

inside

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HOKIESPORTS

The Official Publication of Virginia Tech Athletics

MAROON-ORANGE GAME *CONCLUDES* *SPRING*

Tech head coach Justin Fuente and the Hokies wrapped up a productive spring by playing in front of thousands at Lane, creating excitement for the 2016 season



2016
SPRING
FOOTBALL *REVIEW*
PAGE 18

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HOKIES WITH HIGHLIGHTS ON BOTH SIDES OF BALL IN MAROON-ORANGE GAME

THE STUDENT-ATHLETE EXPERIENCE

Tech head coach Justin Fuente and his football team concluded spring practice by playing in the annual Maroon-Orange Spring Game held April 23 at Lane Stadium.

Jérod Evans threw a touchdown pass to Jaylen Bradshaw, Coleman Fox scored on a touchdown run, and Houshun Gaines had two sacks in a game that pitted the offense (Orange) versus the defense (Maroon). The defense received points for a turnover, a three-and-out, and a stop. The Orange team won 20-15 thanks primarily to the two touchdowns.

The five quarterbacks split the reps evenly throughout the game, but Evans enjoyed the better of it, at least statistically. Unofficially, he threw for more than 100 yards, with a touchdown. Bradshaw caught five passes for more than 70 yards, including a 24-yard touchdown reception from Evans.

Fox scored late in the game on a 16-yard run. In addition to the two touchdowns, the Orange got two field goals from Joey Slye, who connected from 26 and 54 yards.

Defensively, Gaines had two sacks and both Nigel Williams and Darius Fullwood each had one.

Following the game, Fuente thanked the thousands who attended.

“That was absolutely incredible,” he said. “It was an incredible show of support for our kids ... it was a really great atmosphere. It was a great as I’ve seen in terms of a spring game and fan turnout and all that sort of stuff. I know the kids appreciated it and I certainly do. Everyone who made the trip up here for this game should be commended.”

“I’m very appreciative of my scholarship and all that is covered. It’s a lot less stress on my family and a lot less stress on me. I have all the books I need and all the tools I need to succeed both in the classroom and on the field. It’s all there, so I’m very appreciative.”

Ken Ekanem
Redshirt Senior | Centreville, Virginia

“I can’t tell you how much we appreciate our donors. Without them, we wouldn’t have half the stuff we have now and we wouldn’t be as good of a football team. So we really appreciate it.”

Sam Rogers
Redshirt Senior | Mechanicsville, Virginia



The Donor File



Jerry Smith

HOKIE CLUB LEVEL:
Hokie Benefactor

CURRENTLY RESIDES:
Lynchburg, Virginia

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1966

FAMILY:
wife (Marty Carrington Smith); son (Billy Smith, urban affairs and planning '95); daughter-in law (Jen Monroe Smith, crop and soil environmental sciences '96); grandson (Colin Smith); granddaughter (Danielle Smith); son (Bobby Smith); son (Philip Smith, residential property management '00); daughter-in law (Kelly Crews Smith, ECD '99)

Q&A

Q: A Hokie is ...
A: A butt kicking chicken!

Q: What is your best memory of Virginia Tech athletics?
A: Tech's victory against Clemson at Death Valley in 1986 when Morgan Roane was waving to the Tigers to come on down the hill to the field.

Q: How did you get involved with the Hokie Club?
A: In 1977, when local Hokie Clubs were being formed to raise athletics funds for student aid, John Moody convinced me to join at the Golden Hokie Level.

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

A: As a student in the 1960s, Tech sports were my favorite part of the school.

Q: I'm a Hokie Club member because ...
A: I've been active with the Lynchburg Hokie Club from the beginning and I like supporting Virginia Tech.

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

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

Q: My all-time favorite Virginia Tech student-athlete from another sport is ...
A: Jamon Gordon (men's basketball).

The New HOKIE SCHOLARSHIP FUND PROGRAM: THE FUTURE SUPPORT OF VIRGINIA TECH STUDENT-ATHLETES

With education and development of Virginia Tech's student-athletes at the core of the Virginia Tech Athletic Fund, the progression and evolution of the Hokie Club will create a more sustainable model and enable Virginia Tech Athletics to continue to grow and be a national leader.

Currently, Virginia Tech is one of only a few schools within the ACC and the Power 5 conferences that does not participate in a "per-seat" priority seating program to raise annual scholarship funds. Virginia Tech is also one of the few schools nationally that has not raised its annual donor giving levels over a significant period of time. Therefore, annual scholarship fund donations have remained fairly flat, while the cost to provide scholarships has rapidly increased.

Under the new Hokie Scholarship Fund program, season tickets in both Lane Stadium and Virginia Tech Carilion Court at Cassell Coliseum will have an annual per-seat minimum gift requirement that varies based upon section or location. With approximately 75 percent of scholarship funding coming from priority seating for football and men's basketball, the Hokie Scholarship Fund program will provide an invaluable resource for Tech Athletics. Both Lane Stadium and Virginia Tech Carilion Court at Cassell Coliseum will undergo re-seatings for the 2017 seasons.

The new Hokie Scholarship Fund program is designed to address the need for increased funding for annual scholarship support of Hokie student-athletes. All gifts given through this program will go directly to scholarship support. The overall program includes a new priority seating and parking program, exclusive donor benefits, priority point system, and a new and improved benefit allocation process.

With the goal of elevating Virginia Tech Athletics' ability to compete for championships while better meeting the needs of our student-athletes, the Hokie Scholarship Fund program comes as the result of more than a year of extensive research and analysis that included data collection from donors/season ticket holders, ACC peer institution review, a focus group, a national review of Power 5 conference institutions, and a comprehensive look at schools recently implementing major football and/or men's basketball priority seating changes.

How Scholarship Seating Will Work

Beginning in 2017, football and men's basketball season ticket holders seated in designated "scholarship sections" throughout Lane Stadium and Cassell Coliseum will be asked to contribute a minimum per-seat scholarship gift each year to secure a priority location for season tickets for football and/or men's basketball. Gift amounts will vary based on location within the stadium/coliseum.

The Hokie Club also is introducing a new and easier to understand priority point program and annual giving benefits chart that will present donors with additional benefits based upon their giving level, including (but not limited to) parking, exclusive event invitations, and the ability to purchase postseason tickets.

The Hokie Scholarship Fund program will officially launch in 2017. All donors who wish to be eligible for benefits are asked to make their gift to the Hokie Scholarship Fund by

the March 31, 2017 giving deadline. Donors then will be ranked based upon their priority points for a complete reseating of Lane Stadium, which will occur in May of 2017. All donors who wish to be eligible for benefits related only to men's basketball will be asked to make their gift by June 30, 2017.

Benefit Allocation Process

Priority Season Ticket and Parking for Football and Men's Basketball

Seating for season tickets in football and/or men's basketball will be based upon one's priority points and making (at least) the minimum gift annually for "scholarship seat" locations. Parking will be based upon one's priority points and meeting the minimum giving level to be eligible for a donor's desired zone for football. Priority points will be determined based upon the Hokie Club priority point system. Similar to previous years, season ticket and parking selections will take place during one's assigned time slot using Ballena online selection technology.

Seating for Single Game, Away Game, Mini Plans, Neutral Site, and Postseason Tickets

Donors who give at the top three scholarship fund giving levels (Hokie Stone, Hokie Scholar, Hokie Ambassador) will receive first priority for seating for single games, away games, mini plans, neutral site and postseason tickets for football, men's basketball and women's basketball with the Ambassadors receiving first priority followed by the Scholars and finally the Hokie Stone donors. The remaining tickets (if available) will be allocated throughout all other donor giving levels based upon donors' priority point totals.

Other Benefits

All other benefits will be allocated first based upon donors' annual Hokie Scholarship Fund giving level and secondly based upon their priority points.

Receiving a scholarship to attend Virginia Tech has allowed me to live out my childhood dream while meeting some of the best people. I couldn't have done this without the support, and for that, I want to say thank you!

VANESSA GONZALEZ



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behind the mic | with Jon Laaser

The Offseason

Over the years while working in baseball, I often would hear at the end of the season: “So, what do you do with yourself now?”

It generally was asked with the implication that the offseason would be a time of vacation or boredom. It used to annoy some of my baseball brethren because they knew all that went into the planning and preparation necessary to put on 71 separate events—essentially a minor league team’s home schedule. It didn’t annoy me because I recognized that was the way it was supposed to be. If done correctly, the preparation in the offseason would lead fans to feel that the events ran effortlessly, and in turn, would make those events the relaxing form of entertainment that fans rightfully had come to expect.

Those questions would be posed to me in September or October, depending on our postseason success or lack thereof. Now that my primary responsibilities lie in areas of football and basketball, my calendar essentially has flipped so that the offseason now falls where my busy season used to be. That has been an adjustment for me. Thirteen years does tend to establish some habitual routines, whether daily or annually. However, I have noticed that I still have received that same question since the conclusion of the basketball season. That led me to realize that there a number of questions I get frequently that I could probably answer more efficiently using this platform.

So let me launch you into summertime with what I will call a FAQ column:

Q: Do you get some down time during the offseason?

A: Yes and no. My personal schedule does ease a bit in terms of travel and actual play-by-play events, but it also transitions into a more administrative period. Different institutions structure the lead announcer position differently. Some of my colleagues are simply broadcasters. Their commitments are solely the games and maybe coaches’ shows.

In my role, I carry the added responsibilities of serving as a spokesman for the athletics department and the university as a whole. That attracted me to this job, along with many other reasons.

To give you an example, since the end of the basketball season, I have been the host for a number of events, including the AD’s Honors Breakfast, the 2016 annual gathering of the Ut Prosim Society, the Hokie Club Gala, and the Gobbler Awards. I truly enjoy the diversity of the events and the variety of speaking roles for which I prepare. Of course, we also prepared for and conducted the spring game broadcast, which we used as an opportunity to test some new elements of the broadcast.

However, don’t let me fool you. There has been some additional time for personal travel, golf, and moving to a new home—which we did successfully at the end of March.

Q: What do you hope to accomplish in the offseason?

A: This may or may not be known, but my official title isn’t actually “Voice of the Hokies.” It is “Director of Broadcast Services” for IMG College Virginia Tech. That means I work with Andrew Allegretta to coordinate our radio network, which includes more than 30 affiliates region-wide.

This is the less glamorous side of what I do, but at the same time, every bit as important. Each of those affiliates has a separate rights agreement with IMG that allows each to carry Virginia Tech athletics. Our dual-aim is to ensure that the Hokies are heard clearly throughout the state of Virginia and beyond, but also that those affiliates remain satisfied and proud partners. In the interest of explanation without turning this into a business column, that means that we are continually working with affiliates to ensure that we are delivering a top-notch product and satisfying their local market needs.

Many of those agreements are multi-year deals, so they all aren’t in need of renewal each year. But many will need to be revisited prior to the coming football season, including some of the ones in our larger markets. For example, we recently completed a new agreement with iHeart Media to continue and enhance the Virginia Tech presence in Richmond. Other agreements for the coming years are underway.

Another large area of preparation for our network is that of the technical components necessary to conduct our broadcasts. With a crew of six that we recently expanded to include an engineer, we need to make travel preparations and arrangements for the coming year. We also are working with the technical folks at IMG to refresh our overall sound with the inclusion of new equipment that will allow us to use some of the more cutting-edge broadcast technology. Long before I arrived in Blacksburg, the Virginia Tech IMG Sports Network has been looked to as an industry leader and innovator and it is my personal aim to build upon that going forward.

From a personal standpoint, the offseason represents a time for growth on the air as well. I will examine what worked from last season and what didn’t, what listeners enjoyed and what they didn’t. The goal, as with any craft, is continual improvement. It would be boring to take you through the entire process, but largely this involves nit-picking tape game by game and fleshing out what we liked and what we didn’t. It is sometimes difficult to wait until September to put that work on display, but we hope there is enjoyment in the progress once the season rolls around.

Q: Do you miss baseball?

A: I do and I don’t think I will ever not consider myself a baseball guy. Many of our student-athletes will graduate and move on to other endeavors in their lives, but there always will be a part of them that will remain a football, volleyball, or basketball player. I am similar in that way.

For me, baseball was always more of a lifestyle than it was a profession. It provided a sanctuary of sorts with like-minded ambitious people with a defined goal of getting to the



Jon Laaser (left) and Mike Burnop enjoyed a successful year in Laaser’s first as the voice of the Hokies and they look forward to using cutting-edge technology that will make for better broadcasts in the future.

highest levels. The grind of it, which was every day, was something that further bonds the people in it. There is a pride associated with being a part of that group of people.


You will hear athletes talk about missing the locker room the most when they step away from the game. That also is true for me. I will miss the guys in the clubhouse, both past and present, and the friendships and comradery that we shared. I don’t think I’d be human if I didn’t. I am fortunate to call hundreds of people in baseball my friends. And like anyone, I miss my friends when they’re not around.

Q: Have you settled into Blacksburg?

A: Without question. As I mentioned earlier, we have moved to a more permanent location and I can now navigate the area without the aid of GPS. More than that, though, I am amazed at all the Hokies whom

I now know and consider friends. It is remarkable to me how quickly relationships can be established here and I am grateful for all that I have made.

This is another reason why I am excited about the offseason. I have a number of events on my calendar over the next three months that will allow me to travel through Hokie Nation and meet countless Hokies. Also, I will have the appropriate time to prepare for the football and basketball seasons this year now that I am settled. I can’t wait to see what a difference that makes in the coming year.

I hope this gives you an idea of the months ahead for the network and myself. I also hope to cross paths with you this summer. We have much to discuss as it pertains to the future, both for the broadcast network and the Hokies as a whole. Please don’t hesitate to spark that conversation when you see me! 



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Keeping up with Compliance

The compliance corner answers questions concerning the governance of intercollegiate athletics and its impact on our athletics department. Have a question? Please send it to inside@hokiesports.com and we'll answer it in upcoming issues. Now, here are some questions that we've received from Tech alums and fans over the past few months, with responses from Tim Parker, Senior Associate AD for Compliance & Governance:

Q: Just saw where the NCAA approved legislation allowing coaches to text a recruit as much as they want. I thought this was what the coaches wanted and now Urban Meyer is railing against the rule along with some others. What's the deal? Thanks, Bruce in Blacksburg.

TP: "The NCAA Division I Council deregulated electronic communication in football, cross country, track and field, and swimming and diving (all other sports had already been deregulated). This ruling still must be passed by the NCAA's Board of Directors for final resolution, but if approved, then yes, this allows coaches to communicate with prospective student-athletes via text message as much as they want.

"Meyer's complaint—and it's a valid one—is that high school prospects will be bombarded with text messages. He would prefer communications with prospects through social media because at least the

prospect has the option of whom he or she wants to hear from during the recruiting process. For example, a prospect can deny a Facebook request or a request on Twitter.


"The NCAA views text messaging, though, in a similar light by saying prospects can choose not to respond to texts. Also, for the past three years, college basketball coaches have been able to text prospects as much as they want and there haven't been any major repercussions.

"While coaches will be able to send an unlimited number of text messages, they still won't be able to contact a prospect until Sept. 1 of that prospect's junior year. That piece of legislation remains intact."

Q: Do you foresee anything happening with the transfer rules? The New York Times ran a big story that was critical of the NCAA and schools for not allowing student-athletes the

opportunity to transfer to the school of their choosing. Many coaches/schools place restrictions, such as not allowing a student-athlete to transfer within the conference or to a team on a future schedule. Thanks, Damian in Christiansburg.

TP: "This is an issue that is constantly discussed, and it pertains to men's basketball more than any other sport because of the overwhelming number of transfers—more than 700 last year—in that sport. But to this point, there haven't been any solutions that satisfy all parties.

"The 65 schools in the Power 5 conferences challenged the NCAA governance structure to develop new transfer rules/guidelines by 2017. We'll have to wait and see if the full Division I membership is able to meet that deadline. If not, the Power 5 schools will take up the issue." 

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VIRGINIA



SABINE KOPPLIN

TRACK & FIELD
Filderstadt, Germany
by Jimmy Robertson

Kopplin, a member of the Tech women's track and field team, graduated with a degree in marketing in May of 2015 and graduated with a degree in business information technology a couple of weeks ago. She has a yearlong paid internship lined up with Goldman Sachs after the 2016 NCAA Outdoor Track and Field Championships.

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

SK: "I always knew I wanted to do business. Before Virginia Tech, I went to two other universities [the University of Nevada and a university in Germany], and at both, it [the major] was called business administration. I thought it would be going toward advertising and how consumers respond to certain things. I was happy with the choice at the time, but I do enjoy the degree I'm working toward now, which is business information technology, because it's hands on and you get to do something."

Q: Why did you decide to pursue another degree, one in business information technology?

SK: "I had one more year of eligibility and I knew I didn't want to just take classes. I wanted to have something at the end. My marketing advisor suggested that I do a dual degree. A double major is apparently similar, but you need fewer credits and you only graduate once. With a dual degree, you get two degrees."

"I enjoyed BIT. I had a class with the dean of BIT and that's why I looked into it. I like BIT because it's not just concepts or writing papers about certain things. You program stuff and you work with a database. You pick certain things that you want to have in a form. It's more hands on. That's what I like about it."

Q: You lined up an impressive paid internship with Goldman Sachs in one of that company's offices in Germany once you have finished with track and field in June. Please tell us about that.


SK: "I went to a Goldman Sachs event and talked to the [representative] there. He suggested that, as a student-athlete, they really look for that, but it's always better to do an internship with them and then get the job. That's how they do it. So he encouraged me to go online and apply for an internship, so that's what I did. You could choose from different offices and each office had different job opportunities. So I actually chose the German offices."

"It was right after spring break when I got the call. I was in class, so I called her [a representative] back and they wanted to offer me the opportunity. I really needed that. It finally showed me that my resume was worth something and the work that I had put in was worth it."

Q: What will you be doing and what will your future hold?

SK: "I will be on their operations team in Germany for a year, starting in June. I'm not exactly sure what I'll be doing, but I think it'll involve me making sure the deals go through. So whatever the brokers or investment bankers say they will do ... I'd be the one putting it into the system and making sure that we have the money or that the stocks are available. It's really the background workings of investment banking."

"I hope to land a permanent position with them ... if they don't have a position or I'm not a good fit, I think I'd consider applying to grad school."

"I'm not sure what kind of a graduate program I'd do. I believe business analytics is the new IT [information technology]. IT became really big at one point and they needed people for all these new jobs. I think that's what business analytics is going to be. With BIT, having found that, it's opened a door in my head. It's like, 'This is what you should have done all along.'" 

Darren Barlow, a runner on the Tech track and field and cross teams, graduated a couple of weeks ago with a degree in mechanical engineering. He hopes to serve as a volunteer coach at Tech for a year before getting into a career designing and testing machinery.

Q: What led to you deciding to pursue a degree in mechanical engineering?

DB: "I've always been a math and science kind of guy. I've always liked knowing how things worked. I like picking things up and messing with them to figure out how they work on the inside—stuff like that."

"We had some beginner engineering classes at my high school and I really enjoyed those. I came in [to Tech] as a general engineering major, and in that first year, you get to experience everything. Mechanical engineering just seemed like the best fit for me. It had the most opportunities and it's a pretty broad topic when it comes to engineering disciplines."

Q: Have you done any internships or co-ops related to your major?

DB: "I did an internship with DENSO Manufacturing, which is right outside of Knoxville, Tennessee [in the summer of 2014]. They're a company that works with automobile parts, so I got to work with production lines in their plant and see how they make certain parts of any automobile vehicle."


"I worked last summer here doing undergraduate research. I used this program, LabVIEW, to help automate one of the current graduate student's experiments. Currently, he had to adjust the setup manually, which basically was a laser that had to take data from every point on a square grid every time he wanted to take some data. But this program allows him to type in some specifications before starting the program and let it run for a while. This way, he could do other work while the program would reposition the grid so that the laser could take data from multiple points automatically. In short, I helped automate certain processes."

"Of those, I really enjoyed the manufacturing plant that I worked at. It was cool to see this huge building with 22 different production lines just pumping out different parts for different companies and to see how something you use every day is built, or at least certain parts of it. I thought that was pretty cool."

Q: What are your short-term plans?

DB: "I'm going to stay in Blacksburg for one more year and run and see if I can do something with that. I'm going to try to be a volunteer coach. We're still working out the details for that. After that, we'll see. I've been in talks with the people from where I did my internship and I'll be looking at different companies as well. Hopefully, I'll find a job in a manufacturing division."

Q: What would be your dream job?

DB: "I think working at one of the running shoe companies and helping them design testing machinery. One guy whom I basically took classes with all throughout college works at Nike right now helping with testing machinery. I think that would be pretty cool, just doing something like that for Nike, Brooks, ASICS or whomever. That way, I could do running and engineering all at once." 



DARREN BARLOW

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CIANFARINI-OWENS

WIN PRESTIGIOUS SKELTON AWARD

Kevin Cianfarini and Lindsey Owens take home the top honor handed out by the athletics department—and both have big plans for the future by Jimmy Robertson

Virginia Tech volleyball player Lindsey Owens and men’s track athlete Kevin Cianfarini were announced as the winners of the 2016 Skelton Award for Academic Excellence in Athletics at the AD’s Honors Breakfast held April 24 at the Inn at Virginia Tech.

Their academic successes, along with their success on the field and work in the community, led to both receiving the award—the highest designation handed out by the Tech athletics department.

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

“It’s a huge honor,” Owens said. “The Skelton Award is a big deal. Mr. Skelton was super involved in school and giving back and the fact that [the committee] chose me is pretty cool. The scholarship is going to help me a lot.”

“I called my parents pretty quickly to let them know,” Cianfarini said. “They were happy and I was, too. I’m not on scholarship, so every little bit counts. Having lunch with the Skelton family was cool. You learn that there are people dedicated not to just the athletics program, but to Virginia Tech in general. You don’t hear of people doing this type of thing too often.”

Owens excelled on the volleyball court this past season, earning All-ACC honors for the third time. She earned second-team honors after starting 31 of 32 matches and leading the team with 400 kills. The Orlando, Florida native also led the team with 31 service aces.

Even more impressive are her academic aspirations. When she got to Tech, she narrowed her pursuits to architecture and biology and ultimately chose biology because of her love of animals. She graduates in December with a degree in biology and plans on applying to Tech’s veterinary school the following May.

“When I was deciding, I didn’t really know anything about architecture,” she said. “I had no desire for it. I just wanted to do it for the money. I’ve always liked animals and I could see that being a fun job. So that’s what I decided to do.”

She has done more than just study biology from textbooks. She has worked at a small animal clinic in her hometown and she shadowed an equine veterinarian last summer. She hopes to study exotic large animals, with her dream job of preserving their futures.

“I’d love to go over to Africa and do conservation work over there,” she said. “I want to prevent animals from going extinct. That’s my huge end goal. That’s why I’m going into exotics.”

Cianfarini, from West Deptford, New Jersey, serves as a middle distance runner for the Tech track and field and cross country squads. He recently set a personal record in the 1,500 at the Bison Outdoor Classic held on Bucknell’s campus with a time of 3:53.03 and he also set a personal-best in the 800 at the Payton Jordan Invitational held in Stanford, California.

During the indoor season, Cianfarini set a personal record at the ACC Championships, running the 800 in a time of 1:52.35. His best finish during cross country season was at the Hokie Open on Nov. 6 when he came in 10th with a time of 19:13.80 while running unattached.

Cianfarini will be a junior next fall and continue his pursuit of a degree in computer science. Like Owens, he, too, has worked an internship related to his academic pursuits, having worked with a small software development company last summer near his hometown. He plans on participating in another internship this summer at Excella, an information technology consulting firm that

is based at Tech’s Corporate Research Center.

“I’m using the internship over the summer to find out what I want to do,” he said. “Last summer, I worked in software development in New Jersey. This summer, I’m in software development, but it’s also web development. I’ll be working at the CRC. I’m getting a cyber security minor, so I may do something with that. I’m open to anything.”

Considering that he has two more years before he graduates, Cianfarini can take some time to explore his options. With a degree in his major and with the way in which the world seems to becoming more and more automated, he should have plenty of them.

“Technology is moving quickly, so it’s hard to say,” he said of his future dream job. “I would say something that is paving the way with technology.”

Owens and Cianfarini weren’t the only ones recognized at the AD’s Honors Breakfast. Other student-athletes recognized included the more than 300 who achieved a grade-point average of 3.0 or better during one or both semesters in the preceding calendar year.

In addition, the athletics department recognized its Scholar-Athletes of the Year, an honor that goes to those with the highest GPA in the 2015 calendar year. This list of

honorees included Torben Laidig (men’s track and field), Hanna Green (women’s cross country), Kelsey Mericka (softball), and Caroline Buscaglia (women’s swimming and diving).

Finally, the department recognized the 2015 All-Academic Team, which includes the top student-athlete academically in his/her sport. The list for this All-Academic Team include Garrett Hudson (baseball), Matthew Galloway (men’s basketball), Samantha Hill (women’s basketball), Nick Stegmuller (cheerleading), Vincent Ciattei (men’s cross country), Hanna Green (women’s cross country), Shai McKenzie (football), Ian Hildebrand (men’s golf), Amanda Hollandsworth (women’s golf), Maggie Mitchell (HighTechs), Gracee Hendrix (lacrosse), Calyn Witz (manager), Egidio Rossi (men’s soccer), Murielle Tiernan (women’s soccer), Kelsey Mericka (softball), Zachary Switzer (men’s swimming and diving), Caroline Buscaglia (women’s swimming and diving), Frederick Mesmer (men’s tennis), Francesca Fusinato (women’s tennis), Torben Laidig (men’s track and field), Emma King (women’s track and field), Juliette Parks (trainer), Samuel Vicroy (video), Lindsey Owens (volleyball), and Solomon Chishko (wrestling). 

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QUARTERBACK competition to continue at least into August

by Jimmy Robertson

Virginia Tech went into spring practice with an unsettled situation at the quarterback position. It came out of spring practice with a slightly less unsettled situation.

The Hokies entered the spring with five quarterbacks — Brenden Motley, J  rod Evans, Dwayne Lawson, Josh Jackson, and Jack Click—and all of them received an equal number of repetitions in practice during the early part of this spring. Midway through, Motley and Evans separated themselves from the pack and received more of the work.

However, head coach Justin Fuente did not select a starter from the group at the conclusion of spring practice.

“Right now, we’re certainly not ready to do that,” he said.

In the Maroon-Orange Spring Game, Evans threw for more than 100 yards and a touchdown pass, but Fuente insisted afterward that he and the staff would evaluate all quarterbacks on their body of work this spring and not just one game or one scrimmage.

He also said he would be open to the possibility of playing multiple quarterbacks. Normally, coaches cringe at that idea, preferring a more settled situation at the game’s most important position. But the bottom line is winning a game, no matter the method for doing so.

“I’m open to whatever it takes to get the job done,” Fuente said. “Whether that’s asking guys from the basketball team to play wide receiver or whether that’s playing multiple quarterbacks or whether that’s playing one, it doesn’t matter to me. Find a way to get the job done. I’ve been open to all sorts of ways to do things. Ultimately, we’ll figure out what that is by the time we play the first game.”

Most of the upperclassmen adapted to the changes in philosophy and scheme better than some of the returning underclassmen, which was to be expected, and Motley and Evans fall into that category. They possess the most experience among the quarterbacks. Motley started six games a year ago and threw for 1,155 yards and 11 touchdowns, while Evans started for his junior college team in Texas last fall.

They bring similar skills to the position—size, an ability to run, and solid arms. The good news for Fuente and offensive coordinator Brad Cornelsen is that they




wouldn’t have to revamp the offense for one or the other.

“I think they’re fairly similar in that they’re both big strong kids who have some skills running the ball and have some skills throwing the ball,” Fuente said. “Obviously there are varying degrees of both of those skills with those kids, but I don’t see a drastic difference with what you would do with one over the other.

“I think both of those kids had good springs and made progress. I try not to make too much of one practice. This [the spring game] was one of 15, even though it was a spring game and it was a big deal—and we treat it like it’s a big deal.

“We’ll evaluate the entire body of work and see how we feel about those guys. I don’t know about the stats and I’m not concerned with that. I’m more concerned with how many times we were going where we were supposed to go with the football and how we operated. We’ll look at the film and see how we did.”

At 6-foot-6, 230 pounds, Lawson brings all the physical attributes that a coach wants



VIRGINIA TECH

QUARTERBACKS

SPRING • 2016 (In numerical order)

2	Dwayne Lawson	(6-6, 230, So.)
4	J��rod Evans	(6-4, 235, Jr.)
9	Brenden Motley	(6-3, 225, r-Sr.)
11	Jack Click	(6-3, 216, r-Fr.)
12	Josh Jackson	(6-2, 207, Fr.)

to see in a quarterback, but a coach needs to be able to trust that his signal caller will make the right decisions. That goes for Click and Jackson as well. Both of them played fairly well in the spring game—Jackson completed his first four passes in leading the offense down the field on a drive that ended in a Joey Slye field goal.

Tech’s quarterback situation makes for an interesting offseason. The Hokies’ staff loves competition at every position and answers usually emerge. The questions will be which one and when?

Burden transitions to coaching talented group of RUNNING BACKS

by Jimmy Robertson

Zohn Burden knows a lot about wide receivers. He played the position in college at VMI. He coached the position for a season at Fork Union Military Academy, for a year at Richmond, for three seasons at Old Dominion, and last year at Tech.

But his reaction when Justin Fuente, who took over for Frank Beamer, asked him to stay on the staff as the running backs coach probably wasn’t what many would expect.

“I was actually excited,” Burden said. “To me, when you step outside your comfort zone, that’s when you truly become successful. I looked at it [being the running backs coach] as an opportunity to grow as a coach and to challenge myself in different areas than before.

“One day, I want to be an offensive coordinator and a head coach. So this was an opportunity to expand my knowledge of the game from a different perspective and it’s only going to make me a better coach.”

Burden certainly found himself in a good spot this spring, as he tutored returning tailbacks Travon McMillian and Sam Rogers—two dependable and talented players.

McMillian rushed for 1,043 yards and seven touchdowns as a redshirt freshman last season on his way to earning third-team All-ACC honors. He spent much of the spring trying to impress his new position coach and the new head coach.

That meant doing more than just making moves with the ball in his hands. It meant getting better as a blocker and getting a better understanding of the game as a whole.

“He’s trying to improve in pass protection and his toughness in between the tackles,” Burden said. “He’s learning the game, increasing his knowledge of the game.

“Travon understands that it’s not about last year. It’s about right now and moving forward and getting better. He’s working his butt off. He’s competing every day. It’s a competition. He has to earn everything with me as a new position coach. It’s more about him proving that he can be the best that he can be.”

Rogers put his versatility on display this spring, playing both tailback and fullback. He also worked some with tight ends coach James Shibest, as the staff loves what Rogers brings to the table.

However, Burden said not to discount Rogers as a ball carrier. He is a better athlete

than most give him credit for and his knowledge of football and his instincts enable him to be successful as a runner.


“He looks good when he carries the ball, so we say, ‘Why not?’” Burden said. “He’s one of our best players on offense, if not the best, and you want to have a guy you trust with the ball in his hands.”

Shai McKenzie, Deshawn McClease, Coleman Fox, and Steven Peoples all received plenty of repetitions this spring, as Burden split the reps equally among the group to get an evaluation of each back. McKenzie, coming off a second torn ACL, lost 15 pounds this winter and looks good. McClease really impressed with his ability to make people miss in the open field. Fox reminds Burden of a younger, smaller version of Rogers and Peoples is a 220-pound bull.

Marshawn Williams will add to the equation once he returns from a knee injury. He did not participate in spring practice and Burden hopes to get him back in August.

Some in Hokie Nation expressed concern about the Hokies’ depth in the backfield and about the strategy of having a new coach for that group. Burden knows that the players have taken care of any perceived depth issues and he feels confident in his ability to coach those positions.





VIRGINIA TECH

RUNNING BACKS

SPRING • 2016 (In numerical order)

TAILBACKS

16	Coleman Fox	(5-11, 192, r-Fr.)
28	Shai McKenzie	(5-11, 215, r-So.)
33	Deshawn McClease	(5-9, 177, r-Fr.)
34	Travon McMillian	(6-0, 200, r-So.)
42	Marshawn Williams	(5-11, 239, r-So.)
48	D.J. Reid	(6-1, 240, r-So.)

FULLBACKS

32	Steven Peoples	(5-9, 218, So.)
41	Trey Skeens	(6-0, 215, r-Fr.)
45	Sam Rogers	(5-10, 228, Sr.)

“It’s not been that big of an adjustment,” he said. “The one thing that I like is that the staff that we have, Coach Fuente and Coach [Brad] Cornelsen [Tech’s offensive coordinator], have made it easy for me. Those guys have a lot of experience coaching different positions as well.

“Holmon Wiggins [Tech’s receivers coach] played running back as well, so there are some guys in the room whom you can bump ideas off of and that’s making it a whole lot easier for me.”

OFFENSIVE LINE in solid shape coming out of spring

by Jimmy Robertson



To get a feel for how Tech’s offensive line approached spring practice and the idea of playing for a third offensive line coach in four years, one needs only to listen to Vance Vice’s colorful assessment of the group, and in particular, Jonathan McLaughlin and Augie Conte, the lone seniors.

“Those guys have bought in since day one,” Vice said. “They didn’t test the water. They did a cannonball right into it and what we’re doing.”

Tech’s staff spent much of spring searching for a starter at quarterback and desperately looking for depth at receiver and tight end. For once, a spring practice ended without major concerns about Tech’s offensive line.

That’s primarily because four starters returned, along with several others who participated in at least their second spring practice since arriving at Tech. The situation provided a stark contrast to the issues Vice inherited when head coach Justin Fuente hired him at Memphis.

“Night and day,” Vice said of the two situations. “I had six bodies when I got there. The biggest difference is that this is a very mature group. They’re grown-ups. They have

a passion for football, which you have to have, and they show up every day. At the last place, it took me two years not to be mad at them every minute of every day.

“These guys show up to work and they want new stuff and they understand when they see something on film that’s not right. Usually, on their own, they start working on it. That gives us a chance to be successful.”

Of course, that doesn’t mean Vice has his chair tilted back and his feet propped up on his desk. Experience only eased the stress of the transition — not eliminated it.

Vice spent the spring teaching his linemen Tech’s offense, but perhaps more importantly, he spent the spring strongly encouraging them to play at the pace that Fuente and offensive coordinator Brad Cornelsen want to play. That means running a play and then sprinting to the line of scrimmage to run the next play as quickly as possible — and doing it over and over again.

The winter workouts resembled marathon training for the linemen. They ran more than ever before. Then the process advanced to the practice field with the NCAA’s 15 allotted spring practices.

“Once they buy in, they understand that

it’s an advantage for them,” Vice said of the up-tempo pace. “That’s when you have them. Obviously, we have to be up there [at the line of scrimmage] and be set. We want to put the ball in play before the other team is ready. There is nothing better than for that defensive line to be looking at the sideline for a call and we snap the ball. It’s easier to block them when they’re looking the other way. We always look for that advantage.

“These guys have bought in. It’s not normal for 300-pounders to want to hurry everywhere, but that’s why we preach it every day. That’s how we lift in the weight room. That’s how we practice. It has to become a habit and we’ve made some strides toward doing that.”

Vice hasn’t solidified a depth chart just yet. In fact, he moved guys around quite frequently this spring. In one practice, he moved everyone a position to the right just to see how they would react.

For most of spring, though, McLaughlin worked at left tackle, Wyatt Teller at left guard, Eric Gallo at center, and Conte at right guard. Teller possesses arguably the most talent of the group, but on occasion this spring, even he found himself working with the second unit.

“I love his effort,” Vice said. “We’ve been tweaking some things with technique. I’ll move him around on [the depth chart] just to keep his attention. I don’t want him to get comfortable. I don’t want any of them to get comfortable. Sometimes I’ll shake things up to see how he responds. We have a long way to go, but I know we’ll get there.”

Gallo enjoyed a fantastic spring after starting all 13 games last season. Vice said he loved Gallo’s approach and work ethic, but that he needed to find a backup center.

Kyle Chung missed nearly all of spring practice with a knee injury. That left Vice working numerous guys at the center spot, with Tyrell Smith leading that pack.

“Tyrell Smith has taken some reps there,” Vice said. “I’m working Augie and Wyatt ... anyone who can snap and knows what we’re doing, I try to get those guys reps and get them ready in case something drastic happens.

“Tyrell has been coming. Austin Cannon is a guy who got here mid-year and he’s picking it up faster than I thought he would as a freshman. We have Zachariah Hoyt, Colt Pettit, and Billy Ray Mitchell working with the quarterbacks during exchange [quarterback-center exchange session before practice]. So we have a bunch of guys who know the fundamentals of snapping it. Now I have to find the guys who know what they’re

doing and know what to say to get the guys on the same page.”

Vice has looked at different options at the right tackle spot, too. Injuries to D’Andre Plantin, who took a redshirt year last fall, and Yosuah Nijman, who played in 12 games as a true freshman, limited their work. Parker Osterloh benefitted and the redshirt junior may be ready to take the next step in his progression.

Osterloh ranks as the biggest player on the team outside of Tim Settle. The additional running during workouts and the faster pace in practices has led to him dropping his weight to 336 pounds.

“I’ve been very pleased with him,” Vice said. “I’ve played him at four different positions this spring and he shows up to work every day. Since we’ve started, he’s lost 17 pounds — and he needed to. He can lose some more. He works his tail off and he should have a vital role in what we do.”

Overall, the Hokies appear to be in good shape up front. Led by McLaughlin and Conte, several guys within this group possess experience and the ability to play multiple positions. That flexibility makes for a better offensive line.

Hopefully, this group makes the offense as a whole a better unit heading into the season opener.

“We’re not as good as we’re going to be,

VIRGINIA TECH OFFENSIVE LINE	
SPRING 2016 (In numerical order)	
52	Austin Cannon (6-3, 315, Fr.)
57	Wyatt Teller (6-5, 304, r-Jr.)
58	Colt Pettit (6-4, 298, r-So.)
61	Kyle Chung (6-4, 290, r-Jr.)
62	D’Andre Plantin (6-5, 290, r-Fr.)
63	Andrew Moras (6-0, 259, r-So.)
63	Daniel Bailey (6-4, 296, r-Fr.)
64	Eric Gallo (6-2, 297, Jr.)
65	Matt Christ (6-4, 274, r-Fr.)
66	Billy Ray Mitchell (6-4, 286, r-So.)
67	Parker Osterloh (6-8, 336, r-Jr.)
68	Connor Kish (6-2, 280, r-Fr.)
69	Yosuah Nijman (6-8, 298, So.)
70	Kevin Kish (6-2, 280, r-Fr.)
71	Jonathan McLaughlin (6-5, 292, Sr.)
72	Augie Conte (6-6, 303, r-Sr.)
74	Braxton Pfaff (6-5, 295, r-So.)
75	Zachariah Hoyt (6-5, 286, Fr.)
77	Demetri Moore (6-5, 305, Jr.)
79	Tyrell Smith (6-3, 292, r-Fr.)

but we’re going to get there,” Vice said of the line. “And with their leadership [McLaughlin and Conte], we’re going to get there rather quickly.” **VT**

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HODGES' versatility on display this spring

by Jimmy Robertson

In late November, after arriving in Blacksburg on the same day that Virginia Tech held its news conference introducing new football coach Justin Fuente, James Shibest learned that he would get to coach arguably the team's top weapon on offense.

Following 15 spring practices, Shibest probably would agree with such a deduction—even though he coached Bucky Hodges for roughly a third of those practices.

Hodges' talents were on display at both tight end and receiver this spring. Toward the halfway point of spring, he started spending a lot of time with Holmon Wiggins, the Hokies' receivers coach, as the staff moved around the versatile big-play threat. He played a large role in alleviating Tech's lack of experience at the receiver spots.

In short, the coaches quickly learned that this guy needs the ball—frequently.

"We were moving Bucky around everywhere," Shibest said. "He was with me the first five practices and he's been with the receivers and learning those skills. We're trying to get him better and seeing exactly the different ways we can use him. The more he can do, the better it helps our team, obviously.

"He's been a pleasure to be around. He's willing to learn and work. We need to get him a little more urgent at times, but we're working on that."



VIRGINIA TECH TIGHT ENDS

SPRING • 2016 (In numerical order)

- 7 Bucky Hodges** (6-7, 245, r-Jr.)
- 13 Chris Durkin** (6-4, 232, r-So.)
- 80 Casey Harman** (6-4, 240, r-Fr.)
- 82 Xavier Burke** (6-2, 270, r-Fr.)
- 85 Chris Cunningham** (6-2, 242, r-Fr.)

At times during practices, the Hokies' faster pace left Hodges a little winded. Outside of 270-pound Xavier Burke, Hodges is the biggest skill player on the roster and lugging his big frame all over the field wasn't easy.

But the coaching staff wasn't concerned. They expect Hodges to get used to the pace.

"He's in great shape," Shibest said. "You have to remember he's a 230-, 240-pound body, and at the pace we're playing at, it's a little tougher on him. He's getting better and better with that."


Hodges' time at receiver benefited Shibest in that it allowed him to work the younger tight ends a little more than he probably expected. He gave them all an equal number of reps and he likes the potential of the group even though none of them have played at tight end in a collegiate game.

Chris Durkin played quarterback in high school and his first two seasons at Tech, seeing action in three games last fall. He is transitioning to tight end, where his size and athleticism give him a shot at contributing. Chris Cunningham took a redshirt year last fall, and Shibest likes his size and athleticism, too.

Casey Harman is a 6-foot-4, 240-pound walk-on from Honaker High School in deep Southwest Virginia—the same high school that produced former Pittsburgh Steelers tight end Heath Miller. Burke is the biggest of the group, and while a good blocker, he, too, possesses the ability to play in space.

"They're all a little different in what they can do," Shibest said. "That's what this spring has been about—just learning and seeing where they excel. We're also finding out the areas that they need the most work.

"They're just young. They haven't played, but I like their upside. I'm excited about them. I hope maybe we can get more like them because we use those guys a lot. There can be two or three of those guys on the field at the same time.

"But I'm happy with those guys. We started out slow because everything is new, but they showed some progression. We're getting better in all areas. A lot of it is that they're learning what to do so they're playing faster." 

Search for depth at RECEIVER an ongoing process

by Jimmy Robertson

Everyone knows that Virginia Tech essentially played two wide receivers in 2015—Isaiah Ford and Cam Phillips. So new receivers coach Holmon Wiggins' top priority for this spring was to find some depth. At the very least, he wanted to find a couple of guys with the ability to make plays on a consistent basis.

That search will continue once August practices begin.

"We can talk about numbers and there's no doubt that we want more," Wiggins said of the group. "I can't complain, though. It's my job to get the guys whom we have ready. It's going to take some time. Those guys understand that we don't have a lot of time. We have to make sure we take advantage of the reps that we're getting and take advantage of every day. The summer will be huge for us and we can use that as a springboard into fall camp—and make some noise."

Wiggins certainly had the opportunity to work a lot of guys this spring. Ford missed spring practice while recovering from minor knee surgery and Phillips missed the latter part of spring after injuring an ankle.

Ford's injury ruined Wiggins' opportunity to teach him the scheme and to see what Ford could do within it, but Wiggins at least got to see what Phillips brought to the table.

"He looked awesome before he got hurt," Wiggins said. "I'm excited about what he'll bring to the table. He's another smart guy. He's another guy who plays offense with a defensive mindset. He has a passion to be better. He has a work ethic that impresses me. He watches countless hours of film. I'm excited to get him back to the forefront to show these young guys the way and give us a boost offensively."

Arguably, Wiggins' top receiver was Bucky Hodges, who became one of Wiggins' pupils after five practices. The previous staff split Hodges out as a receiver quite a bit last season, so the transition wasn't difficult.

The current staff plans on playing Hodges at both receiver and tight end. They want to make sure they get the most out of possibly their best weapon.

"He does some things and he looks like a receiver," Wiggins said. "He can sink his hips and get in and out of breaks. He can punish a defensive back. We're looking forward to him learning a little more of the details as far as using his body and using leverage.

"We're still going to move him inside and he's going to have to put his hand on the ground. He's going to have to get his nose dirty.



Hopefully, he'll get better at both positions, so that we can get the best of both worlds."

The rest of the receiving group included a mix of scholarship players with little playing experience (e.g. Deon Newsome and Jaylen Bradshaw), three freshmen (Divine Deablo, Samuel Denmark, and Eric Kumah), and walk-ons such as C.J. Carroll.

Carroll may have been the most consistent of the group. The smallest guy on Tech's roster knows where to go and catches everything in sight. He resembles former receiver Willie Byrn, though he is smaller.

"He has surprised me," Wiggins said. "Sometimes football doesn't come down to size. It comes down to will and determination. That's what he has. He has a chip on his shoulder. He probably feels like he's been overlooked for a long time and he's trying to show what he can do. He plays the ball well and he gets in there and mixes it up. He can play all three spots [both outside positions and the slot]. He brings some ability. We're excited to see what he can do."

The 'X' factor, though, is Devin Wilson, the basketball player who decided to give football a try this spring. He received recruiting offers out of high school, but decided to pursue basketball at the time.


This spring, he showed some rust—but he also displayed some talent. He picked up the offense fairly quickly and he catches the ball easily. He just needs more reps to pick up on the nuances of the position.

"He plays the ball better than anyone, just going up in the air and attacking the ball," Wiggins said. "He has unbelievable hands. He's a smart guy and that always gives you a chance.

We've had guys with a lot of talent, but couldn't adapt to what we were doing or make the right reads. He knows what to expect. The game was starting to slow down for him [at the end of spring].

"He's still trying to pick up our scheme, but the more comfortable he becomes with that, you'll see his true athletic ability as opposed to him sitting there thinking about what to do."

The two staffs and Wilson plan to meet in the coming months to discuss his future.

Tech's staff, especially Wiggins, hopes to see an improved group of receivers after summer workouts. He likes the potential of the younger players—but the clock is ticking to get them ready for this fall. 



VIRGINIA TECH RECEIVERS

SPRING • 2016 (In numerical order)

- 1 Isaiah Ford** (6-2, 190, Jr.)
- 5 Cam Phillips** (6-1, 198, Jr.)
- 7 Bucky Hodges** (6-7 245, r-Jr.)
- 15 Sean Daniel** (5-10, 175, Fr.)
- 20 Deon Newsome** (5-11, 187, r-Jr.)
- 27 Ryan Palmer** (6-2, 170, r-Fr.)
- 29 Tyler Fitzgerald** (5-9, 175, r-Fr.)
- 30 Jordan Jefferson** (5-10, 168, Fr.)
- 36 Alden Carpenter** (6-1, 192, Jr.)
- 39 Jaylen Bradshaw** (6-1, 198, r-So.)
- 81 Samuel Denmark** (6-0, 182, Fr.)
- 83 Eric Kumah** (6-2, 203, Fr.)
- 86 C.J. Carroll** (5-7, 165, r-So.)
- 88 Divine Deablo** (6-3, 210, Fr.)
- 89 Devin Wilson** (6-4, 190, Jr.)

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SPRING²⁰¹⁶ **FOOTBALL REVIEW**

Players adjusting to new schemes on **SPECIAL TEAMS**

by **Jimmy Robertson**

Virginia Tech's coaching staff not only implemented a new offense, but also new schemes on special teams—a group of units that now has its own coordinator in James Shibest, who served in the same capacity at Memphis and Ole Miss.

For much of his three decades as Tech's coach, Frank Beamer oversaw the special teams and did a very good job at it—as his display at the College Football Hall of Fame suggests. The principles he instilled in his players gave Shibest a good base foundation from which to work.

"Obviously, what he's done here has helped us tremendously," Shibest said of Beamer. "These guys know that this aspect is very important. You can tell how attentive they are in meetings and in their effort on the field.

"But it's different scheme-wise and our drills are different. We're trying to get that taught, so that when we go in the fall, when we're moving quicker, we can get better."

An example of the changes being made can be found on Tech's punting unit. Shibest installed a "shield" formation this spring, with three bigger players lined up in front of the punter and blocking for him. Numerous teams in college football use this formation.

Beamer stayed with a more traditional scheme that focused on zone protection. That scheme doesn't require as much size.

"It's a lot different than what they did here in the past," Shibest said of the shield formation. "It's going to take a little more time, but we have the big guys back there [protecting the punter]. We were pro style for many years at some of the places I've been, but this is the new thing.

"We'll also do some rugby stuff [punting], but that all depends on the punters and what they can do. A lot of things are different, so it's going to take some time."

A top concern for Shibest this spring was finding a punter. A.J. Hughes departed after starting all four years and enjoying a record-setting career. He placed 91 of his career punts inside the 20-yard line, often giving the Hokies an advantage in field position.

Mitchell Ludwig came out of spring ball as the top contender for the starting job at punter. He has been a part-time kickoff specialist in the past.

"I think he has great potential," Shibest said. "He has a great opportunity to take that role. I wish we had another guy or two



competing there, but we don't. We have [Jackson] VanSickle there, and Joey Slye can do that, too.

"We've been impressed with Mitch. We didn't know much about him. He hadn't really punted here, not on game days anyway. But he's done well this spring. We've been really happy with him."

Shibest also needed to find a long snapper. Eddie D'Antuono decided to give up football midway through the spring, leaving the spot vacant. Colton Taylor, who played in five games last season, figures to be the guy going into August practices.

At the least, Shibest has some stability at punt returner and kicker. Slye made 23 of 30 field-goal attempts last season, with a long of 48 yards. He also handled most of the kickoffs, with 42 of his 64 kickoffs going for touchbacks.

Greg Stroman returns for his third season as Tech's punt returner. He averaged 7.8 yards per return, bringing one back for a touchdown.

"We sure feel good about Stroman," Shibest said. "I watched him the last two years and he's an explosive player. If we can just get hats on people, he'll make one or two miss hopefully and we'll have a chance to have some great returns."

Several players are in the mix for the role of kick returner, including Der'Woun Greene, who handled those duties for the most part last season, averaging 27.4 yards per return. Mook Reynolds got looks there this spring as well, along with Deon Newsome. Basically, anyone with the ability to make plays will get a

look, according to Shibest, even a starter.

Playing starters is a philosophy that he shares with Beamer, who often played starters on special teams. Shibest and [Justin] Fuente firmly believe in the importance of special teams and insist they will not sacrifice talent and practice time in this area to work on something else.

"It takes good athletes and hopefully you have a core of six to eight good backup guys who can do that," Shibest said. "The thing that we try to do is to get the best personnel out there that we possibly can. It's going to win or lose you games and you have to try to get the best. We're going to put the best people out there whom we possibly can."



PUNTERS

90 Mitchell Ludwig (5-11, 200, r-Jr.)

93 Jackson VanSickle (6-1, 205, r-Fr.)

KICKERS

35 Michael Santamaria (5-8, 168, r-So.)

46 Joey Slye (6-1, 207, Jr.)

SNAPPERS

54 Chaska Moon (6-0, 249, r-Fr.)

59 Joe Callas (6-0, 197, r-So.)

87 Colton Taylor (6-1, 212, r-Jr.)

89 Wright Bynum (6-4, 230, r-Fr.)

Tech DEFENSIVE LINE in good shape coming out of spring

by Jimmy Robertson



Charley Wiles has seen it all over the course of his lengthy coaching career. In some seasons, Tech’s defensive line coach only felt comfortable playing four or five defensive linemen. In others, when the Hokies were loaded, he rotated eight at will — with little-to-no drop-off.

Not coincidentally, Tech enjoyed some of its finer seasons when he was able to shuttle eight guys on and off the field. Hopefully, the 2016 team enjoys a similar campaign, as the Hokies are very close to being stacked on the defensive line yet again.

Of course, a lot of that potential success hinges on the continued development of their young defensive ends. Ken Ekanem anchors the defensive line from his end spot and gives the Hokies an All-ACC type of player. Vinny Mihota played quite a bit last year and enjoyed a fine spring. But the rest of the ends who practiced this spring—Seth Dooley sat out with an injury—lacked collegiate experience.

However, their talent may help them overcome the experience deficit.

“Their play has been inconsistent in a word right now,” Wiles said. “You see some growth. You see improvement and some flashes of playmaking ability. We’re just a

little up and down.

“We need more work. You can’t get it done in 15 practices, but we’re a lot further along now than we were. I’m excited about those guys. They’ve done a good job.”

The young ends who received close scrutiny this spring were redshirt freshmen Trevon Hill, Houshun Gaines, and Darius Fullwood. Physically, they give Wiles a lot to like, as all three stand at least 6-foot-4 and weigh at least 230 pounds.

Hill and Gaines worked mostly with the second-team group, though Fullwood got some reps with that unit as well. Hill displayed some explosiveness that caught the staff a little by surprise considering he took a redshirt season last fall while recovering from a torn ACL that he suffered his senior year of high school.

“He looks as good, or better, than the guy we recruited,” Wiles said. “I had never coached the kid before because he was hurt last year. He got to do some things with us toward the end of the year, but just very little.

“He’s a really athletic guy. He has some playmaking skills. He can make a play for you, but he can go the wrong way, too, and bust an assignment in a second. That’s the part we’ve

got to get cleaned up with him and Gaines both.”

Unfortunately, Gaines’ status for next season remains in limbo at the moment. Three days after the Maroon-Orange Spring Game, head coach Justin Fuente suspended the North Carolina native indefinitely because of an off-field incident. Gaines’ situation probably will not be resolved until later this summer at the earliest.

That could mean extra repetitions for Fullwood when August practices start. He brings a little more size to the position, checking in at 262 pounds during weigh-ins. He’s probably a little behind the other two at this point, but Wiles loves the young man’s potential.

“Darius Fullwood is a good prospect, too,” Wiles said. “He’s learning how to play hard and how to do it all the time. You explain to the guys that you’re not going to play them if it’s an up-and-down performance. You want to feel comfortable that you know what you’re getting when you put him in a game. We haven’t talked about him much, but he’s a good prospect. He just needs to close that gap.”

The other scholarship defensive end is Jimmie Taylor, a freshman from North

Carolina who enrolled in January. He needs to get stronger and improve his technique before being able to challenge those in front of him.

At tackle, Wiles may have his best all-around group. Woody Baron leads that contingent after a fantastic spring. Far from the biggest guy, at 275 pounds, the senior gets it done with outstanding fundamentals and near-flawless technique. He came out of spring practice as a clear No. 1 at one of the tackle spots.

Nigel Williams, another senior, figures to be the favorite for the other tackle spot, but he and Baron both were challenged by Tim Settle and Ricky Walker this spring.

Settle receives a lot of attention simply because of his size. At 344 pounds, he stands as the biggest guy on the Hokies’ roster.

The former five-star recruit makes plays and wreaks havoc along the interior. He pressured the quarterback, stuffed the run, blocked several passes, and even recovered a fumble in a scrimmage that he returned 30-40 yards inside the 5-yard line.

The question with Settle centers on stamina. He lost 15 pounds during winter workouts, but needs to lose another 15 to be a potential every-down player.

“He’s a lot better,” Wiles said. “He’s still a work in progress, but he’s chopping at it. That final scrimmage [before the Maroon-Orange

Spring Game] was his best one. He’s stayed the course and he’s coming along very well.”

Walker seemed quite eager to be back on the field after taking a redshirt season a year ago. Tech’s plethora of defensive tackles in 2015 left him as the odd man out, but he certainly made his case this spring for playing time in the fall.

Though only a rising redshirt sophomore, Walker takes a business-like approach reminiscent of a veteran player. As a coach, Wiles loves that about him.

“Ricky had a good spring,” Wiles said. “His overall body of work was pretty good. He was already a mature guy. I think he’s hungry. Any time you get those guys a year older, they’re going to be more seasoned, more mature, and a little bit more experienced. I think it’s good for everyone to go through that [a redshirt year]. Ricky was already ahead of most guys when it comes to maturity level and he’s had a good spring.”

Steve Sobczak and Harry Lewis give the Hokies six defensive tackles. Sobczak missed a chunk of spring practice with an injury, while Lewis got some on-the-job training. Wiles likes both of them, though they need to improve to surpass the four players in front of them.

“It’s going to be good competition in there [in August],” Wiles said. “I think that thing is wide open. Woody is the guy to separate



VIRGINIA TECH

DEFENSIVE LINEMEN

SPRING
 2016
 (In numerical order)

ENDS


- 4 Ken Ekanem (6-3, 255, r-Sr.)
- 43 Seth Dooley (6-6, 239, r-Jr.)
- 47 Darius Fullwood (6-4, 262, r-Fr.)
- 94 Trevon Hill (6-5, 234, r-Fr.)
- 96 Jimmie Taylor (6-3, 225, Fr.)

TACKLES

- 51 Harry Lewis (6-0, 270, r-Fr.)
- 60 Woody Baron (6-1, 275, Sr.)
- 90 Dalton Roe (6-1, 235, r-Jr.)
- 91 Steve Sobczak (6-1, 300, r-So.)
- 95 Nigel Williams (6-4, 295, r-Sr.)
- 97 Tim Settle (6-3, 344, r-Fr.)
- 98 Ricky Walker (6-2, 288, r-So.)

himself, but other than that, I think it’s wide open as to who will start in the other spot and finding out how we’ll substitute. We’re going to play a two-deep, for sure. It’s been a healthy competition. We have some talented guys in there.”

He has talented guys all across the line. Experience is really the only thing standing in the way of them being very good.

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Clark and Edmunds solidify back end of SECONDARY this spring

by Jimmy Robertson

Galen Scott certainly inherited contrasting situations after being named the safeties coach following Torrian Gray’s departure to Florida.

Heading into spring practice, he knew he was going to be coaching arguably the Hokies’ most consistent player in free safety Chuck Clark, who has started 23 straight games. He also knew the rover position was a revolving door last fall, as Tech’s staff played several players there with only sporadic successes.

Thanks to some surprisingly strong performances all the way around, Scott felt good about both spots coming out of spring practice.

“I like what I’ve seen,” Scott said. “Of course, you’re always wanting to get better. You always want to be deeper. I like my first group. I like some guys in my second group pretty well. I just wish we had more depth. We have to get some of the younger guys in here and recruit some more guys to get some depth, but I do like my starting group. We have some younger guys that we have to get coming along.”

As expected, Clark anchored the group. A smart, versatile player, he spent much of last fall trying to get everyone else lined up in the right spots while still performing at a high level, becoming the first Tech defensive back in 12 years to record more than 100 tackles in a season.

Scott expects to see that type of performance this fall, particularly with the positions around him a little more settled than last fall.

“He’s sharp,” Scott said. “You can tell he’s been here. He has a lot of experience. He’s like another coach on the field. He sees things and he makes adjustments. He can talk you through some things. He likes coaching those young guys. He’s been around it. He knows it. He’s a good football player and a heady football player.”

The best part about spring practice, though, was watching Terrell Edmunds take control over that troublesome rover spot. Last fall, Donovan Riley, Adonis Alexander, Desmond Frye and others played that spot at various times, but this spring, Edmunds entrenched himself there — and looked like a natural.

That comes as a little bit of a surprise. A year ago, the lanky 200-pounder spent the

fall at one of the cornerback spots, starting the final eight games of the season. No one worried about his coverage skills, but he eased concerns about his willingness to play the run by being physical all spring.

“I’m excited about Terrell,” Scott said. “Most of the time, you’re worried about a corner moving to safety. You wonder if he is going to be physical enough or bigger enough, but Terrell is a good-sized kid who is not scared to put his body on you. He’s a heady kid as well. He sees things. He’ll take coaching. Getting coached hard is nothing new to him. To take coaching and be able to fit and play that safety position, you need to

be tied into the run a little more. He’s done a good job with that.”

Scott also was able to establish a little depth behind those two. Der’Woun Greene spent most of the spring behind Clark at free safety, while rising sophomore Jahque Alleyne played behind Edmunds.

Alleyne needs to get stronger and become more knowledgeable with the scheme. That would help him play more consistently. The consistency issue led to Scott playing Greene some at rover in addition to free safety.

“He’s one of those who will have to be able to play both,” Scott said of Greene. “He’s heady enough to do it. He’s an instinctive guy



who can play in the box and play in space.”

Scott also took over the coaching of the whip/nickel position, receiving help from former Tech standout Cody Grimm. The staff wants players at this position with enough of a physical nature to be a force in stopping the run, while also possessing the athleticism to cover in space.

In Mook Reynolds and Anthony Shegog, they are getting exactly that. Reynolds played in all 13 games last season as a true freshman and Shegog started the final five games, recording 26 of his 29 tackles during that span.

“Mook has to get bigger and stronger,” Scott said. “Shegog has to constantly work on his feet and change-of-direction skills, but I believe they can do it [play the position]. Especially with what we’re asking them to do, I believe they can do it.

“They both played a lot last year. They’re younger, but they have some experience. It’s just building on that experience and making sure you’re not making elementary mistakes. Trust what you see and play fast. Be aggressive and have fun.”

Johnathan Galante also figures in at this hybrid position, giving Scott another physical presence, particularly against run-heavy schemes.

Other than Greene, who played a little at rover and mostly free safety this spring, the rest of this group played the positions they are expected to play in the fall. Defensive coordinator Bud Foster felt like he and his staff juggled too much in the secondary a year ago because of injuries and he wanted to use this spring to get players settled at certain spots.

Scott agreed with that approach.

“You want to get them comfortable at a position,” he said. “You have a couple of guys who can play a couple of spots, but you want to try to get them comfortable at one spot to the point where they know it and can really play fast at that spot.

“The offense is going so fast and making adjustments and you want to be able to mix your coverages, but you have to be comfortable knowing that your players can do it. You have to know the schemes to do that. That’s kind of the rub. You get someone banged up and you may have to move somebody, but if not and if they know it and you can keep them where they’re comfortable, that’s what you would like to do.”

Foster plans on mixing his coverages more this season. In essence, he wants to play more zone coverages than he has played the past few seasons. A year ago, injuries and the shuffling around in the secondary limited his ability to



VIRGINIA TECH
 SAFETIES, ROVERS,
 AND NICKEL BACKS

SPRING 2016 *(In numerical order)*

FREE SAFETIES
19 Chuck Clark (6-1, 204, Sr.)
23 Der’Woun Greene (5-11, 194, r-Sr.)


ROVERS
17 Jahque Alleyne (6-1, 175, So.)
22 Terrell Edmunds (6-1, 201, r-So.)


NICKEL BACKS/WHIPS
6 Mook Reynolds (6-1, 184, So.)
18 Raymon Minor (6-2, 221, r-So.)
24 Anthony Shegog (6-3, 212, r-Jr.)
37 Johnathan Galante (5-9, 210, Sr.)

get creative.

Scott thinks he has the safeties and nickel backs with the flexibility to play in zones.


“I think this group can do it,” he said. “There are going to be times when you have to get down and press [man-to-man press coverage] and go play. I think they can do that as well.

“Top to bottom, if we can stay healthy, I think we’ll be all right. But that’s always the big question. That’s part of football.”
 



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GO Hokies!

Edmunds, Motuapuaka strong, but Hokies hope depth *emerges* at LINEBACKER spots

by Jimmy Robertson

Some familiar names played at Bud Foster’s two linebacker spots this spring, as the Tech defensive coordinator saw only Deon Clarke depart from last season’s squad. Clarke started 24 games in his career, but was suspended on two occasions last season, including the Independence Bowl game in which he was sent home.

As a result, Tremaine Edmunds started two games as a true freshman and recorded a personal-best five tackles in the Hokies’ 55-52 win over Tulsa in the bowl game. That experience, along with his play this spring, left the young man in the top spot vacated by Clarke at the backer position.

Edmunds gives Foster a combination of size, athleticism, and more importantly, football savvy.

“He made big improvement,” Foster said. “He played a limited role last fall and had two starts. He played one full game. Once he figures it out and his mind isn’t tying up his feet, he’s got a chance to be a dynamic football

player. The last two weeks, he really made big strides. He was seeing things and playing faster. He’s long and athletic. He can run. He’s got all the tools and I’m excited about his future.”

Andrew Motuapuaka came out of spring on top at mike linebacker, which comes as no surprise. He started 11 games this past fall, missing two with an injury, and recorded 73 tackles, including 11.5 for a loss. He also added four sacks.

Motuapuaka missed the early part of spring practice while recovering from a knee injury and healing from a calf injury. But he came back and played the way Foster expected—smart and fast.

“The last couple of weeks, he really did well,” Foster said. “He started off a little slowly because he was coming off a knee injury and he strained a calf, but he really played well the last couple of weeks of spring ball.

“I have high expectations for him. He has some experience under his belt. I’m expecting

him to be one of our leaders. I would expect to see a guy who is going to play faster and with more confidence. I think you’ll see a more efficient and productive player.”

Foster expects more consistent play this fall out of his two linebacker spots. Edmunds’ athleticism and upside and Motuapuaka’s experience give him reasons to think that way.

He wasn’t quite as confident, though, with his depth at both linebacker positions. Carson Lydon came out of spring behind Motuapuaka. He played in 11 games last season as a true freshman—mostly on special teams—but he’ll need to fend off veteran Sean Huelskamp once August practices commence. Huelskamp missed the spring with a shoulder injury.

“Carson had a good spring,” Foster said. “He’s still learning the position. He has a great upside. He has all the tools. He needs to be more consistent, but I think he has a good future.”

Trent Young also is vying for time at the spot. The walk-on from Richmond played in



six games last fall as a redshirt freshman.

At the backer position, the only viable backup is Jamieon Moss, who played in 12 games last season—mostly on special teams. Moss was a little up and down this spring despite getting more reps.

“Jamieon has some abilities, but he’s inconsistent,” Foster said. “I want him to be a guy whom I can trust. He’s very good on special teams, but we need to get him to playing a little more consistently on defense.”

VIRGINIA TECH
 LINEBACKERS

SPRING • 2016 *(In numerical order)*

MIKE LINEBACKERS

44 Carson Lydon (6-2, 237, So.)
 53 Trent Young (5-10, 212, r-So.)
 54 Andrew Motuapuaka (6-0, 235, r-Jr.)
 56 Sean Huelskamp (6-1, 207, r-Jr.)

BACKERS

49 Tremaine Edmunds (6-5, 236, So.)
 50 Jamieon Moss (6-2, 220, r-Jr.)

Tech’s staff signed three linebackers this past February in Eron Carter, Emmanuel Belmar, and Tavante Beckett. But Carter projects more as a mike linebacker and Belmar probably will end up at defensive end.

Foster said he may give Lydon some reps at backer in August.

“He’s more suited to be a mike as far as his movement in space,” Foster said. “But he could be a guy like [former player] Chase Williams and maybe play both.”

In short, the search for depth will continue. But Motuapuaka and Edmunds give Foster two solid, if not very good, starters at very important positions within his scheme.

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by **Jimmy Robertson**



The Virginia Tech football program has long been known for churning out quality defensive backs, and in particular, cornerbacks with the ability to play tight man-to-man coverage and to make plays. The latest example was Kendall Fuller, a third-round pick of the Washington Redskins in the most recent NFL Draft.

Fuller became the 11th Tech defensive back chosen in an NFL Draft in the past decade, including seven cornerbacks. The coaching staff hopes that the current array of cornerbacks exhibits similar abilities and continues that tradition.

The 2016 group took a hit before spring practice when Brandon Facyson went down

with an injury that caused him to miss the entire spring, but even without him, a couple of youngsters caught head coach Justin Fuente's eye.

"I like the way some of those younger guys in secondary who played a little bit last year played this spring, like Mook [Reynolds] and Adonis [Alexander]," Fuente said. "[Greg] Stroman is another one of those guys who had a really productive spring on the back end. We've gotten some good work in."

That comment, though, came before Fuente suspended Alexander indefinitely following an off-field incident shortly after the spring game. Alexander and Stroman received most of the

first-team reps this spring at the cornerback positions and Alexander's status for the 2016 season figures to remain up in the air at least through most of the summer.

Facyson's injury and Alexander's suspension leaves the Hokies dangerously thin at the cornerback spots, though everyone expects Facyson to be back. The Hokies certainly need him, as he possesses 28 games of experience, including 22 career starts.

Tech's staff moved cornerbacks to other spots to solidify those positions before spring practice. The coaches moved Terrell Edmunds to rover and kept Der'Woun Greene at free safety behind Chuck Clark. Also, Reynolds

spent nearly all spring playing the Hokies' nickel position, a spot of ever-growing importance in Tech's scheme.

All three have played cornerback in the past and Tech's staff probably would move one back to corner in the event that Alexander's situation remains unresolved when August practices start. Right now, Stroman, who enjoyed a terrific spring, serves as the anchor, but the Hokies lack another scholarship cornerback with any collegiate experience.

The list of backups includes DuWayne Johnson, Shawn Payne, and true freshman Khalil Ladler, who missed spring practice while recovering from a torn ACL. Walk-ons Erikk Banks, Elisha Boyd, and Curtis Williams are listed at the positions. The 2016 recruiting class includes several potential cornerbacks, such as Jovonn Quillen and Tyree Rodgers.

All that said, defensive coordinator Bud Foster liked what he saw from a secondary that struggled at times last season, especially in the bowl game when injuries to Facyson and Donovan Riley totally changed Foster's game plan. The group exhibited a strong knowledge of the scheme and played much faster—and better—as the spring went along.

"I've seen good improvement at all positions, but particularly in the secondary," Foster said. "You've seen Greg Stroman get better and he's worked hard since day one. He's been a very good player. Adonis

Alexander had really improved at the corner spot. Chuck Clark has had a very good spring and Der'Woun Greene has been very good as well. He's shown improvement.

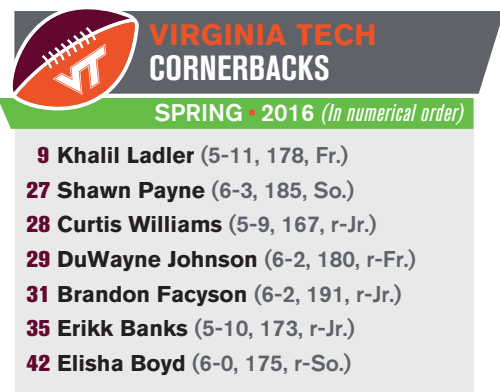
“The guy who has really turned our heads is Terrell Edmunds at the rover spot. He’s been physical, which is what we wanted to see. We wanted to get guys in the positions so now they’ll understand their position and how they need to fit and all those things. I like the direction we’re going.”

One of Foster's main points of emphasis this spring was to establish guys at positions and let them get reps at those spots. Foster, cornerbacks coach Brian Mitchell, and safeties coach Galen Scott did very little juggling in the secondary—and that resulted in consistent play toward the end of spring.

Foster said he and the staff worked on more zone coverages this spring instead of his traditional man-to-man. He wanted more eyes on the football as opposed to having cornerbacks playing with their backs turned to the ball. Zone coverages tend to reduce the threat of a big play against a defense.


“We did work on our zone coverage,” he said. “We played some man free [man-to-man coverage], but we know we can do that. We played a lot of different looks.

“We had a lot of eyes on the ball. The advantage is that if a play pops, at least you can go make the tackle and make [the offense] snap the



ball again instead of seeing them take it to the house. So yeah, we looked at doing more of that.

"In today's college football, it's just hard to shut people down. Alabama does it, but they're playing in a league that plays a lot of pro-style offense. When you look at them, they can struggle like everyone else against teams that spread it out. They've got the best players in America, so that goes to show you. That style of offense, particularly one with a quarterback who can run, is challenging. It's good that we saw that and practice that this spring."

Foster planned to do that even before Facyson's injury and Alexander's suspension. Hopefully, both make it back for August practices. At the least, the Hokies' secondary, and especially the cornerbacks, were able to practice an array of coverages this spring in preparation for next fall. 

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CURTIN SETS THE PACE

Virginia Tech runner Tommy Curtin has some unique interests off the course and the track, but nothing tops running—and he's blazed a trail into the Hokie history
by Jimmy Robertson

Some student-athletes don't fit within the usual stereotype. Others simply refuse to do so.

Take, for instance, a certain member of the Virginia Tech men's track and field squad. His teammates pursue degrees in rigorous subjects like engineering and human nutrition, foods and exercise. This individual chose sociology, which is a noble major, but not quite as difficult as engineering or HNF.

Most have an idea of what they want to do in the future. He has no concrete plan.

Most are clean cut during their competitions. He runs with a pink and purple bandana keeping back his usually long locks.

Most pursue more traditional hobbies, such as joining a fraternity or playing video games. He raises rats and drinks foreign teas in his spare time.

"He is a little different," admitted Darren Barlow, a senior distance runner himself.

Folks, this is an introduction to Tommy Curtin, one of the greatest distance runners in Virginia Tech history—and also an eccentric young man who contradicts normal and is perfectly at ease doing so.

"Strange, for sure," Curtin said, shrugging off the self-assessment as though weird should be normal for everyone. "All runners are sort of weird."

There certainly lies some truth in that statement. After all, not all humans relish the task of running an average of 85 miles per week as part of a training regimen, regardless of the weather, and particularly not on Southwest Virginia's hilly terrain. Heck, even finely tuned distance runners occasionally blanch at such a thought.

Not Curtin. He not only relishes it, he thrives on it and his hardware provides the proof. He has earned All-America honors in track and field and cross country five times—a feat accomplished by no other distance runner in Tech history. He also has won five ACC titles combined in track and field and cross country.

But he likes being different. Look at, for example, his desire two years ago to get a pet. Most athletes choose a dog or a cat, but dogs require constant maintenance and Curtin is allergic to cats. That forced him to consider other alternatives.

"I thought about reptiles, but the house I live in here is super crappy," Curtin said. "Reptiles need a regulated temperature and I was worried that the drafts in the house and the lack of insulation would accidentally kill them. So I ruled out reptiles and moved on to rodents."

His exhaustive research on the topic led to him eliminating the idea of buying rats from a pet store for an array of reasons. So he found a specialty breeder, though not in Blacksburg.

track & field spotlight | Tommy Curtin

Curtin drove 90 minutes to pick up his four pet rodents. He takes them out of their cage twice a day and plays with them.

"Rats are the most intelligent and smell the least, so I settled with those," he said. "I didn't jump into it blindly. I did a lot of research. It took me a while to find a breeder that had a litter."

Then there's his borderline obsession with tea. He loved it as a kid, but his parents limited his intake. After all, caffeine is the devil to parents.

A couple of years ago, he started drinking loose-leaf teas and the hobby escalated from there. His preferred choice is pu-erh, a Chinese tea that he orders online. Most local stores do not carry Curtin's preferred flavors, so he orders from specialty teas that import his selections from various countries.

"I started trying different teas that I had never tried before and got into it that way," he said. "It was originally used as a vessel to put sugar into my body. It was just something sweet to drink. I don't put sugar into my tea anymore. Now it's just tea."



“He’s one of those rare athletes with whom the suffering part is fully accepted to get there first. Even more rare is that I think he actually enjoys that. He is on the starting line completely unafraid of the pain part of the equation and just loves the race and all its challenges.”

Tech distance coach
Ben Thomas on Tommy Curtin

Peculiar interests aside, Curtin is a fantastic athlete in his sport. Given his accomplishments, he almost certainly will be inducted into the Virginia Tech Sports Hall of Fame when he becomes eligible in 10 years.

That seems like an outlandish thought after taking a glance at Curtin. He stands 5-foot-7, weighs 130 pounds, and looks like he belongs at a middle school formal. Yet he arguably

ranks as one of the greatest Virginia Tech athletes in school history—not just for track and field, but also for all sports.

Running is really all he wants to do, but truthfully, it's about all he *can* do. Curtin said he played recreational league basketball once as a kid. He got the ball twice all season and walked both times. He tried gymnastics, but the coaches, seeing little potential, didn't want to train him.

That left only running, which he picked up in middle school.

"I just knew I had a natural knack for it," he said. "You'd do the mile in P.E [physical education]. I was never the best at it, but I was up there. I had a competitive drive for that even at a young age. I liked the racing aspect and it's easier to get into something that you have a natural talent for compared to other people and other sports."

Curtin became a standout runner for Loudoun County High School in Northern Virginia. He was a member of the 4x800-meter relay team that won the 2011 Group AA championship, but he never won an individual state crown.

He received some interest from colleges coming out of high school. He even visited Iowa State, but a four-day blizzard soured his opinion of the school and location. *Continued on page 36*



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CURTIN
Continued from page 35

He liked Virginia Tech, but Ben Thomas, the Hokies' distance coach, had shown no interest. So Curtin emailed Thomas before his senior season, asking for an opportunity to try out for the squad once he graduated.

"He started doing very well in cross country the fall of his senior year and we offered him an opportunity to visit," Thomas said. "He came on the visit. I liked him and how he raced, but we didn't offer him a scholarship. We did offer him a spot on the roster."

Curtin took it, electing to go to a program that was starting to close the distance on the ACC's elite. Virginia Tech also was the only school to which he officially applied.

The truth is Curtin never really cared much about going to college. He simply wanted to continue running. College served as a means to that end.

Such statements probably cause athletics department administrators to wince. But with Curtin, that's what one gets — brutal honesty.

"I probably wouldn't have gone to college at all if it weren't for running," he admitted.

That's not to say he lacks intelligence, or that he shirks his academic responsibilities. On the contrary, he got his degree in mid-May and he earned a spot on the All-ACC Academic Teams for both track and cross country multiple times during his career.

He just enjoys running more. Yet he didn't exactly burst off the starting line toward greatness. He arrived on campus in the summer of 2011 and Tech's rigorous training schedule left him sucking air. He practically needed a ventilator to get through a long run — and on some occasions, pulled out.

"I made the poor choice of not really running that frequently, so I came here really out of shape," Curtin said. "I was here earlier, but I was pulled out of every workout early because I was dead. I wasn't ready for it. It was definitely a shock to the system, but I have that drive. It didn't discourage me at all. I just needed three more weeks and I knew I'd be OK. I got into it pretty quick."

Curtin scored points at his first ACC Cross Country Championships and he also scored in various distance events during the indoor and outdoor track seasons. In his second season, he finished seventh at the ACC Cross Country Championships, helping the men's team to its first ACC cross country title.

He won the first of his five ACC titles during the indoor season in 2013, claiming gold in

the 5,000-meter run. He won a second gold in the same event during the outdoor season. That led to Tech's staff awarding him with some scholarship dollars.

Curtin redshirted the 2014 track season because of an injury, but came back to receive national acclaim the following year. He earned his first All-America honors last winter when he finished eighth in both the 3,000- and 5,000-meter races at the NCAA Indoor Track and Field Championships. He added another All-America honor in the 5,000 during the outdoor season last summer.

This academic year, though, may have been his best. He won three races during the cross country season, including the ACC title when he kicked by Syracuse's Justyn Knight in the final 100 meters. He also stunned the track world when he beat Oregon's Ed Cheserek at the NCAA Pre-National meet in Louisville, Kentucky. Cheserek had not lost a race in his career, but Curtin jumped out to a big lead and maintained the pace.

"It's cool from a notoriety standpoint," Curtin said. "It caught a lot of people's attention and got people looking at me. As far as race importance, it wasn't super important. It wasn't a championship race. It was a cool race and I'm glad that [the win] happened for a whole lot of reasons, but in the grand scheme of things, it wasn't overly important."

Cheserek bested Curtin and the field at the NCAA Cross Country Championships to conclude last fall. Curtin felt poorly going into that race, finishing 22nd — but still earning All-America honors.

Curtin nearly won the national championship in the 5,000 during the indoor season at the NCAA meet in mid-March. He and Cheserek broke from the pack, but Cheserek got him again, winning by roughly three seconds.

That only has served as fuel for Curtin's gas tank during this outdoor season, his final one as a Hokie. For all his idiosyncrasies, his odd hobbies and interests, and his somewhat unique outlook on life, Curtin loves to compete. He loves to race. He loves to win.

That drive separates him from other runners. He maybe lacks the stride length, the power, or the explosiveness of other runners, but his willingness to run through pain is nearly unequaled.

"He definitely has natural ability, but it's more of a durability quality, and he's had to work hard to develop his talent," Thomas said. "But more than anything, I'd say competitive drive — and it's not that simple either. It's the degree of competitive drive."

"He's one of those rare athletes with whom

the suffering part is fully accepted to get there first. Even more rare is that I think he actually enjoys that. He is on the starting line completely unafraid of the pain part of the equation and just loves the race and all its challenges."


Barring injury or illness, Curtin will get a final crack at Cheserek at the NCAA Outdoor Championships in early June. It also represents his final chance at winning that elusive national championship — the last on his Rolodex of goals.

"That would be awesome," he said. "Anything could happen ... It's just about whoever shows up on that day. I'm pretty consistent. I'm ready to take one last stab at it."

Then he'll be off, running to an unknown future. He hopes to race professionally and he's started the process of researching agents and coaches of post-collegiate groups.

Running really is the only option that appeals to him. He admits to lacking any other plan should that option not pan out.

"I'll do whatever makes me happy," he said. "I'm not super big on money. As long as I'm surviving, I don't care what it is as long as it's not soul-sucking."

Such a response is not surprising. Rest assured, Tommy Curtin does what he wants — and almost always at his own pace. 



Tommy Curtin isn't afraid to be himself, as seen here when he draped himself in the Virginia Tech flag and put on a HokieBird hat after Tech clinched the ACC indoor title in 2015.

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A CHANGE for the BETTER

Saige Jenco always envisioned himself as a football player, but a switch to baseball has his future looking bright

by **Matt Kovatch**
Special to Inside Hokie Sports

At first glance, Saige Jenco's story looks like one that's been told before.

Boy grows up in a football-crazed town and falls in love with the game. Boy works hard — his single mother works harder. Boy earns a scholarship to a big-time school in another football-crazed town. Boy goes on to stardom ... for the baseball team?

Yes, Jenco's journey began like many others — lots of which ended up playing out on Saturdays in beloved Lane Stadium. But for Jenco and his family, their biggest challenge from the past may well be the very reason for their biggest success in the future.

Jenco was born and raised in State College, Pennsylvania, in the shadow of Beaver Stadium, the football home of Penn State's Nittany Lions. Like most others in that town, he got swept up in the sports culture, especially football. Family friends included Penn State pipelines, such as the Johnsons, of whom Larry went on to have All-Pro seasons with the Kansas City Chiefs, and the Norwoods — Jordan just won a Super Bowl with the Denver Broncos last year.

Jenco strapped on a helmet and shoulder pads at the age of 5, and from that day on, he devoted his childhood to the gridiron.

"I would play year in and year out," he said. "I played football my whole life and that was kind of my thing. I trained and played Pop Warner and was getting recruited and all that."

Around the same time Jenco started playing football, his father was sent to jail. He was never a part of Jenco's life, but Jenco prefers not to talk much about that situation. Instead he heaps praise upon those who were there for him, including his grandmother, his two uncles and most importantly, his mother, Lindsay.

"That's my queen," Jenco proclaimed of his mother. "She's done everything for me. My mom was a single mother. She worked three jobs, sometimes four. She would wake up early in the morning and I wouldn't see her until nighttime. She would do everything she could to keep me healthy and get me food and take me from place to place and travel to my games. She's done a lot for me and is the strongest woman I know."

Football is obviously not a year-round sport, so in the offseason, Jenco also ran track and took up baseball, though it was more of a way to pass the time.

"I was just playing baseball as a hobby with my friends," Jenco said. "I would pick up a bat for the first game and I would put it down when the season ended."

All the while, his mother was picking up work wherever she could find it, whether it be at the local market, McDonald's, the cafeteria at the middle school, or as a teller at the bank. She would also drive special-needs kids to school and continues her work with those children to this day.

But as one might imagine, working multiple jobs is usually only necessary because things aren't the best financially. When Jenco got to high school, the booster club began asking the families of football players for donations. That wasn't exactly an option for Jenco and his mother, and in a town full of college professors, scientists, and Penn State season ticket holders, politics soon became a factor. Football skills were secondary when playing time was determined. Those with parents who donated were those who saw the most action.

"A lot of kids with a lot of talent got screwed," Jenco said. "It's not my say on how it's run now, but for a long time, it was definitely unfair when it came to playing time and how the politics worked. Especially being in a college town like that, it was kind of a money-based place. Myself included, there were a lot of kids who grew up there with the talent to play college football, but never got the opportunity. That's changed with the new coaching staff, but that's how it was for 20 or 30 years. My uncle played there and dealt with the same thing. I think times are changing now and it's not a problem any more, but growing up, that was definitely a big thing in State College."

Despite that, Jenco continued to play both football and baseball. Even with the politics in play, he used his speed and explosiveness to become a slot back and return man on the gridiron, eventually picking up some attention from some smaller Division I schools. But it was on the baseball diamond, as an outfielder and a

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A CHANGE for the BETTER

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threat on the base paths, where he stumbled across a true opportunity. One day, Jenco happened to play against the son of the coach of the Mid-Atlantic Canes summer travel team and impressed the coach enough to earn an invitation to try out for the squad.

“I wasn’t really planning on going to college at the time,” Jenco remembered. “But I had a good game against him and got a chance to play on a travel team. That’s really when I started to take baseball seriously—when I got asked to play on a team that traveled across the country.”

It was at a tournament in the summer before his junior year when he met the Virginia Tech coaches and the rest is history. He got an offer to play in Blacksburg and his decision to do so was cemented in the fall of his senior year when he finally gave up the love of his life to commit to baseball.

Jenco had an opportunity to go to Florida to participate in the World Wood Bat



Saige Jenco was a terrific football player as a kid, but later developed into an All-ACC baseball player and hopes for a future professionally in that sport at some point down the road.

Tournament, which took place at Major League spring training facilities in front of pro scouts and against the best competition from all over the United States and Puerto Rico.

“I knew that I would be missing a couple [football] games, so I had to decide what I wanted to do,” Jenco said. “But it was an opportunity I couldn’t miss. I gave up football. It was tough. Still to this day, I struggle watching football because that was something I loved to do.”

Jenco finished off his high school career by batting .430 and leading the league in stolen bases. He would take a redshirt year in his first season at Tech, but he burst onto the scene in 2014, ranking in the ACC’s top 12 in steals, walks, batting average, and on-base percentage. Last year as a redshirt sophomore, he earned third-team All-ACC honors and was drafted by the Boston Red Sox in the 27th round of the MLB First-Year Player Draft.

Going pro is the dream of any player, but the level-headed Jenco decided it wasn’t the right time. It would have been nice to have put a Red Sox cap on his head, but 27th-round picks are not guaranteed a ton of money.


“I didn’t think it was the right opportunity for me to leave,” Jenco explained. “I don’t think I was mature enough mentally and I learned a lot this summer and this school year that I can really build on before I’m ready to

take on the next level. I also wanted to get closer to my degree. It was my second year playing here and I felt like I still had more to prove. I wanted to come back with my classmates and not only bond with them and get closer to my degree, but also improve on some things myself that will hopefully help me move up in the draft.”

Jenco said the draft is kind of a crapshoot, but Virginia Tech has built a track record of success in recent years, with 28 players having been drafted since 2010, including eight players in the top 10 rounds and three Hokies in the top three.

“I’m just doing all I can this season to get another opportunity, and hopefully when June rolls around, I’m in the same situation, if not better,” Jenco said. “Technically, I have another year [of eligibility] after this if I want to, so I still have some leverage on my side.”

No matter when he’s selected or where he ends up playing next, Jenco hasn’t forgotten the whole reason why he’s even in this situation—his mother.

“That’s why I do everything I’m doing,” he said. “To hopefully get a chance to tell her thank you in a different manner—to have her not worry about me and stress about money. I hopefully will get an opportunity to pay her back, so she can relax for the next 20 or 30 years.” 

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The Tech lacrosse team has befriended Clara Sherman, a 12-year-old girl with a rare form of brain cancer, and is helping her to raise money for cancer research

by **Evan Nicely**
Special to Inside Hokie Sports

The Sherman family's home is nestled near the foot of Roanoke's Mill Mountain. It's roughly an hour from Virginia Tech's campus, where the Virginia Tech women's lacrosse team practices daily and plays its home games every spring.

The family and the team became connected through a series of somewhat random events—and yet their joining has resulted in so much good.

To start off this story, on a beautiful spring evening, the family was gathered in the living room, concerned with the progression of a middle school science fair project.

It is a scene familiar to most parents, but for the better part of the past two years, Christy and Andrew Sherman were more concerned about the ongoing fight of one of their 12-year-old twin daughters, Clara. The family was just weeks away from the two-year anniversary of one of the darkest moments of their lives when Clara was diagnosed with a cancerous brain tumor.

At that time, Clara, a natural left-hander, had begun to clench her thumb in her right fist in the months prior to the diagnosis—an infantile reflex that halts once a baby becomes a toddler. Christy, an anesthesiologist with

extensive medical knowledge, grew concerned enough with the development that she tested her one night after Clara returned home from an elementary school dance, thumb clinched in a fist.

Christy made Clara attempt to drink a glass of water utilizing only her right hand. Clara proceeded to spill the water everywhere, which solidified the suspicion for Christy that she needed to set up an appointment with Clara's pediatrician. After consulting with the pediatrician at the end of March, the family kept prior plans for spring break, with a neurologist appointment booked for a month later.

"We brought some old videos along on the trip and noticed that everything was normal until a certain point and then [the thumb clinching] started," Christy said. "I knew for sure then that it wasn't something she was born with and something was happening."

Once back in Roanoke, the family moved up the neurologist appointment to a Tuesday, April 29. After examining Clara, the neurologist immediately became troubled and ordered her to be taken in for an MRI just a few hours later. The results of the scan came back to reveal an aggressive-looking tumor located in Clara's brain.

"The scan of the tumor was on about 16 computer monitors [in the room]. It was very shocking," Andrew said.

The doctor was unaware of the specific nature of the tumor and ordered a biopsy to be performed. He sent Clara to the ICU, which left the family in a state of uncertainty and doubt.

"The nurses took Clara to start an IV, while Andrew was at home with the other two children getting them settled," Christy said. "The neurosurgeon who took care of her told me that Clara was going to die and that this was a non-survivable tumor. For a while, we thought she was going to die."

Clara then underwent surgery to have a biopsy done on the tumor, after which she was diagnosed with juvenile pilocytic astrocytoma, an inoperable brain tumor. But she received a more promising diagnosis than the one Christy heard the first night in the ICU.

"She had a low-grade glioma," Christy said. "It's cancerous because of its location and it affects regular parts of the body, but it's controllable with chemotherapy. She'll always have it—she'll never get rid of it."

The family looked at the treatment options available while Christy sent Clara's slides and biopsy to some of the best hospitals for other opinions. During the process, Christy



Clara Sherman, her family, and the Virginia Tech lacrosse team have teamed to raise money for pediatric cancer research.

shockingly discovered that some of the most recent drugs developed to treat Clara's tumor were decades old, archaic despite today's progression of modern medicine.

Knowing the cancer lacked a cure, the doctors decided that Clara would enter into an 18-month chemotherapy regimen to stunt the growth of her tumor. Doctors from Duke University Hospital in Durham, North Carolina, oversaw the plan.

Clara underwent chemotherapy once a month, often leaving her completely debilitated and far removed from the girl who played lacrosse, took dance lessons, and swam for her local club team.

"We were dealing with this perfectly healthy child and now she was someone we couldn't take anywhere," Andrew said. "We wanted to get lots of opinions from different surgeons and were sending her slides and reports all around asking, 'Are we doing the right thing?'"

Her twin sister, Alice, and her best friend, Libby, a pediatric cancer survivor herself, joined Clara for the chemotherapy treatments.

They often would raid the treatment center's stocked kitchen for chocolate pudding before all three snuggled up in the bed to devour it.

Clara became unable to remain upright for longer than 30 minutes at a time without becoming extremely nauseous and sick—a byproduct of chemotherapy. The nausea cut into her time catching up on schoolwork and her physical therapy, among other things.

Her doctors at Duke suggested a remedy to the nausea and vomiting, which turned out to be a drug that most parents hate to give their children.

"It was the best solution ever, caffeine," Andrew said. "She drank lots of Frappuccinos for a while."

The Sherman family persevered through the diagnosis and the 18 months of chemotherapy that ended this past October. They credit their close-knit family, along with the overflowing support from close friends and strangers, for getting them through the dark days. They had people helping with everything from cooking, to leaving kind words of support on their

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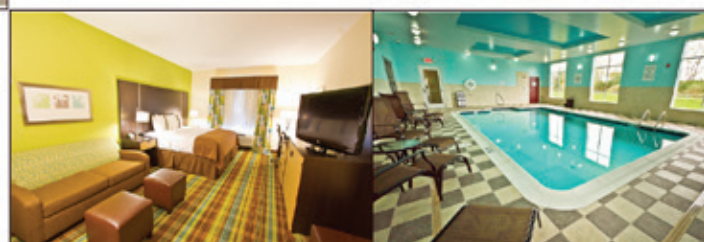


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online blog, to helping mow the family's yard—all so they could focus their time on their family and Clara. "We could not keep up with the food," Andrew said. "The lacrosse club, the church, her dance school, swim club, neighborhood ... all of the support was overwhelming. The East Roanoke team showed up the third day with hundreds of dollars of gift cards to restaurants, and at the time, they didn't even know us. They had this huge stuffed animal for Clara and a banner they had all signed."

Clara's condition also had qualified her as a candidate for the Make-A-Wish Foundation, which grants the wishes of children with life-threatening illnesses, oftentimes connecting these children with their heroes and favorite celebrities.

Clara, though, decided that she didn't want just to meet a celebrity—she wanted a celebrity to help her raise money for those with her condition as well as pediatric cancer research. She needed Make-A-Wish to help, but that was outside the scope of Make-A-Wish's mission.

Enter the Virginia Tech lacrosse team.

Around that time, the Sherman family's next-door neighbor, Mark Lucas, who serves as the director of the Roanoke Valley Lacrosse Association for which Clara plays, and his daughter, Claiborne, decided to get the family in touch with the Hokies' lacrosse squad. A former Tech player who played for three seasons, Claiborne facilitated those discussions and a wonderful relationship began to blossom.

"Claiborne set it up and Megan Burkner [Virginia Tech's head coach] and I began to

communicate back and forth," Andrew said. "The next thing you know, she told me that the team wanted to adopt Clara. We initially had dinner in Salem and then the girls and I went up for some practices and hung out with the team. It's just really grown from there."

The Hokies sponsored a "Cradling for Clara" match in March, as Tech faced then-No. 14 Duke at home. The team had t-shirts made with the "Cradling for Clara" initiative on the front and invited Clara and her family onto the field prior to the game. They presented her with a jersey, a brand new lacrosse stick, and other gear.

The relationship came full circle, as Clara's wish to raise money became a reality just a few weeks later. The coaching staff and team launched a fundraising page for Clara on the PLGA foundation's website—PLGA stands for Polymorphous Low-Grade Adenocarcinoma, a similar type of cancer to the one Clara has. The initial goal was to raise \$5,000 and almost \$3,000 has been raised so far in a little less than six weeks.

"We felt honored that we came in at the time that we did, so that we could help her fulfill her wish, which was to raise funds for the PLGA Foundation," Burkner said. "We're hoping to continue to make efforts in that, but our first step was to create the fundraising page. We want to solicit donations and use our team as a muscle for that. We want to try to get anyone who supports our team to help and also educate them about the PLGA. It's all about supporting Clara. She's truly become a member of our group."

Finished with chemotherapy and finally settling back into a normal life, Clara is focusing on school projects, playing lacrosse, and hanging out with her best friends with all the energy one would expect from an 12-year-old—only now without so many Frappuccinos.

The Sherman family, meanwhile, has continued to keep its focus on helping to find a cure to treat Clara's tumor by donating money to research for new drugs and treatment methods for children suffering from pediatric cancers. Christy said pediatric forms of cancer are some of the most severely underfunded causes and desperately need donations to bring aging treatments and medicines into the 21st century.


Until a cure is found, Clara still will get MRI's done every three months to track her tumor, and when it inevitably begins to grow again, the family will choose a different treatment plan, though none currently available will reduce the tumor's size.

Clara's astute wish to raise money coupled with her joyful personality and contagious smile has inspired those around her, especially the Tech lacrosse team.

"Getting to know Clara and her family has been nothing short of amazing," senior captain Meghan Macera said. "Clara and her sister, Alice, are unbelievably mature for their ages and continue to inspire us every day.

"I am so thankful to have been part of the initiation of our team's relationship with Clara and her family and they have truly had an impact on my life. In interacting with Clara and her family, we are both growing the lacrosse world and further solidifying the community of Virginia Tech."

The Sherman family and Clara continue to move forward with the help of their extended family, the community, and the Virginia Tech lacrosse team—all strong together.

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