The Washington Post’s Player of the Year
- Averaged 14.1 points per game as a junior, earning second-team all-state honors



### SIERRA VOTAW

6-1, F, Fr.  
Harrells Christian High  
Harrells, North Carolina

- A three-star recruit by ESPN HoopGurlz
- Played for the East team in the N.C. Private School All-Star Basketball Game
- Named the Player of the Year in the Coastal Rivers Conference as a senior



### ALEXIS JEAN

6-1, F, Jr.  
Treasure Coast High/  
Palm Beach State College  
Port St. Lucie, Florida

- Averaged 19.6 points and 9.8 rebounds per game at Palm Beach State College in 2016-17
- A first-team National Junior College Athletic Association All-American
- The 2016-17 Southern Conference Player of the Year
- Played one season at Kennesaw State (3.3 ppg, 2.7 rpg)





# BUILDING ON YEAR 1

Continued from page 19

Kendyl averaged 6.3 points per game, and she ranked second on the squad with 62 3-pointers. She played more than 20 minutes per game.

“The most impressive thing to me was that, in her first game, she made two [3-pointers], but she also took 10,” Kenny Brooks said. “She was confident enough to step up, and by the end of the year, she was playing.

They [Tech’s opponents] were face-guarding her because they knew she was a threat and could shoot the 3. Just watching her grow ... it’s been a unique situation. It’s been fun.”

Magarity, Hicks and Kendyl Brooks represent the nucleus of the team, but Tech’s head coach admits that he faces uncertainty with the rest of the roster. He expects to see improvement, and he expects his first recruiting class to contribute right away. However, he may not know for certain until this group starts playing under the lights.

His biggest concern centers on his post players. Obviously, Magarity proved herself a year ago, but she needs some help. That means getting contributions from 6-1 Michelle Berry and 6-3 Erin Garner, two transfers who sat out last season, and two freshmen, 6-2 Celeste Akoro from O’Fallon, Illinois, and 6-1 Sierra Votaw from Harrells, North Carolina.

“I think depth inside is going to be an issue again,” Brooks said. “We were hoping to get Erin back [from a back injury] ... we’re crossing our fingers with that. It puts pressure on us to makeshift a lineup. Someone who plays that two-spot [shooting guard] may have to play the 3 [small forward], or someone who plays the 3 may have to play the 4 [power forward].”

Tech is in much better shape with its perimeter depth. For starters, Brooks gets Rachel Camp back in the fold after she missed all of last season with an injury. Camp averaged 11.4 points and 5.6 rebounds per

game as a freshman, but her numbers dipped to 5.0 and 2.7 as a sophomore. Hopefully, she returns to her freshman form.

Also, Diandra DaRosa, Kaela Kinder and Erinn Brooks return. None of the trio

averaged more than 11 minutes per game last season, but hopefully they take the next step in their development.

The newcomers are the ones generating the most excitement, including Taylor Emery, a 5-10 guard who earned junior college player of the year honors last season. Emery, a former Parade All-American, averaged 19 points per game in leading Gulf Coast State College in Panama City, Florida to the National Junior College Athletic Association Division I title.

“She’s going to have to hit the ground running,” Brooks said. “There is not going to be an adaptation period. She’s going to have to come in and be a force. We’re going to look for her to take over some of the scoring responsibilities left by Sami Hill and Vanessa Panousis. We know she can score. She’s a really good shooter, but she’s going to have to take on more responsibility because of our lack of depth.”

Brooks expects another junior college transfer, Alexis Jean, to help, as well as Aisha Sheppard, who was The Washington Post’s Player of the Year in 2016-17. A 6-1 forward, Jean averaged 19.6 points per game at Palm Beach State College in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida. Sheppard, a 5-9 guard, averaged 13.7 points per game her senior season and ranked as a top-50 prospect by ESPN HoopGurlz.

These young, athletic perimeter players possess talent and fit more into the style that Brooks wants to play.

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“With this group, we have more athleticism, but I’m not sure how they’re going to go out with the IQ part,” Brooks said. “It’s not that they’re not capable. It’s the unknown. I won’t know how they are until we’re actually playing games. That was the case last year. I knew they were good at implementing plays and executing in practice. I just didn’t know they’d do in games until the game started.”

Brooks hopes this group plays much better on defense than last year’s team, which ranked last in the ACC in field-goal percentage defense and 14th in scoring defense. Part of the issues stemmed from getting out-rebounded by more than eight per game, and part centered on playing five players more than 30 minutes per game. Of course, Tech also played a rugged schedule.

But Brooks knows the Hokies ultimately need more depth and athleticism to get more stops—which, in turn, usually add up to winning more games. He and the staff added the five newcomers, while losing the four seniors, so in year No. 1, they made incremental progress.

They continue to work toward rebuilding a roster with players that fit into what Brooks wants to do on both ends of the court. The process will take time, and an impatient Brooks knows this, but he also feels the Hokies are trending in the right direction, as they head toward the season opener Nov. 10 against Wagner.

“When you have success for as many straight years as we had, when



you hear, ‘Oh, you’ll get it done. You know it’s going to be tough the first couple of years’ ... as a competitor, you don’t want to hear that,” Brooks said. “But I wouldn’t change anything. I thought we learned a lot. We go into the season with just as many unknowns. Next year will be a little better because we have all of this team back with the addition of a recruit or two.

“But what gets me really excited is that I think recruiting has taken off. I think we’re involved with some kids who can be difference makers and can make us a top-tier ACC program. Those are the things that make me excited. Plus, the fact that I’m one year older as the Virginia Tech coach, and I know what this school can provide for us and this program.”

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## TECH men's assistant enjoys golden summer



**Jamie McNeilly was an assistant coach on the Canadian men's basketball team that won a gold medal at the FIBA U-19 World Cup in Cairo this summer**

by **Bill Dyer**

Special to *Inside Hokie Sports*

Coaching at the collegiate level is a year-round, full-time job — long hours of hard work, both on the court and in planning meetings, and countless days on the road recruiting. So why would Virginia Tech men's basketball assistant coach Jamie McNeilly want to add to this workload during the summer?

"By far, the most important thing to me is the chance to represent my country," McNeilly said. "I know that this is a very unique and limited opportunity. Every summer that I get a chance to do that, I'm jumping on the opportunity.

"Obviously, Coach Buzz [Williams] has been extremely gracious in giving me that time to do that. It's not even close. Being able to represent your country on an international stage is, by far, the most fulfilling part of this — and also getting to know these young kids. They're awesome kids, great young men who are eager to go through the things I went through with the national team. Being able to share and help them grow has been extremely fulfilling."

McNeilly, originally from Toronto, has been involved in his country's developmental program for years — first as a player and now as a coach. He sees great benefits in coaching in the Canadian system and now has a gold medal to go along with the experience. In July, the Canadian team won the gold medal in the FIBA U-19 Basketball World Cup held in Cairo, Egypt. The Canadian team defeated the favored U.S. team 99-87 in the semifinals and then captured the title with a 79-60 victory over Italy in the championship game.

The experience of coaching in the Canadian system is beneficial in many ways, and McNeilly sees it as a two-way street. The experience and wisdom he takes from Virginia Tech and Williams is a true help

to Canada, and the same can be said for the knowledge he brings back to Blacksburg.

"I think it kind of goes both ways," McNeilly said. "Coach Buzz gives me a lot of freedom here, and that freedom ... when I get with the national team, I can share a lot of things firsthand. It's not 'I see Coach Buzz do this, and you should do this.' It's 'I get to do this every day, and I can do this for our program.' And the same is true with the national team. There are things we do there in our approach and philosophy that are extremely different. Every summer, I come back and say, 'Hey, Coach Buzz, how about this? This is what we do with the national team, and this might be worth trying.'"

McNeilly is exposed to the finest young players in the Canadian system and obviously was involved in the recruiting on Nickeil Alexander-Walker, a Canadian who is a freshman on this year's Tech squad. But don't expect there to be a wave of Canadian players on the Tech roster. He knows what and where the priorities are.

Experiencing new cultures has been a great benefit to him both personally and professionally. During his time as a player and coach in the Canadian system, McNeilly has traveled to Africa, Europe, South America and Asia. For a man who always has been so eager to learn, his travels have been tremendous, providing him with a multitude of opportunities.




Jamie McNeilly showed off the gold medal that he and the Canadian U-19 team won in Egypt this summer.

This year's trip to Cairo was a great eye opener for McNeilly. The change in cultures added to the challenges of international travel these days and having to prepare quickly to win a tournament made this a truly unique experience.

"Cairo is a city of 20-plus million people," McNeilly said. "It's a big city, and this was the first time for us being in an environment like that. We took our kids to see the pyramids, and I rode a camel. I really got to experience it firsthand. That was awesome. A lot of our players were very hesitant to ride a camel. I was one of the first ones to run and hop on one. They saw me have the time of my life, and before you know it, I look back, and the whole team was on camels."

Looking to the future, McNeilly doesn't know what to expect. Would he like to advance in the system? Will duties here at Virginia Tech limit these opportunities? How will fatherhood affect these opportunities? He makes his thoughts on these points very clear.

"I want to stay at Tech as long as possible, and I want to stay with Coach Buzz as long as possible, and I want to continue to do the national team and rise in those ranks as long as possible as well," he said. "Every year, a lot of things change dramatically, and you have to adapt. Hopefully, I'm doing it for a long time." 





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**PICTURED ON COVER** are just a few of the Inorganic Ventures' employees that hold a degree from Virginia Tech. **Back row (L to R):** Julia Hotinger; Uyen Truong; Lee Hawthorne; Debbie Haines; Johnver Afienza; Lesley Owens, PhD; Autumn Harris. **Front row (L to R):** Joey Burns; Brian Alexander, PhD; Beth Day; James King Jr.



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# Having FUN AND SUCCESS

*Wyatt Teller is arguably Virginia Tech's most outgoing football player, and he likes to have fun, but the talented offensive lineman is all business on the field, where he continues making a name for himself*

by Jimmy Robertson

On a spectacular late August afternoon in Southwest Virginia, a collection of Virginia Tech football players, sweaty and exhausted after another grueling preseason practice, gathered around Dave Gittings, the team's chaplain, to go over any prayer requests and for a post-practice prayer.

That Wyatt Teller joined them came as a bit of a surprise. The gregarious offensive lineman doesn't necessarily strike one as being a man of faith given his love of a good time and his relatively nasty disposition on the football field, but there he was, head bowed and eyes closed in a rare moment — at least publicly for him — of serious reflection.

"Well, my mom was a Catholic and my dad was a Southern Baptist," Teller said shortly thereafter when quizzed on the subject.

Then he added, "They're a lot the same, right?"

And there it was — the real Teller standing up, a comedian unwilling to let an opportunity to provoke laughter slip away. Tech fans only know what they see on game days, which is a darn good player who has them Googling the football version of the term "pancake." But to know Teller — really know him — means being around him, watching him in action, listening to the jabs and jokes and then joining in the laughter. He makes cutting up an art form, and he proudly wears any related label as well.

"Coming from the family I do, you can't be very dry," Teller said. "If you ever met my mom or dad ... I think my dad can be heard over the cheerleaders in the parent section. He's very, very outgoing, like me.

"But yeah, definitely coming from the family I do, if you don't have an outgoing personality, you're not going to get along with us. Half the things that happen, or half the things I say, are just family jokes or something like that that we've all said."



Teller has received plenty of close instruction over the years. He grew up in a household with three sisters and a brother, and combined with parents Richard and Cheryl, they offered him guidance on how to deliver one-liners on unsuspecting souls outside of the household.

Teller brought such fun to Virginia Tech after the football coaching staff won a back-and-forth battle with rival Virginia to secure his abilities shortly before his senior year of high school in 2012. He grew up in Bealeton, a little more than an hour north of Virginia's campus, and he went to numerous Cavalier football games while in middle and high school. He liked the history surrounding Charlottesville, and he enjoyed conversing with then-UVA head coach Mike London, who, by most accounts, is an honorable man.

But the relaxed atmosphere around Tech's campus fit his personality a little better than that surrounding the somewhat stodgy student body at UVA.

"I just remember coming to Tech, and everything was different—the way the students talked to you, the tradition around here—it was just different," Teller said. "I'm not even talking about game day, but just the campus. It was a different atmosphere, and obviously, I liked one over the other. I liked Coach London. He was a very godly and good guy, and I loved talking to him, but I just liked it here more."

Teller's engaging personality certainly attracted attention during his first couple of years at Tech. Most of that attention centered on his wide array of hairstyles. He has featured a Mohawk, a mullet and even a cross between the two, which he affectionately termed a "Mul-hawk." He even displayed a buzz cut at one time, though he hated it. Today, he simply lets it grow, much in the same manner as teammate and fellow Northern Virginian Vinny Mihota.

The difference between the two, though, is that Mihota never deviates with his hairstyle, and thus, never attracts attention. Teller once nearly went viral on Twitter when he let teammate Jack Click cut his mullet, while former offensive lineman Wade Hansen videotaped the proceedings with his phone.

"I don't do it to be different," Teller said. "This is my reasoning—by the time college is done, you're going to have to get a real haircut.

"With this long hair [currently], I'm just letting it grow.

There is no rhyme or reason. I'm not going to cut it to be crazy or special. Just letting it grow."

Teller admits that he occasionally has frustrated the coaching staff over the years, particularly with his practice habits. His overall personality accounts for part of that frustration, but a diagnosis of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, better known as ADHD, while in the second grade also has contributed. He takes medication, but he refuses to use ADHD as an excuse. *Continued on page 30*

“

*I just remember coming to Tech, and everything was different—the way the students talked to you, the tradition around here—it was just different. I'm not even talking about game day, but just the campus. It was a different atmosphere, and obviously, I liked one over the other.*

*Wyatt Teller on his decision to come to Virginia Tech*

”



# Having FUN AND SUCCESS

Continued from page 29

Like most players, Teller enjoys games more than practices. Watch Tech games, and one often sees him downfield trying to make a block.

“It’s [practice] not the same as a game,” Teller said. “You don’t have the same time to think about each play that you’re about to run. You don’t have time not only to mentally prepare, but also physically feel amazing.”

“On game day, unless you’re playing through an injury, you feel great. Your mind is clear, your head is clear and your whole body is ready to play. In practice on a Tuesday or Wednesday or Thursday, it’s hard to get in that state of mind.”

As he has matured, especially over the past two seasons, Teller has developed into the player whom Tech’s staff envisioned when recruiting him. A beast in the strength and conditioning program, Teller rates as one of the strongest guys on the team and weighs 315 pounds. Bud Foster, Tech’s defensive coordinator, recruited him and started him out as a defensive lineman, but truthfully, he fully expected Teller to end up on the other side of the ball. Injuries and depth issues hastened that move.

“I truly believe in time it would have been the move anyway,” Foster said. “He’s a straight-ahead guy, how good he is to do certain things. From the defensive side to the offensive side, I think he’s in the best position to maximize his assets and strengths. It’s been a good spot for us and a good spot for him.”

Teller said he naively made the move, fully

expecting to go back to the defensive line. Veterans of college football, of course, know that rarely happens. Once the coaches saw Teller’s potential as an offensive lineman, they never considered moving him back.

Teller never had a problem with the move—he just wanted to play. He embraced it, taking his on-field mentality over to the offense and making a name for himself as a lineman. A year ago, he earned honorable mention All-ACC honors from both the league’s coaches and the media. But Pro Football Focus, an outfit that heavily analyzes individual play, ranked him as a first-team All-ACC choice in its publication.

“Your effort will take you as far as you want it to, so if you want to be recognized or noticed, be seen downfield,” Teller said. “Don’t be one of those guys always at the line of scrimmage. Be the guy who is 10 yards down the field blocking someone, or making a touchdown block 40 yards down the field.”

“If you want to be noticed as an offensive lineman, you’ve got to do extraordinary things. It’s the same feeling as a defensive lineman except that you hit the crap out of someone who doesn’t even look at you. They’re looking at the ball. It’s fun.”

Teller should graduate in December with a degree in property management. Like most players, before he pursues a career, he wants to see how far football takes him. He plans to take that pursuit seriously, though his walk with Christ ranks higher on the serious meter.

As for the rest of life, Teller offers no promises. There are certainly opportunities for having fun — and rest assured, he wants to make the most of them.



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# GETTING TO KNOW WYATT TELLER

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

**WT:** “Jim Shockey. He has his own hunting show [Jim Shockey’s Hunting Adventures]. He can shoot a bow accurately over 100 yards. The guy is a BA [bad a--]. Muzzleloaders, he’s amazing. He’s a BA guy. If I had to switch places with someone, it’d probably be someone with their own hunting show. Jim Shockey’s a good one. He’s a good family guy. He’s got his stuff squared away. It wouldn’t be bad trading places with him for a day. That’s the life—hunting, fishing every day and making money.”

**Q: Instagram, Twitter, Facebook ... what’s your favorite?**

**WT:** “I use Instagram to keep touch with people and the same with Facebook, birthdays and stuff like that, making sure that I’m staying up with my friends from high school and older guys who have moved on. Woody [Baron], I’ve seen all the stuff he’s posted on Facebook [while with the Cowboys]. Even Jon [McLaughlin] ... that’s a great way to stay in touch with people.”

**Q: What is the talent you’d most like to have?**

**WT:** “Singing wouldn’t be bad. I’m not a big music guy, but just the ability to sing. If someone is feeling bad, and you can belt some songs out, that’s awesome. If someone is feeling good, and you can sing, that’s great. I just can’t sing at all, not even the slightest. I can’t even hum. That [being able to sing] would definitely be cool. Or flying, that would be cool, too.”


**Q: What would be a dream vacation for you?**

**WT:** “I think I already took it. I went to the Cayman Islands with my girlfriend, and that was amazing. But to kind of go with that hunting thing, a trip to Alaska would be an amazing trip. To kill a moose, you know. My sister and my dad took a mission trip to Alaska when I was in middle school, and I couldn’t go. They got to go to Anchorage, Alaska, and they were telling me about a moose. The antlers were wider than the car—they were driving a mini van—and it was taller, and its shoulders were half the size of a car. That’s insane. That would be an amazing hunt. Alaska would be a dream trip, but the Cayman Islands trip this past spring was an amazing time with my girlfriend and her parents. It was beautiful.”

**Q: What is your favorite thing about being a Virginia Tech football player?**

**WT:** “Probably the tradition. Running out onto the field, it says [on a piece of Hokie stone at the tunnel entrance], “For those who have passed and for those to come, reach for excellence.” Those words are just so strong.

“It means so much when you’re thinking about Jake Grove and Eugene Chung and Duane Brown—all these studs. When you go out there, you’re not playing for just yourself or your family or for the number you’re wearing, you’re playing also for the people that have worn that number. Great people have worn No. 57 [Teller’s number], and you have to keep that in mind. Dwight Vick, [William] Boatwright ... all these studs. All the tradition here.

“I haven’t been to another school, but if I had to guess, it’s not like that at a lot of places. I appreciate the guys that have come in, and the ones that are going to come.” 



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**D**ream vacations often start with warm temperatures and beautiful beaches, but some places offer more — much more, actually.

Costa Rica, for example, features rain forests, volcanoes, a popular national forest and coastlines on two major oceans. Tourists venture to this idyllic spot in Central America to hike, bungee jump from bridges, watch birds, go rafting, try snorkeling and attempt surfing, among other things.

Marcelo Acuna loves his native country, and he likes going to the beach with his buddies. He absorbs the rays of the sun and watches while his friends surf.

The truth, though, is that, in this relative utopia, Acuna prefers another of Costa Rica's passions — one that doesn't involve tourists or scenery. He loves soccer, and in his world and that of many of his native countrymen, it comes first at the expense of everything else in this beautiful place.

"I'm the only one of my friends who doesn't surf, but that's because I prefer soccer," Acuna said. "I didn't have time to go to the beach on weekends. I had games and practices.

"Everything is soccer in Costa Rica. There is no other sport. It's just soccer. That's all you do. It's, like, the only option you have."

Acuna, who hails from San Jose (the nation's capital), brought his passion to the United States, and ultimately, Blacksburg, where he currently serves as a high-scoring forward on the Virginia Tech men's soccer team. Largely as a result of his ability to put balls in the back of the net, the Hokies earned a bid to the NCAA Championships in 2016 and advanced to the Elite Eight — their first berth and best run since the 2007 team went to the College Cup.

That Acuna wound up in Blacksburg came as a surprise — both to him and Tech's coaches. Tech men's head coach Mike Brizendine and his assistants do not actively recruit in Costa Rica. Yes, like a lot of Tech's Olympic sports coaches, they recruit a few international kids, but for the most part, they fill the roster with those from within a six-hour radius of the university's campus.

Acuna himself never expected to play in the United States. He expected to play in college in Costa Rica and then pursue a spot on a professional team or on Costa Rica's national team.

"I graduated from high school at a very young age, and I got into college over there back in Costa Rica," he said. "The problem there is that it's impossible to study and play soccer at the same time, so I had to take a position, and I started looking for options. I discovered that, by coming to the U.S., I could do both at the same time."

Acuna's journey, though, wasn't as simple as a direct flight to Blacksburg. It involved a layover — at Houston Baptist, a small Division I school in Houston with approximately 3,300 students.

The Houston Baptist coaching staff was in Costa Rica looking for players and came across Acuna, who played for an academy. Houston Baptist's coaches offered Acuna an opportunity to play in the United States — and he took it.

Unlike a lot of international students, Acuna easily adapted to American culture. He learned English while in high school in Costa Rica, and Houston Baptist's roster featured several Hispanic players. Plus, his mother was actually born in Los Angeles, so he made several trips to the United States as a child.

"My mother was born here, and my grandmother is from the U.S., too," he said. "She married my grandfather, who is from Costa Rica. They went back to Costa Rica, but I used to come back two or three times a year.

"I also came with the national team a couple of times, and then I came with my high school three or four times to play in Minnesota [in a tournament]. Of course, you get nervous of living here because it's different, but not because I was coming to the U.S."

A sophomore according to the NCAA because of the time spent at Universidad Escuela Libre Derecho in Costa Rica, Acuna showed his ability to score goals right away at Houston Baptist, registering 10 goals in 19 games. On two occasions, he recorded the rare hat trick (three goals in a game).

But he had bigger aspirations. He wanted to play at a higher level — which meant leaving Houston Baptist. He sent emails to the coaching staffs at several schools, including one to the coaches at Tech. Looking for some scoring punch, Brizendine and his staff followed up with Acuna, and that led to him winding up in Blacksburg. He visited in the spring of 2016, and he made his decision a few days later.

"I wanted to play in a more competitive conference and on a better team," Acuna said. "So I asked for my release and started looking at my options. I thought this one was the best fit for me. I think it was."





**“** *I love it. I like everything. The school spirit is the thing that I like the most. Everybody is concerned about the university, and everyone loves being here. Also, the athletic department, I like it. I love everything about it.*

**Marcelo Acuna why he transferred to Virginia Tech** **”**

When asked why, Acuna never hesitated.

“I love it,” he said. “I like everything. The school spirit is the thing that I like the most. Everybody is concerned about the university, and everyone loves being here. Also, the athletic department, I like it. I love everything about it.”

And Tech certainly loves him.

Acuna started all 22 games a year ago and scored 11 goals, including a hat trick against VMI and two goals each in games against South Florida and Charlotte, with the latter game being in the NCAA Championships. He scored the game-winning goal in the Hokies' first three games.

He interestingly played with confidence right from the start. Some maybe would be at least a little intimidated by playing in the ACC, which features the best men's soccer players in the nation. A recent check of the polls proves that fact, as six of the top 11 teams in the United Soccer Coaches poll call the ACC home.

“I come from a very good level back in Costa Rica,” Acuna said. “I was playing with excellent players. I knew the ACC was a good level, but I believe in my capacities as a soccer player. I never doubted. It never passed through my mind that I couldn't play in the ACC.”

Acuna gave the Hokies exactly what they needed — a threat on offense. Soccer games are often close, and a proven goal scorer often turns out to be the difference in those close games. He forced defenses to pay attention to him, and when he wasn't scoring, he opened things for others.

After the regular season, he earned second-team All-ACC honors. More impressively, after the NCAA Championships, he earned third-team All-America honors by the National Soccer Coaches Association of America, becoming just the second All-American in program history.

Behind Acuna, the Hokies won 13 games — the final three coming at the NCAA Championships.

*Continued on page 34*

***Prolific goal scorer Marcelo Acuna hails from Costa Rica, but he always wanted to play in the U.S. and he ultimately wanted to play in the ACC — and he's been successful at every stop***

*by Jimmy Robertson*

GOALS

GOING





# GOING AFTER HIS GOALS *Continued from page 33*

"It was incredible," Acuna said of last season. "I never thought it would happen. For me, it was like impossible ... We didn't make it to the conference tournament, and now we're going to the Elite Eight.

"I remember ... watching the games at nationals [while at Houston Baptist], and [thinking] it would be so incredible to play just at nationals. Then just going to the Elite Eight, the best eight teams in the country, it was awesome."

This season, Acuna has continued his goal-scoring pace. He leads the team with eight goals—including two in the Hokies' upset of then-No. 1 Notre Dame—as the Hokies seek to make a return trip to the NCAA Championships.

That will be a tall task, as Tech manages one of the nation's most difficult schedules—it's currently ranked the second-toughest based on opponents' records. The Hokies' slate features just six home games and not many "gimmies." Still, they remain confident, especially after knocking off the Irish.

"I'm very confident," Acuna said. "I know we didn't have the start that we wanted to have, but I think that's normal in college soccer. We didn't play at home in the first five games. So I'm confident about going to nationals and having a good run. We can do the same thing as last year."

Acuna's collegiate career ends this fall, and he plans on graduating next spring with a degree in economics. He probably gets his interest in such a topic from his parents—his father runs his own company back in San Jose, and his mom works as a financial manager for a company there.

But he himself hasn't quite figured out his future. He simply maintains a keen focus on the present.

"Right now, I'm just having fun," he said. "I'm living in the moment. I know God has a plan, and I'm going to enjoy every day that I have here. I want to get my degree and have a good season and then see what happens."

## TOP MARCELO ACUNA MOMENTS

### Tech vs. Notre Dame (Sept. 22, 2017)

He scored two goals, including the game winner in the 71st minute, to carry Tech to a win over the then-No. 1 Irish.

### Tech at Charlotte (Nov. 20, 2016)

He scored two second-half goals to help the Hokies rally to a road win over then-No. 10 Charlotte in the second round of the NCAA Championships.

### Tech vs. Duke (Oct. 7, 2016)

Three days after his hat trick against VMI, he notched a goal and an assist to lift Tech to a 3-1 victory over the Blue Devils.

### Tech vs. VMI (Oct. 4, 2016)

He registered his first hat trick as a Hokie, scoring three goals in Tech's 7-1 triumph over the Keydets.


### Tech at Ohio State (Aug. 2, 2016)

His header in the 106th minute was the game winner in the Hokies' 1-0 double-overtime win over the then-No. 18 Buckeyes.

For sure, he wants to continue playing soccer—somewhere. The options include professionally here in the U.S., or perhaps professionally overseas. Another option is returning home and working toward a spot on the Costa Rica national team.

"My dream is to play in a World Cup," he admitted. "I played on the U-20 national team, and we played in the World Cup qualification, but we didn't make it to the World Cup. It was incredible. It was a long process. It was awesome, but we didn't make it, so it was disappointing."

Of course, returning home to Costa Rica wouldn't be the worst thing in the world. After all, a land of warm temperatures, beautiful beaches, lush rainforests and dramatic volcanoes—and all the activities that come along with those things—sounds quite divine.

Acuna himself certainly enjoys all that his native home offers. But for him, a world without soccer would be rather incomplete. 



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When the NCAA Selection Show began on Nov. 7, 2016, the Virginia Tech women's soccer team expected to hear its name called for the ninth straight year. The Hokies watched, as the teams were announced. To their dismay, they never heard the name "Virginia Tech Hokies." For Virginia Tech midfielder Madi Conyers, the moment that followed ranked as one of the toughest of her career.

"We were all sitting together in the Michael Vick room [McConnell Auditorium] watching it, and when we didn't see our name pop up, the seniors realized they were done playing soccer," she said. "That really hit me because they were some of the closest people on the team to me. Knowing how they would never play again was crazy, and I didn't want that to happen to us. It definitely fueled the offseason fire."

While last season ended in disappointment for her, Conyers has seen her soccer career take her from Cosby High School in Midlothian, Virginia to competing in one of the toughest conferences in the country. Her background and family helped her get to Blacksburg, and she and Virginia Tech have been a perfect fit.

Conyers' interest in soccer began when she was just 4 or 5 years old. That interest arose from watching her sister, Kelsey.

"My sister was a soccer player, so I would always go to her practices and just kick the ball around with my dad," Conyers said. "A girl on my sister's team, her dad was there and had a soccer team. He saw me and asked if I wanted to play. I joined his team, and it was just a little rec soccer team."

Her sister helped feed her love for soccer, and their relationship fostered a high competition level between the two.

"My sister and I would compete in pretty much everything we did," Conyers said. "We would play one-on-one basketball, soccer, and even who could do their chores the fastest. It was always something."

The love for competition went beyond soccer for Conyers. While at Cosby High, she lettered in basketball three times. The time on the hardwood actually helped her grow in the game she truly loved: soccer.

"It's so different from soccer, and it helps me see the field better now that I understand soccer more," she said.

While playing for Coach Brenda Tarzentski at Cosby, Conyers earned all-region and all-state honors three years in a row. She was also the 2014 All-Metro Player of the Year by The Richmond Times-Dispatch.

In addition, she played club soccer for the U-18 Richmond Kickers Elite, a team coached by Rob Ukrop. While with the Kickers, Conyers helped the team win a state championship.

Andy McIntosh, one of her former coaches on the Kickers, talked about the Conyers' road and how she's developed while at Virginia Tech.

"It was very exciting to turn on the TV and see so many Richmond players playing in the Virginia Tech-Tennessee game [on Sept. 10], including Madi, who is definitely one of the most exciting and talented young players that I have coached," McIntosh said. "She was always a creative and explosive player, and it is great to see how she has developed her game to have such success at the next level. It is fantastic to see a player that started with the Richmond Kickers at a very young age have such a strong and successful college campaign."

The decision to commit to Virginia Tech came about after plenty of discussion. One of the main focal points for Conyers was the idea of staying close to the place she called home.

"My parents wanted me to go where I wanted to go," she said. "When I first started looking, I narrowed it down. I didn't want to go to a city school. I didn't want to go north, but I didn't want to go super south because I don't play well in the heat. I wanted to be within a three-hour radius from home."

One of the other factors that went into her decision was the hope of being at a school with a good football program. That left her with two options in two different conferences.

She narrowed her choices to Virginia Tech and Tennessee. Both featured solid women's soccer programs, but the Hokies ended up winning out because the road trips throughout the ACC made things easier for her family from a travel perspective. Conyers attended two camps at Virginia Tech before committing.

Conyers came to Blacksburg already familiar with a couple of her teammates from her club days. Blayne Fink and Morgan Conklin, former Tech players, played on the same club team as Conyers.

"Morgan and I had the same club coach, and Blayne and I played on the same high school team," Conyers said. "All three of us played on the same club team. Blayne is hilarious, so I knew if she could fit in here, I could also because we are so different. I felt that it would be awesome to go where I knew people."

Her sister was also a senior at Virginia Tech when Conyers began her freshman year. Kelsey Conyers played basketball for the Hokies and helped Madi with the transition process.

"That year was the year we got super close," Madi said. "It was the best experience I could have had. It also helped that she played basketball here, so she knew about the difficulties of being a student-athlete. It was also a little part of home when

my parents couldn't be there."

Conyers stepped right into a significant role her freshman year. After watching her score four goals against Buffalo and tally a goal and an assist against East Carolina, head coach Charles "Chugger" Adair knew he possessed a talented freshman.

Conyers finished the season with three goals and 11 points. The immediate impact helped her make the All-ACC Freshman Team.

She still says that honor ranks as one of the biggest honors of her collegiate career.

"I don't think I was expecting it," she said. "Coming in, I was just going to work hard, and hopefully I'll get playing time. You come in, and you don't know your role or where you're going to be. It's such a difference in terms of speed of play."

With the success also came a steep learning curve, as Conyers adjusted to a different system and tougher competition. She talked about the most difficult part of her career.

"Coming in as a freshman, I was being thrown into the outside mid-role [midfielder position]," she said. "That role is very different than what I had ever played. Learning all of that at once was difficult."

Now with her senior year in full swing, Conyers has started 60 games, which stands as the most on the team.

She talked about the goals for this team after coming up short a year ago.

*Continued on page 38*



# MAKING THE MOST OF A **FINAL** **OPPORTUNITY**

*Madi Conyers plans to be a teacher once her playing career ends, but the most experienced player on the Tech women's soccer team first wants to help the Hokies return to the NCAA tournament*

*by Nathan Loprete  
Special to Inside Hokie Sports*





MAKING THE  
**MOST**  
OF A FINAL  
**OPPORTUNITY**

Continued  
from  
page 37

MADI  
CONYERS



“We definitely want to make the NCAA tournament again,” Conyers said. “We want to make the ACC tournament. When there were just four teams that made the tournament, we were the fifth or sixth team. Last year when eight teams made it, we were the ninth team. We’ve always been that first one out. We’re reaching for fourth, fifth or sixth in the ACC, so if we do fall a little bit, we’ll still be in. Those are two of our main goals.”


Plenty of time remains in this season, but the reality is starting to set in for Conyers. Soccer has been a part of her life since a young age, and this season represents the final stage.

Conyers talked about what soccer has meant to her and the hardest thing about leaving the pitch.

“It’s an escape from when you’re having a bad day,” she said. “You can go step on the field, and all of your worries are out of the door for an hour or two. I’ve never been a part of a team that’s as close as we are. With practice, you’re with them four hours a day at least. When you go on trips, you’re with them the whole weekend.”

Conyers continues pursuit of a degree in human development at Virginia Tech and remains focused on the next chapter, which includes elementary education. Luckily for her, Virginia Tech offers a one-year master’s program, and she wants to apply to it.

“Kids are my passion, so I would love to be able to make a difference in their lives and hopefully help them figure out what they want to do and encourage them,” she said. “As a teacher, you can really make a difference in their lives even at a young age. I remember my kindergarten and first grade teachers. I’m hoping that I can be that memorable person in their life that they can turn to when they’re older.”

It’s all coming full circle for Conyers. Her strong family background helped mold her into the person she is today, and she wants to give it back to the next generation of students. For now, however, Tech fans can find her on a soccer field, listening to Thomas Rhett and aiming to get the Hokies back to the NCAA tournament. 



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**M**ost of Virginia Tech's international student-athletes are experienced travelers, with the wherewithal to order airline tickets, navigate airports, use public transportation and speak a couple of different languages just well enough to ask the appropriate questions if confused.

Klaudia Nazieblo found a trick, though, that helped steer her through the complexities of the English language. Whenever she struggled with a word or phrase or colloquial saying that Americans often use in their respective geographic regions, she sought out the youngest of society to help with translations.

"Talking to the kids is the best way to learn the language," she said. "They won't make fun of you, and they use very simple language."

Nazieblo has a relatively good grasp of the English language these days, especially after having spent the past four years in the United States, including the past three in Southwest

Virginia as a member of the Virginia Tech women's swimming and diving team. This young lady also has a relatively strong grip on the Hokies' record book as well, as a recent perusal revealed her name being listed more than 20 times.

That she got to this point — an All-American and a three-time honorable mention All-American — is an incredible feat considering her humble beginnings in her hometown of Wroclaw, Poland. She grew up as the daughter of two parents who run a small restaurant and the youngest of three children.

Her rebellious side led her to swimming. She wanted to go out into the deep water with her two older brothers, and her mother insisted that she wear "floaties" on her arms. She took them off because she wanted to swim faster — a precursor of her future.

Her father wanted her to play tennis, but

she was having none of that.

"He was talking a lot and talking a lot, and I was getting annoyed," she said, with a smile. "I thought, 'If I go to swimming, he wouldn't be much involved.'"

So she swam all throughout her formative years, landing on a club team and becoming great at her craft. As she got older, she started making more and more waves.

Dr. Ned Skinner, the head of Virginia Tech's swimming and diving program, and his staff know how to navigate the international swimming circuit. A former Skinner assistant had contacts in Poland and already had lured two swimmers from Wroclaw, Nazieblo's hometown, to Blacksburg — former women's swimmer Weronika Paluszek and former men's swimmer Michal Szuba. They participated on different club teams than Nazieblo, but knew each other.

*Continued on page 42*



# LIFE IN THE FAST LANE

Virginia Tech women's swimmer  
Klaudia Nazieblo navigated language  
difficulties and cultural barriers  
to become one of the best in  
school history and to put  
herself in position for  
a future in the sport  
by Jimmy  
Robertson

## TECH swimming and diving looking to continue ACC consistency

by Jimmy Robertson

For the first time in four years, Dr. Ned Skinner showed up at a Virginia Tech swimming practice and failed to see Brandon Fiala or Robert Owen. The two All-Americans graduated last May, taking with them eight ACC titles and six All-America honors (and seven honorable mention nods).

"It's going to be a new-look men's team," Skinner admitted.

That said, Skinner loves a challenge, and he loves the talent returning on both Tech swimming and diving squads, as the Hokies opened their 2017-18 season with a meet at Duke on Oct. 13-14.

Despite the losses of the two superstars, the men's team returns a strong contingent of divers, including seniors Mauro Castro-Silva, Jack Gigliotti and Thomas Shinholser and juniors Eduardo Castro-Silva and Ben Schiesl. Also, Blacksburg native Ian Ho and Norbert Szabo, who qualified for the Hungary Olympic Team in 2016, return after scoring in multiple events each at the ACC Championships a year ago.

"I'm definitely excited," Skinner said. "Our men's diving is going to be rock solid—all five have ACC scoring experience. Ian is emerging as a superstar, and Norbert has a lot of ACC and NCAA experience."

"You add [seniors] Harrison Pierce and Justin Edwards—they both scored at the U.S. Open this summer—and the ninth-ranked recruiting class. A couple of those freshmen look good. We've got some guys ready to do. I think we're going to reload, and I'm excited about that."

The women's team returns quite a bit of firepower in its own right, led by All-Americans Klaudia Nazieblo and Reka Gyorgy, who also was the ACC champion in the 400 individual medley as a freshman last season. In addition, Tech returns Ashlynn Peters, the ACC 3-meter diving champion, and the roster features steady seniors Adriana Grabski, Kelly Henry and Maggie Gruber.

Grabski scored in several events at the ACC meet last spring. Gruber missed last season with an injury, but she qualified for the NCAA Championships as a relay member two years ago. Plus, Joelle Vereb, a freshman from Williamsburg, Virginia, joins the mix after winning two individual state titles last spring and two as a member of relay teams.

"Adriana had a great summer and continues to grow as a swimmer and a leader," Skinner said. "Chloe Hicks has NCAA experience and had a great summer. Joelle Vereb is a freshman, and I think she can make an immediate impact."

"The women have a little more experience, with people like Klaudia, Reka and Maggie, who is back after a year off from injury. I think the women have a chance to be really strong. I'm excited about them, too."

Certainly, Tech's swimming and diving program has been consistent under Skinner. The Tech men finished fourth at the ACC Championships last spring to mark their eighth consecutive top-four finish, while the women's team came in fifth, which marked its 13th straight top-five finish.

Given the talent, experience and motivation, there is little reason to think that the Hokies will not accomplish or exceed those finishes yet again this season.



Continued from page 40

# LIFE IN THE FAST LANE

Tech's staff found out about Nazieblo, thus starting the recruiting process. She became interested after seeing a lot of her friends leave to swim collegiately in the United States and also because Polish colleges—or most European ones, for that matter—do not provide opportunities to participate in collegiate sports.

She eventually made up her mind to switch continents and attempt to swim collegiately in the United States—and at Virginia Tech

“Here [in the U.S.], I can do both things [get an education and swim collegiately], and that's what I like,” she said. “So I decided that I would try the first year, and if I didn't like it, I could always come back. I'm not losing anything.”

In the summer of 2014, Nazieblo made a life-altering decision. She applied for a job that would bring her to the U.S., and she wound up getting it. She ended up at a YMCA camp in Maine, of all places, and she worked as a lifeguard at the lake that was part of the camp. She also worked as a counselor to the young children who attended the camp.

She said they stayed in “wood shacks somewhere in the woods next to the lake.” Despite the spartan conditions, she enjoyed the work, and more importantly, it provided her

with the opportunity to improve her English and to travel during breaks.

She made trips to Boston, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C.—and then came a little farther south, to Virginia Tech.

“I came here to see how it looked, and I really liked it, but I also didn't have any other place to compare it to just because I didn't go on any recruiting trips,” Nazieblo said. “But because of the connections I had with the coaches, it convinced me that they had an interest in me, and they helped me through the process.”

She later added, “For me, it was just the size of the facility [the Christiansburg Aquatic Center] was impressive, but also people were very nice and very friendly. To be honest, I didn't have much to compare, but I just liked it.”

She found a surprise waiting for her when she arrived on campus. She had lost touch with Paluszek and Szuba, both a year older than her, and yet learned that both actually swam for the Hokies. They helped convince her to come to Blacksburg.

They also helped her with the transition to the culture. Most international athletes struggle with things like the language, the food, banking and the bus transit system. Also, most come from big cities—Wroclaw has more than 600,000 people—and Blacksburg, with the students in town, holds roughly 70,000.

Yet Nazieblo adapted—pardon the pun—swimmingly.



“Most of the stuff, they were explaining it to me,” she said. “So that really helped with the transition. From what I heard, there were stories about how they had to adjust to a new environment. It was completely different. They just explained it, and that helped with the transition.”

Nazieblo certainly made a splash in the pool. As a freshman, she came in third in two individual events at the ACC Championships and earned honorable mention All-America honors in the 200-yard butterfly at the NCAA Championships.

However, she wasn't exactly satisfied. Like most swimmers, she places more of an emphasis on her times than her finishes, and she wanted to swim even faster.

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“My first year, I gained at least 10 pounds,” she said. “I had never lifted before, and here I was lifting. Besides new muscles I gained, I also gained some unnecessary weight. I didn’t feel completely well in the pool. So for the next year, I tried to learn from my mistakes, to eat better and choose other meals, and I started lifting differently. With trying new stuff, that helped me moving forward.”

Without question, as she earned All-America honors in the 200-yard butterfly as a sophomore and honorable mention honors as a junior. In addition, she twice has been a part of relay teams that earned honorable mention All-America honors.

Today, she holds the school record in the 200 butterfly and in the 100 and 200

backstroke. Her times in the 100 butterfly, and the 200 and the 400 individual medley, rank among the fastest in school history. In addition, she has been a part of the 200 medley, 400 medley and 800 freestyle relay teams that hold school records.

In short, she holds individually or shares as part of a relay team six school records—the most in school history by a women’s swimmer.

“Klaudia is the most well rounded swimmer we’ve had come through,” Skinner said. “She could theoretically score in 10 events at the ACC Championships. She could theoretically score in five events at the NCAA Championships. She’s that versatile and gifted. She’s got speed in freestyle, so she’s been on our sprint freestyle relays. She’s got stroke, where she leads off our medley relays in the backstroke. She’s got IM [individual medley] and has been to the ACC finals in those events. She’s truly one of those swimmers that is unique—very reminiscent of [former swimmer] Brandon Fiala on the men’s side.”

Skinner views Nazieblo in a special light for perfectly good reasons. Of course, she’s supremely talented, but she also decided to return for her final year even though she could have graduated with a degree last spring. Instead, she will get a degree in economics in May, while adding minors in both communications and business leadership.


She plans to make the most of her senior year in the pool, too, in preparation for a possible future in swimming. She competed at the World Championships in Budapest, Hungary and then at the World University Games in Taipei, Taiwan over the summer and hopes those performances carry her into next spring’s ACC Championships. She finished sixth in the 200 butterfly in Taiwan.

Her travels add to her collection of international stops. She has swum in competitions on three continents—North America, Europe and Asia.

“That’s one of the advantages of this sport,” Nazieblo said. “If you’re good enough, you get to know the world better because you have a chance to participate in meets that are on the other side of the world. That’s one of the reasons I keep going to swimming. I’m hoping to qualify for more meets and see other places.”

Skinner, who raves about Nazieblo’s leadership skills with the incoming freshman class, hopes that his superstar gets to take at least one more trip.

“Swimming fast sets her up for 2020,” he said. “I believe she has what it takes to go to the Olympic Games [in Tokyo] and represent Poland.”

For sure, she has come a long way in a relatively short amount of time. She would be the first to say that. In perfect English, too. 

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*Tony Robie takes over the helm of the Virginia Tech wrestling program, and while he and his staff have a lot of youth and inexperience on this year's roster, they plan on doing what this proud program has done a lot of lately – win*  
by Jimmy Robertson

# NEW COACH, SAME GOALS

College athletics continues to become more and more complex, but when it came time to name a head wrestling coach, Virginia Tech AD Whit Babcock boiled the decision down to the simplest of forms.

"You don't mess with something that's fourth to sixth in the country," Babcock said, referring to the wrestling program's finish at the NCAA Championships the past two years.

With that in mind, Babcock made the common-sense move, tabbing Tony Robie, a longtime assistant at Tech, to be Kevin Dresser's successor. For 11 seasons, Robie served as the top lieutenant for Dresser, who departed last February for the head coaching position at Iowa State.

Dresser actually left before last season ended, and Robie served in the interim, leading the Hokies to an ACC tournament title and the sixth-place finish at the NCAA Championships. In the five months since being named the head coach, he's moved into a bigger office, changed the décor, assembled his staff and immersed himself in recruiting.

Other than that, he's been doing most of the same things that helped the Tech program become one of the best in the country.

"I enjoy coming to work now as much as I ever have in my coaching career," Robie said. "I'm really excited for the challenge. I've wanted to be a head coach for a long time. I felt I was ready for a long time. I didn't see it playing out the way it did at Virginia Tech, but it worked out for me fantastically. I'm really excited about the future and the challenges ahead. I try to come to work every day and bring great energy and commitment to the program in all aspects of what we do. It's going great."

According to those in the know in wrestling circles, Robie has gotten off to a terrific start as the Hokies' head coach. For starters, after getting the head job, he quickly added two stars as assistants.

Frank Molinaro, a 2012 national champion and four-time All-American at 149 pounds while at Penn State, came to Tech after serving as the volunteer assistant at his alma mater. Jared Frayer, a two-time All-American at 149 pounds while at Oklahoma, arrived in Blacksburg after working assistant stints at Harvard, Iowa, Wisconsin and Oklahoma.

Both Molinaro and Frayer have been Olympians. Frayer participated in the 2012 Olympics in London, while Molinaro competed at the Olympics in Rio de Janeiro last year. With

the addition of the duo, Tech became one of just three wrestling staffs nationally—Iowa and Penn State being the others—to feature two Olympians on the staff.

"They're both great character guys, family guys, and hard workers who have earned all the success they've had," Robie said. "They really fit the mold in terms of what I was looking for to bring onto the staff. Their success speaks for themselves in terms of what they've accomplished."

Robie, his two assistants, and Tyler Graff, his director of performance, immediately put together a plan that gets the roster ready physically, while also preparing the athletes to wrestle their best toward the end of the season. Tech's wrestlers traditionally peak around NCAA tournament time, which explains why the Hokies have finished in the top 11 for six consecutive seasons.

Yet this Tech team will feature a different flair, as the Hokies return just two seniors and lost four standouts off last year's squad — Joey Dance (125 pounds), Sal Mastriani (157), Ty Walz (heavyweight) and Zach Epperly (174), who graduated and departed with a year of eligibility remaining. This quartet combined for eight All-America honors over their careers.

The Hokies certainly return some talent, led by two-time All-Americans Jared Haught and Solomon Chishko. But half of their 10 weight classes could feature newcomers and/or inexperienced wrestlers.

"It's hard to replace All-Americans," Robie admitted. "That's just the way it is. That's the situation we're in, but we look forward to the challenge. We've got a lot of really good, young kids and a lot of talent in this [wrestling] room, and the commitment to success is as good as it's ever been."

With that said, here is a look at the 2017-18 Hokies by weight class:

## 125 pounds

Dance departed with 114 wins and three ACC championships in addition to being a two-time All-American. He won at least 28 matches in each of his four years, so he leaves behind quite the void.

Redshirt freshman Kyle Norstrom and junior Ryan Haskett stand ready to fill that void. Norstrom came in more highly decorated, having won five state championships at Brandon High School in Florida. Yet Haskett has worked himself into contention for the starting role.

"I would think one of those two guys would earn that spot," Robie said. "Kyle was a bigger name coming out of high school, but Ryan has done a really good job. He's a Virginia guy [Burke, Virginia] that has improved a lot in the past six months. I would anticipate seeing one of those guys."


"Our schedule at 125 is going to be tough — a lot of good guys coming in here that are highly ranked in the country with the teams we're wrestling. So whoever ends up in that spot is going to have his work cut out for him and needs to be ready to roll."

## 133 pounds

Dennis Gustafson returns after a redshirt junior season in which he went 21-8. He won the ACC title at 133 as a true freshman in 2014, and he finished third this past season. Robie expects him to be a contender for an ACC title and All-







America recognition in his final year. Gustafson could follow the same path as that of Mastriani, who earned All-America honors for the first time his senior year.

“What Sal [Mastriani] was able to do last year as a fifth-year senior has motivated Dennis, and I think just having a guy like Tyler Graff [a four-time All-American at 133 pounds while at Wisconsin] to roll with has been able to help him with his wrestling and with his confidence in himself,” Robie said. “I expect a big year out of Dennis. He’s going to be a critical part of what we do. We need him to perform.”

Josh Baier, who won a state championship while at Cave Spring High in Roanoke, Virginia, entered the fall as the top backup at this weight class.

### **141 pounds**

Things are up in the air for the Hokies at 141 pounds, as Robie knows he needs one of his younger wrestlers at this class to emerge. The contenders for the job include redshirt freshmen Brent Moore and Andrew Mehrholz, freshman Caden Darber and junior Brendan Ryan. Moore probably ranks as the

favorite to win the job after going 26-6 while wrestling unattached during his redshirt season. Those 26 wins included nine pins.

“We’ve got a lot of young guys in there that are unproven, but if you had to say one guy is the favorite, it

would have to be Brent Moore just from what he did last year as far as having some success,” Robie said. “What we’ve seen in the room, we’ve got to get his weight in a good place and get him to feeling good and wrestling well on a one-hour weigh-in. That’s his challenge.

“He’s a competitive and tough kid. It’s going to require discipline and a lot of work for him to maintain the weight and do it the right way. That’s his challenge. Not far behind him would be Andrew Mehrholz from [Deerfield] Illinois who redshirted last year. He’s a talented guy, and he’s going to be in the mix.”

### **149 pounds**

Chishko returns to anchor this weight class for the third straight year. He won his first ACC title last season, and he finished sixth at the NCAA Championships for the second consecutive year to earn All-America honors. He went 25-6 overall and already has won 55 matches in two years. He enters the season ranked fourth in the nation at his weight class, and Robie expects a big redshirt junior season.

“He’s got to be a guy whose goal is to be wrestling in the NCAA final on Saturday night,” Robie said.

*Continued on page 46*



**NEW**  
**COACH,**  
Continued  
from **SAME**  
**GOALS**  
page 45

“He’s certainly good enough to do that, and he’s got to take advantage of the opportunities in the room with his training partners and with his coaches. He’s in a great situation because Molinaro and Frayer were 149-pounders, so for me, looking at his situation, it’s as good as it’s been from a training standpoint.”

“He’s done a pretty good job, especially this fall, just getting his body in shape and making sure he’s ready to go. I expect big things out of him this year.”

The Hokies lack depth at this weight class, though freshman Brendan Grammes, a McLean, Virginia native, won two Virginia Group 6A state titles during his prep career.

**157 pounds**

Tech’s roster features three talented 157-pounders, as Robie seeks to replace Mastriani, who went 20-9 and earned his first All-America honor last season. The trio consists of redshirt junior Ryan Blee, redshirt freshman B.C. LaPrade and freshman sensation Mekhi Lewis.

Blee, who transferred from Oklahoma State three years ago, went 12-5 in limited action last season, and LaPrade went 19-10 while wrestling unattached. Lewis, out of Bound Brook, New Jersey, ranked as one of the top recruits in the nation as a senior in high school.

This battle figures to continue well into fall workouts, but that actually is a good thing. Coaches like competition, and everyone at this weight class figures to get even better because of it.

“It’s hard to say how it’s going to pan out right now,” Robie said. “I think B.C. and Ryan have improved a lot since last year, and Mekhi Lewis has been impressive since he showed up on campus. He’s by far the best athlete on our team.”

“It’s really a weight class that is a little of a question mark in terms of who is going to be the guy, but I feel good about any of these three guys if we have to put them out on the mat.”

**165 pounds**

This season marks the return of David McFadden, who took a redshirt season last year to recover fully from a torn ACL suffered in the 2016 NCAA Championships. As a freshman at those Championships, McFadden earned All-America honors, which capped a 27-11 campaign.

McFadden has recovered fully from the knee injury, and Robie expects him to take the next step in his development.

“David has looked fantastic,” Robie said. “He really has. He’s a guy that’s a student of the sport of wrestling. He’s constantly trying to improve and learn and add new things to his wrestling. His wrestling



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IQ is incredibly high. He's a great learner, and he wants to come in and work with coaches and add things to his wrestling. I've seen a lot of improvement out of him.

"At the end of the day, I think his best quality is that he loves the sport of wrestling as much as anyone in our program. He loves to work out, he loves to train and he really loves to compete, so we have high expectations for David. He's going to be in the mix to win a title this year, and he's capable of doing that. He believes that in his mind, and that's really important."

Mike Ciavarro serves as the backup at this weight class. The redshirt junior has seen limited action in his career.

### 174 pounds

Tech's staff faces a little uncertainty at this weight class, as it tries to replace Epperly. The competition for the starting nod really comes down to two wrestlers — redshirt sophomore Cody Hughes and freshman Hunter Bolen.

Hughes took a redshirt season last year, but went 15-8 in limited action as a true freshman two years ago. Bolen, from nearby Christiansburg, ranked as one of the top recruits in the nation. He won three state titles in his career, but perhaps more impressively, won the 160-pound crown at the prestigious Beast of the East tournament this past December.

"Cody has been in the program for two years, and he's been a guy that is consistent with his work ethic and his effort," Robie said. "He's steadily and quietly improved over the course of the past two years. He seems to be the guy that I would have to pinpoint as the favorite.

"Hunter Bolen is right there with him. There is a possibility that



Hunter redshirts this year. We'll have to see how things progress over the course of the next several weeks, but those are the two top guys at 174."

### 184 pounds

Tech lacks depth in this weight class, but it returns a stalwart in Zack Zavatsky, a two-time ACC champion entering his redshirt junior season. Zavatsky went 25-4 last season and qualified for the NCAA Championships, though he missed on earning All-America honors.

"He's coming off two seasons when he had good regular seasons, but had some disappointments at the NCAA tournament," Robie said. "There is no other way to say it. But Zack is incredibly talented and has proven that he can wrestle with the best guys in the country. To me, he's a top-four guy [nationally], and that's what he's got to do. That's what he has to prove when he steps out there in March. He knows that.

*Continued on page 48*

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# NEW COACH, Continued from SAME GOALS

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We know that. Everyone who has watched him wrestle knows how good he is.”

Freshman Stan Smeltzer and sophomore T.J. Allen serve as the backups. Allen won four matches last season in a limited role.

## 197 pounds

Haught returns to the Hokies' lineup as the team leader and a threat to win an NCAA title. A year ago, he advanced to the semifinals at this weight class before losing to Olympic bronze medalist J'Den Cox of Missouri — who ultimately went on to win the national title. Cox, though, graduated, along with runner-up Brett Pfarr from Minnesota, so Haught certainly has an opportunity. The two-time All-American went 28-4 last season.

“It's pretty obvious what the goal is for him,” Robie said. “He's got to set his sights on winning the national title, and he certainly has. We're excited to watch him compete. It's on for Jared. He's got a chance to be a three-time All-American and a national champion and the most successful wrestler to come through Virginia Tech. That's exciting.”

“I know he's excited. Nobody works harder than that guy, and nobody is tougher than that guy. He's chomping at the bit to get back out there.”

Redshirt sophomore Dylan Cook and freshman John Borst went into the fall as backups behind Haught. Cook took a redshirt year last season, while Borst finished his career as a three-time state champion at Sherando High in Sherando, Virginia.

## Heavyweight

Perhaps no loss on Tech's roster looms bigger than that of Walz, who served as the heart and soul of the program the past two years. Walz concluded his career as a three-time All-American, twice finishing fourth. He went 26-4 last season and won at least 26 matches in all four years of his career.

The frontrunner to replace Walz is Andrew Dunn, a redshirt freshman from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

“I'm excited to see him compete,” Robie said. “It's truly difficult to gauge these guys based on what you see every day in practice. You know what they're putting into it, but I want to see him compete, and hopefully that optimism I have for Andrew right now carries over, and we see that as a finished product when he steps out on the mat.”

“He's a freshman. He's going to have some good moments and bad moments. That's a part of being young, but he's proven to me that wrestling is important to him, and he's willing to commit himself to it. He's really done a good job of attaching himself to Ty Walz and training with Ty [who is helping this season] and trying to absorb everything that Ty brings to the table.”


Brooks Wilding goes into the season as the backup. Wilding used to wrestle at 184 and 197, but bulked up to give the Hokies some depth at heavyweight.

Tech opens the season Nov. 4 against Stanford, and that marks the start of a difficult slate. In addition to playing Stanford, the Hokies take on quality programs such as Chattanooga and Central Michigan, along with Missouri, which heads into the season ranked No. 5 nationally.

On the ACC level, NC State figures to be the frontrunner, as it returns a lot of its lineup and gets a couple of guys back from redshirt seasons. Virginia and North Carolina also will be tough, and Pittsburgh, under a new coach, could make things interesting.

Tech may not be picked to win the ACC, but Robie and this staff like this group. The coaches like the combination of experience, youth and talent — and they welcome the challenge of proving people wrong.

After all, this is a proud program. This group only knows one thing — winning — and the players and coaches plan on doing just that.

“When you look at how our team sets up, there is going to be a learning curve, with so many young guys and so many new faces in the lineup,” Robie said. “It's going to be difficult to duplicate what we did the past two years, but I still think we have a very good team. We have some great individuals. We have some really good young kids that can do some great things. So I'm excited about that.” 

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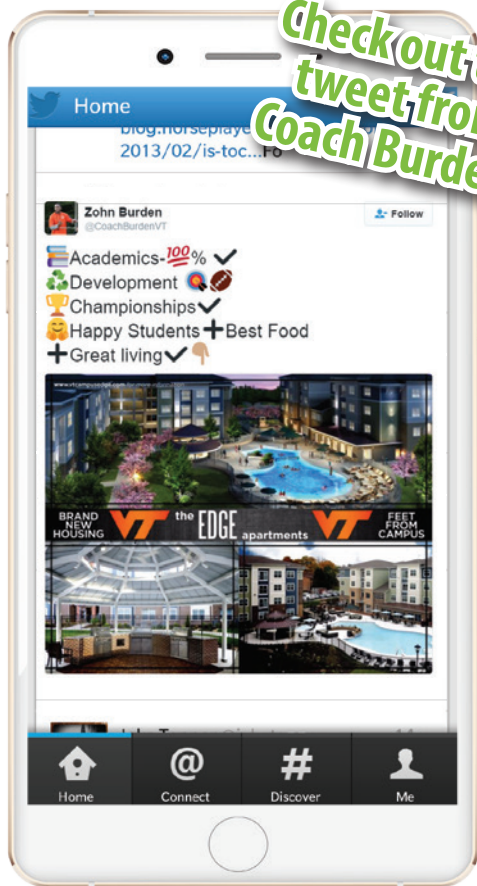
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