

inside

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HOKIESPORTS

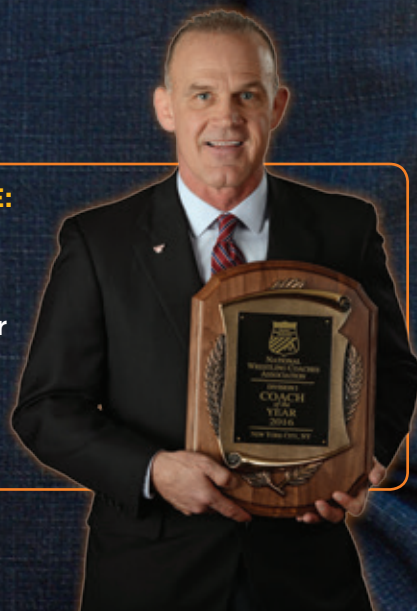
The Official Publication
of Virginia Tech Athletics

A **CHANGE** IN **DIRECTION**

Former JMU coach Kenny Brooks
has been hired as the Tech women's
basketball coach and is looking to lift
that program's fortunes

WHAT'S INSIDE:

Kevin Dresser
was named
national coach
of the year after
guiding Tech to
a program-best
fourth at the
NCAAs



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Tech student-athletes know the value of their scholarships—
and appreciate the ones providing the financial support for those

by Jimmy Robertson

Ken Ekanem is set to go into the fall as a starter at one of the defensive end spots for the Virginia Tech football team. He already has been a two-year starter, with nearly 100 career tackles, including 24 for a loss, and 14 career sacks. He already has earned All-ACC honors once in his career and he will receive his degree in management, with a concentration in entrepreneurship, innovation and technology management, this May.

Hokie Nation helped him do all those things.

Donors to the Hokie Club's Annual Fund—the account that pays for the tuition, fees, and room and board for all of the school's 479 scholarship athletes—has provided Ekanem's scholarship. Others contributed to capital campaigns designed to help pay for the facilities that house the services that he has used to become a quality student and athlete. Some participated in the 110% HOKIE Campaign to help pay for his "cost of attendance," which provides student-athletes with a little extra money to cover personal expenses.

And arguably no student-athlete at Virginia Tech has taken more advantage of his scholarship and other opportunities than Ekanem. He will gladly tell you so.

"I'm very appreciative," he said. "I don't pay room and board. All of that is covered. It's a lot less stress on my family and me. I have all the books I need. I have all the tools I need to succeed in school and on the field. Everything is right here for me."

Ekanem tore the ACL in his knee while playing in the state championship game his senior season at Centreville High School in Northern Virginia. Some schools backed off, but not Virginia Tech. Two days after the injury occurred, Tech assistant coaches Bud Foster and Charley Wiles traveled to Ekanem's home to insure the scholarship offer remained intact.

Ekanem signed a letter-of-intent with Tech, but he needed more than a scholarship to become the player and person whom he wanted to become. He needed Tech's sports medicine and strength and condition staffs to help him overcome his injury. He needed the Hokies' nutrition staff, as he gained weight because he couldn't work out and

the nutrition staff helped him lose 15 pounds. He needed the help of the Student-Athlete Academic Support Services staff to keep him on track academically while he took a redshirt season once he arrived at Tech.

"Tutoring was big for me," he admitted. "My freshman and sophomore years, I was taking some science classes and I don't like science. They [the SAASS staff] set me up with some tutors and that helped me. I got my schedule right and got my work ethic right. I was a decent student in high school, but you can't be a decent student and succeed at Tech. So they really helped me

develop into a better student."

The end result is that Virginia Tech donors have helped Ekanem be who and what *he* wanted to be. What *they* wanted him to be. What they want all student-athletes at Virginia Tech to be.

Yet the price of continuing to do that keeps rising. The athletics department is a self-supporting auxiliary of the university and thus receives no state funding. It operates solely on donations and revenue from ticket sales, advertising contracts, and apparel contracts. Each tuition hike by the university forces department officials to ask

for even more contributions to the Hokie Club's Annual Fund to cover the scholarship investments in its student-athletes.

In the past five years, that price tag has increased by 62 percent. The athletics department is expected to spend approximately \$14.4 million on scholarships for the 2015-16 academic year. However, scholarship donations for 2015 came in at \$9.8 million, which has resulted in a significant shortfall, even when combined with funds from scholarship endowments.

The final dollar figures for all ACC schools' annual fund contributions for 2015 were not

available, but in 2014, Tech's annual fund contributions ranked 11th out of 13 ACC schools' annual fund contributions (Notre Dame's and Boston College's numbers are not made public).

That has Virginia Tech Director of Athletics Whit Babcock, his administrative staff, and the Hokie Club staff looking closely at fundraising models and planning changes. Some of those plans center on increasing the

number of people who donate to the Hokie Club, as only four percent of Tech's living alumni contribute to athletics.

Those plans will be announced, explained, and implemented in the days and weeks ahead. Babcock and his administrative staff want everyone to become involved—or as Babcock often likes to say, "strong together."

Tech fans should never discount how much their donations mean to student-athletes. They don't need Babcock or Bill Lansden, senior associate AD of development and the executive director of the Hokie Club, to tell them. They need only to listen to the student-athletes themselves or read their comments. They are the ones telling them.

Like football player Sam Rogers.

"I have a friend who is not a player and he's paying all this money," Rogers said. "Here I am, I don't have to worry about computers or books or any of that. As you get older, you have an appreciation for it. I had an appreciation because I came here as a walk-on, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't appreciate it more now because I understand what it means and what other people have to do."

Or women's basketball player Tajiah Campbell.

"I never imagined that someone like me, coming from where I came from, would be here on scholarship," she said. "I get super emotional thinking of how grateful I am, and I never thought I would have this opportunity. That there are people who would do this for people who come from many different backgrounds is amazing."

Pretty much any student-athlete at Virginia Tech will reiterate the exact same thing. They love Virginia Tech, they love the opportunities that they receive, and they're appreciative of the ones who provide those.

Going forward, athletics department officials want to continue providing those opportunities. They know that the need for additional revenue from donors to support scholarships is real. They readily admit that.

But they also know this—the impact of that revenue is immeasurable.

THE COST
OF EXCELLENCE

VIRGINIA TECH FOOTBALL
STUDENT-ATHLETE

KEN
EKANEM

Year
Redshirt Senior

Major
Management

Hometown
Centreville, Virginia

Tuition & Fees
\$12,486

Room & Board
\$8,290

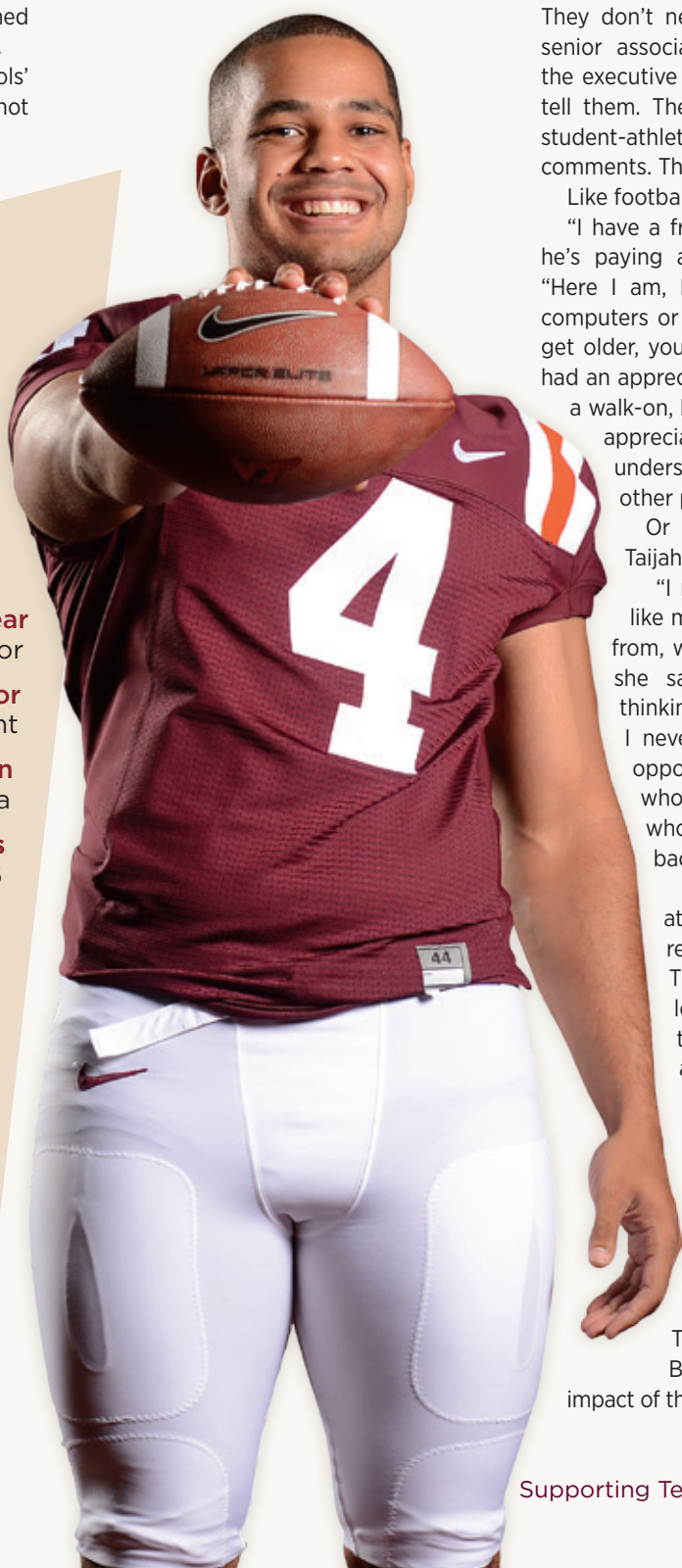
Books
\$800

Cost of
Attendance Gap
\$3,411

Total*
\$24,987 (in-state)

(out-of-state equivalent:
\$41,985)

*Reflects projected
2016-2017 scholarship costs
and additional expenses.



\$14.4 million 2015-2016 Scholarship Cost
for Virginia Tech Athletics

479 Number of
Scholarships Provided

62% Increase in Total Scholarship Cost
in the last five years

\$9.8 million Amount of Virginia Tech Athletics
revenue that came from scholarship
donations in 2015

OTHER EXPENSES* PER STUDENT-ATHLETE

\$2,385 Equipment/
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Support Services

\$2,836 Sports
Medicine

\$7,886 Team
Travel



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Supporting Tech Athletics Since 1949



The Donor File

Mickey Fitzgerald

HOKIE CLUB LEVEL:
Hokie Benefactor

CURRENTLY RESIDES:
Atlanta, Georgia

GRADUATION YEAR:
1981

Fitzgerald has, and continues to be, a generous benefactor of Virginia Tech, having made significant gifts to the university in addition to more than \$250,000 in support of Virginia Tech athletics. Recently, he donated his cherished Hokie Bike—a custom-built Virginia Tech-themed chopper motorcycle to the Tech Chapter of Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity to be the prize in a fundraising raffle in which Virginia Tech athletics will be the majority benefactor.

Fitzgerald's post-football career has been one of entrepreneurship and success, especially in the pioneering medical arena. He established several highly specialized neurophysiology and orthotic prosthetics services. He was named one of the top 10 entrepreneurs in metro Atlanta, his home, in 2002.

While incubating and developing his successful businesses, Fitzgerald also was developing a bent toward community service and philanthropy. Raised in a Lynchburg area orphanage with his brothers after being abandoned by his parents, Fitzgerald's early days put him on the same wavelength with kids going through the same wrenching experience. He established a foundation, Mickey's Rascals, to help underprivileged children and passionately supports an Atlanta-area orphanage, Calvary Children's Home. Fitzgerald's service to his community, his dedication to underprivileged children, and his support and philanthropy for Virginia Tech are reasons for him to be very satisfied and proud.

Likewise, Hokie Nation can also be very proud. *Go Hokies!*

Letter from JUSTIN FUENTE HEAD FOOTBALL COACH VIRGINIA TECH

Dear Hokie Nation,

I wanted to take a minute and write all of you a letter to thank you for the wonderful way in which you've welcomed my family and I to Blacksburg. You have a reputation for being a friendly community that embraces its football program and I have found that to be true. That was one of the many reasons why I was interested in taking the position as the football coach at Virginia Tech.

I am honored to be the new coach here and embrace the challenge of trying to replace a legend in Coach Frank Beamer. He has been so gracious in offering his insight and I'm sure I'll be seeking his advice in the future. My staff and I are working hard each day to continue the winning tradition that has already been established here.

The past three months have been incredibly busy. We met with our team, assembled our staff, visited with many recruits and ultimately signed a recruiting class. We started workouts with those on our current roster and we're now in the middle of spring practice. I've been pleased with the work ethics and attitudes of our players.

Our goal is to build upon the foundation put in place and to take our program to an even higher level. We will build a team that will make you proud and I promise you that we will play hard, smart and tough. The culture of our program will reflect our university's core values and the values of you, Hokie Nation.

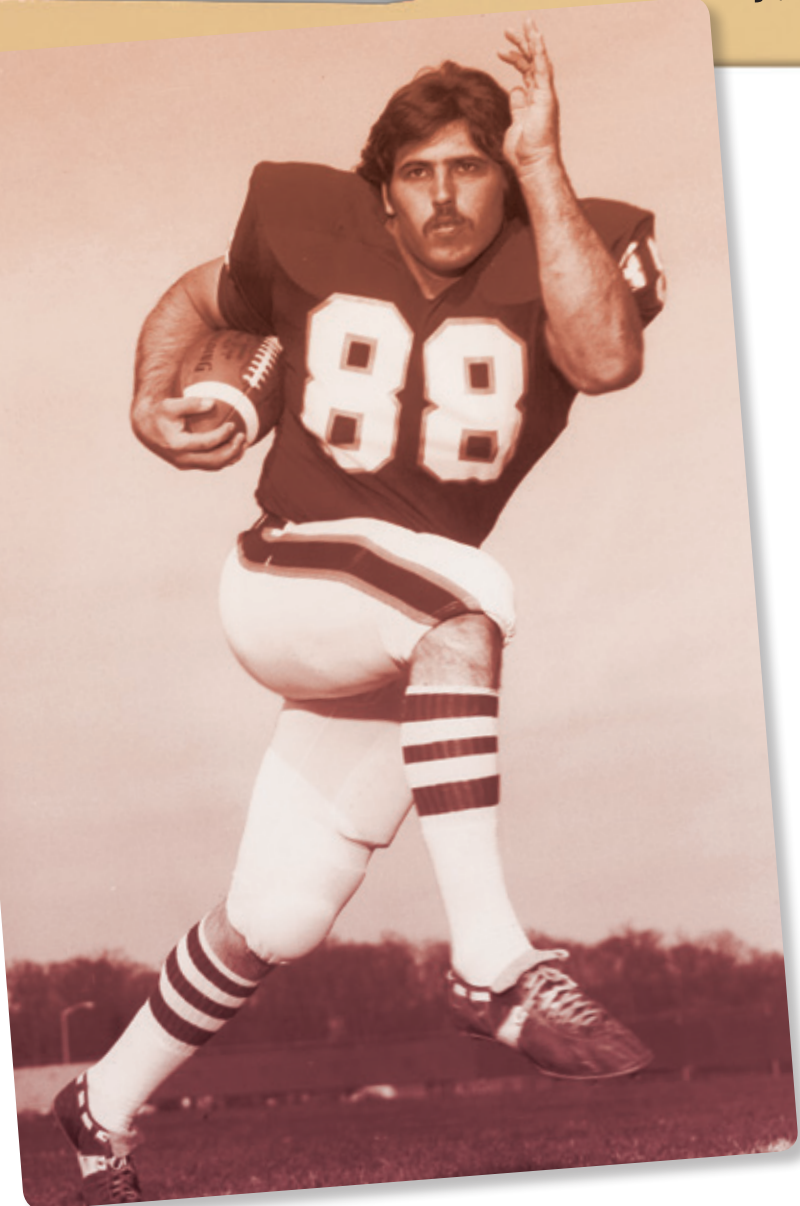
I'm looking forward to our spring game and hope that you will join us on April 23. Your support and investment in our program — through season ticket purchases, donations and attendance at our games — are critical components to our success. I deeply appreciate that support and will not take it for granted.

I want you to know that I'm humbled to have the opportunity to be the football coach at Virginia Tech. I look forward to all of us being strong together and accomplishing great things.

Go Hokies!

Justin Fuente

Justin Fuente
Football coach, Virginia Tech



Fitzgerald's story: Football was Mickey Fitzgerald's springboard to success. An outstanding fullback and tight end at Lynchburg's E.C. Glass High School in the mid-1970s, Fitzgerald was one of the top 10 high school players in America his senior year. Highly recruited by all the major college programs and visited in his home back then by the likes of Alabama's legendary Bear Bryant and Ohio State's Woody Hayes, Fitzgerald could have played college football anywhere he chose. He chose Virginia Tech.

Fitzgerald played for both head coaches Jimmy Sharpe and Bill Dooley during his playing days at Virginia Tech and earned the nickname "Incredible

Hulk" after being moved by Sharpe from tight end to fullback, where he proceeded to run over and through everybody — sometimes even his own blockers. He rushed for more than 100 yards in each of his first four games at fullback.

He was a Virginia Tech team captain his senior year and was All-South and selected All-America on offense. Fitzgerald made the Dean's List graduated from Virginia Tech in 1981 with a degree in sociology and went on to play pro football for the Atlanta Falcons, the Philadelphia Eagles, and the Memphis Showboats. He was inducted into the Virginia Tech Sports Hall of Fame in 2002.

YOU COULD WIN THE **HOKIE** *Bike*

HOKIE Bike is a 2002 custom build for former Tech football star Mickey Fitzgerald. A native of Lynchburg, Virginia and a top-10 high school recruit in 1975, Fitzgerald came to Tech in the face of offers from all the major college programs and he started as a tight end and fullback. He was inducted into the Virginia Tech Sports Hall of Fame in 2002.

After graduating from Tech, Fitzgerald played professional football for the Atlanta Falcons, the Philadelphia Eagles, and the Memphis Showboats.

A born entrepreneur, Fitzgerald is a successful businessman in Atlanta and has been a generous supporter of Tech.

Fitzgerald has donated **HOKIE Bike** to the Virginia Tech Chapter of Delta Kappa Epsilon (DEKES) to be the prize in a fall 2016 raffle, with significant proceeds to benefit Virginia Tech Athletics.

LET'S GO HOKIES!

Purchase raffle tickets for \$10 each or six for \$50 beginning at the Maroon-Orange spring football game on April 23 and continuing throughout the season for a chance to win. Proceeds will benefit the Virginia Tech Athletic Fund and Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity. The winning ticket will be drawn at halftime of the Tech vs. University of Virginia football game on Nov. 26. For more information, contact Mickey Hayes (mickeyhayes@live.com) or Ben Brisley (bbrisley11@gmail.com).



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Tech to rename baseball stadium in recognition of Union Bank & Trust

Virginia Tech announced on March 21 that it was renaming its baseball stadium in recognition of a financial commitment to athletics from Union Bank & Trust, the largest community bank headquartered in Virginia.

Now known as “English Field at Union Park”, the stadium is set to receive numerous upgrades thanks to a \$3.5 million commitment provided by the Richmond-based bank. The university’s board of visitors approved extending the stadium’s naming rights to Union for 10 years in recognition of the company’s financial support.

The Tech athletics department now plans to begin the initial phases of a multi-million dollar baseball facility improvement project of which the final costs won’t be determined until design-and-build bids are analyzed. Projected improvements and upgrades include additional seating, modernized concession areas, a new patio area, and a new entrance to the stadium that celebrates the legacy of English Field and Virginia Tech baseball.

The athletics department also plans to look at adding premium seating, a new team clubhouse, and new scoreboard and video replay boards. In addition, more restrooms and an expanded family area could be in the works.

“Virginia Tech is thrilled to partner with Union to create a contemporary, yet traditional baseball park in Blacksburg,” Tech AD Whit Babcock said in a statement. “We share Union’s vision of developing a community focal point where friends and families can gather to cheer on the Hokies and come together on a year-round basis.

“The next generation of English Field at Union Park will be one that all Hokies will be proud of for many years to come, and that will well position our baseball program to compete among the ACC and national elite.”

School renames football locker room in honor of Beamer

The baseball stadium wasn’t the only Tech athletics facility renamed, as the board of visitors also approved the renaming of the football

locker room to The Frank Beamer Locker Room in honor of Beamer’s contributions and years of service.

Beamer retired after this past season following 29 years as the Hokies’ head coach. He finished his career with 280 coaching victories, including 238 at Tech. He guided the Hokies to 23 straight winning seasons and 23 consecutive bowl appearances.


A formal dedication ceremony will take place once new signage is installed. Brian Callaghan (Class of 1993), Win Sheridan (Class of 1994), Jeff Veatch (Class of 1993) and Ted Hanson (Class of 1991) — the founders and principals of Apex Systems, Inc. in Richmond, Virginia—made the original gift in June of 2011 that facilitated the construction of the new locker room facilities for the Hokies.

The renaming of the locker room became the second way in which the university has honored Beamer. This past August, the school changed Spring Road, which runs adjacent to Lane Stadium, to “Beamer Way” to recognize the contributions made by Beamer and wife Cheryl.

Tech men’s golfers visit children at Shriners Hospital

The Virginia Tech men’s golf team visited the Shriners Hospital for Children in Greenville, South Carolina on March 23 in what has become an annual tradition for the team each time it plays in the Furman Intercollegiate tournament.

Shriners Hospitals for Children are located in 20 cities throughout the nation and specialize in an array of inpatient and outpatient care services for children. The services include treatment for orthopaedic injuries, burns, cleft lip and palate, and spinal cord injuries. These hospitals also serve as leaders in medical research.

The Hokies spent the day interacting with patients, family members, and staff members, and visiting with some very special youngsters. The players handed out gifts and also went through some putting exercises with the kids, creating memories that last a lifetime—both for the players and the children. As has been the case over the years, the players indicated that they got as much out of the trip as the kids, making for a meaningful experience for all. 



editor’s desk | *by Jimmy Robertson*

Dresser has Tech wrestling getting closer toward national title

The two trophies sat on his desk, two hulking pieces of metal and wood, both symbolic of hard work, and ultimately, success.

As you walked into his office, you couldn’t see him over the one trophy, the reward for finishing fourth at the NCAA Championships held at Madison Square Garden. Most coaches store such tokens in pretty glass cases with fancy lighting, but you get the sense that this trophy and the other one may be parked on Kevin Dresser’s desk for a lengthy period of time. They serve as reminders of what drives him every day.

“Eight guys created a lot of excitement,” Tech’s wrestling coach said. “That’s what you go to tournaments to do—create a lot of excitement.”

Dresser, his staff, and eight Tech wrestlers created excitement and made history in the process. In a sport in which the Big Ten and Big 12 traditionally dominate, the Hokies stood on the podium among the likes of Penn State, Oklahoma State, and Ohio State. Conspicuously absent was Iowa, whom the Hokies surpassed in the team race. Iowa, Dresser’s alma mater, is widely considered the standard bearer of collegiate wrestling.

The fourth-place finish was the best in program history, along with the six who earned All-America honors. The team finish tied for the best ever by a Tech team. The men’s and women’s soccer teams both made the College Cup and lost in the semifinal (in 2007 and 2013, respectively) and the men’s cross country squad finished fourth in the late 1980s.

Following the finals on March 19, the National Wrestling Coaches Association named

Dresser its 2016 National Coach of the Year. The move stunned Dresser, who had left the building en route to the team hotel for a post-championships celebratory social. He turned around to go back and collect his award, though it took him a while to get through security.

“I called them [NCAA officials] and told them to hang with me,” he laughed.

Dresser became just the second coach ever to receive a national coach of the year honor. Some guy named Beamer received one in 1999.

“When good things happen, the head coach gets the award and the credit,” Dresser said. “It really should be spread out. I wish I could chop it up into 25 pieces and give [top assistant] Tony Robie a piece, give all my coaches a piece, and everyone who has helped us over the years a piece. They all deserve a piece. That’s the way I feel about it.”

Though tired once he returned to Blacksburg, Dresser spent the next week fielding calls and performing media interviews each day. He wasn’t about to turn down a request. Instead, he shrewdly used the opportunities to market his program, both to recruits and to fans looking to get behind a winner.

He also spent the week—and weeks—following the championships answering phone calls and text messages. He probably ranks as Tech’s most popular coach, given his program’s success and his Southwest Virginia ties following state championship runs at Grundy High School and Christiansburg High School.

The best part about this program’s success is that the best may yet be coming. The Hokies have finished in the top 10 in each of the past four years—and five years ago, they finished

in 11th. Dresser has built this program into a consistent winner.

The Hokies lose Nick Brascetta, their 157-pounder and a three-time All-American, but they return the remainder of the lineup. In fact, five of the six who earned All-America honors return. So, too, do Joey Dance and Zack Zavatsky, two with All-America skills and potential.

“On paper, we look pretty good,” Dresser admitted. “I think we’ve got the third-most returning points of anyone in the nation coming back behind Penn State and Missouri. We’ve got a lot coming back ... but with that, we have to understand that there are no automatics and no ‘gimmes’ in this sport.”

Penn State won the national championship—for the fifth time in six years. So Tech’s road to winning the school’s first national championship in any sport would have to go through the Nittany Lions. Tech wrestled Penn State each of the past two years and lost close matches both times.

Without question, winning a national championship in wrestling is a monumental task. The Hokies would need luck and they would need for things to go perfectly. That means staying healthy, getting better, and wrestling beyond each one’s talent level.

But getting into the top 10, and now, the top five were monumental undertakings and the Hokies managed to get it done. No one really thought Tech could do that when Dresser took over a decade ago.

Now he has the evidence to prove otherwise. It’s sitting on his desk. 



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behind the mic | with Jon Laaser

A spring state of mind

Growing up in Minnesota, spring was without question the greatest time of the year. Winter was cold, dark, and even suffocating in many ways—and the worst part was that it was long. I mean loooooong! In early November, you could feel the tide turning, and at that point, you settled in and counted the days until late April. In between, you made compromises with yourself. You developed a physical toughness that allowed you to cope with the elements, but it certainly was not an environment conducive to inspiration and excitement.

Then it would all change and it would seemingly be in an instant. I can vividly remember the day each year. The sun would shine in the winter, but it was different on this day. It wasn't warm by national standards, but it was warm enough! My brother, sister, and I all would recognize that the day was upon us. I remember the sun shining through the windows of the school bus on the way home. I remember frantically changing from the warm clothes I had left for school in that morning to shorts. Shorts! Generally we would just end up lounging on the front porch, basking. But it was glorious because we shared the feeling that anything was possible. Basketball in the driveway? Catch in the street? Ride our bikes into town to pick up some baseball cards? All of those things were options now, plus Little League ball would be starting soon. Family rounds of golf weren't too far into the distance either.

The bottom line was we had made it through another winter. There was a badge of honor that came with that accomplishment and we reveled in it. We enjoyed the sun more than most because we had earned it. I still like to say that, for five months of the year, there is no greater place than Minnesota. I moved away a long time ago. I took up residence in various places that all had their strengths and weaknesses, but none that had that severe a contrast between dark and light.

Believe me, I don't miss walking out of basketball practice at 4:15 with the sun already vanished for the night and the temperature below zero. But I have missed that feeling of accomplishment and invigoration the day that spring finally sprung.

As I stood on the sideline of the first spring football practice led by Justin Fuente, that feeling returned. I meant to be observing the early stages of the quarterback competition, but my mind kept wandering and it wandered back to those first days of spring when anything seemed possible.

Less than 72 hours earlier, the plane carrying the men's basketball team had touched down at the Roanoke airport. The Hokies had concluded the season with a second-round loss to BYU in the NIT. The mood on the plane was one of sadness, as there is at the end of anything, but it wasn't somber. It was hopeful. It felt like the beginning of something special. I shared that mood.

I had been looking forward to that day for a while. It's not that I wanted the season to end—I didn't. But I knew it would represent the beginning of the next phase—for me and for Tech.

I had weathered my rookie season and all the newness that came with it. I've always felt that establishing a track record is the most important thing to do when developing something. A year isn't a long track record, but it was a tangible and solid start. I was eager to build upon that and felt that I could do that from a position of strength going forward.

Back on that sideline, as I witnessed the energy being exuded by Fuente and the new members of the coaching staff, I couldn't help but think that Hokies everywhere were probably sharing my invigorating feeling of spring. The sun was shining and the temperature was warming, so there was a literal sense to that feeling, but it was metaphorical as well.

I know that it has been a trying and emotional time in Blacksburg for many. We entered the previous football season with optimism, but also with an uneasy undertone, knowing that Father Time is undefeated and that the Frank Beamer era was approaching its end.

There was palpable apprehension in that fact alone. The man had meant so much to so many. For some, it was impossible to think of a time before him, and even tougher, to a time after him.



There have been a lot of changes within Tech athletics the past two years, but also a lot to celebrate, including the Hokies' 12th straight win over UVA on the football field.

When he announced his retirement, that fear was realized, but there was more to it. We worried that the transition would be handled gracefully and what the future would like.

When the men's basketball team lost to Alabama State in its opener, you could almost sense a collective "here we go again" from Hokie Nation. That got louder when West Virginia waxed Tech in Blacksburg at the end of December.

In November, we met Fuente and his family. We watched Hokies everywhere rally around Beamer in what became a farewell tour. Then we beat UVA—again. Then we went to a bowl—again. Then we won that bowl—again. The sun came up in the morning and the world kept on spinning. We witnessed Tech AD Whit Babcock and his staff handle the transition flawlessly. Beamer was stoic, as he always has been.

In hindsight, we knew it would be that way, but we had worried anyway. That's human nature. Change comes with trepidation.

Buzz Williams and the Hokies followed that loss to West Virginia with back-to-back wins over NC State and UVA. UVA! Tech opened ACC play 4-1 and then closed the regular season with five consecutive victories. A winning record in the toughest conference in the country was posted. It wasn't "here we go again"—again.

The more I looked, the more the signs of spring were everywhere. There was Buzz on CBS' NCAA Tournament coverage,


representing Tech with style. English Field became English Field at Union Park. A substantial financial commitment to Tech's baseball facility accompanied the renaming. The Hokies' wrestling team went to the greatest stage in the world and delivered. Kevin Dresser's grapplers finished in fourth place nationally, one spot ahead of Iowa. Iowa!

You needed only to walk into the Merryman Athletic Center to see progress. Saws hummed and hammers banged, as the core of athletics received a facelift.

Hokies, recognize this. In the past two years, you have welcomed a new football coach, director of athletics, men's and women's basketball coaches, voice, and countless other new faces. You have also said so long for now to beloved Tech lifers, and unfortunately, good-bye to others.

It has been a bit of roller coaster, hasn't it? But the realization I had the other day was that the ride has ended for now. You have weathered the winter, the change, and the uncertainty—and you've done it gracefully. Time to wear that as a badge of honor because you're now on that school bus, heading home. I invite you to bask in the sunshine. Like the future in Blacksburg, it is bright and will feel warm. Enjoy the days to come and know that you've earned them.

And hurry up and get those shorts on—time's a wasting!

Happy spring, Hokies! 

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TRIO attends NCAA's Emerging Leaders Seminar

by Reyna Gilbert-Lowry

For the past several years, the NCAA has served as the host for the Emerging Leaders Seminar (ELS), an annual professional development event that provides leadership, educational, and transitional programming for graduate assistants and interns from NCAA membership institutions, conference offices, and affiliate organizations. The three-day program gives participants the opportunity to identify, and network with, key decision makers within college athletics. It allows them to return to their respective roles with the applicable skills and knowledge that will help them succeed in the next steps toward becoming a college athletics professional. During the program, participants heard from prominent leaders within intercollegiate athletics and were able to delve into topics such as self-awareness, group dynamics, and the impact of leadership.

In late January, the Virginia Tech Athletics Department sent three aspiring athletics professionals to the NCAA national office in Indianapolis, Indiana to attend this year's Emerging Leaders Seminar.

Tracy Beyer, a graduate assistant in the sports medicine program, admitted that she was initially hesitant to attend the event after finding out that she had been accepted.

"I went into ELS a little skeptical of how much of it would apply to me as a graduate assistant in athletics training," Beyer said. "I was wonderfully surprised by how much I learned about myself, other people, and the field of athletics. I would highly recommend it as a great experience for anyone who gets the chance."

Marcus Haskett, an intern in the Office of Student-Athlete Development with plans to attend Georgetown University's Master of Professional Studies in Sports Industry Management program next fall, said the knowledge he was able to gain from the event only made his passion for college sports stronger.

"I will continue to dream big so that one day maybe I can become one of the most influential people in college athletics," Haskett said.

Jacob Roulston, an intern in Student-Athlete Academic Support Services, also attended the Emerging Leaders Seminar.

Marcus Haskett (left), Tracy Beyer (middle) and Jacob Roulston used an NCAA leaders seminar to educate themselves on potential careers in athletics.

"The NCAA Emerging Leaders Seminar will go down as one of my favorite memories while working in athletics at Tech ... right up there with beating OSU in the Shoe!" Roulston said. "It was a great opportunity to make new connections and further my relationships with Tracy and Marcus. I am extremely appreciative of Reyna Gilbert-Lowry and Danny White in the Office of Student-Athlete Development for helping provide me with such a great opportunity to further my professional development."

Why did you decide to apply for the NCAA Emerging Leaders Seminar?

TB: "I applied to attend the ELS because it seemed like a phenomenal opportunity to work on leadership skills with peers, interns, and graduate assistants like myself who are just beginning their careers in intercollegiate athletics. I also saw it as an opportunity to get to know the administrative side of athletics. As an athletics trainer, I spend a lot of time with athletes and coaches, but there's so much more that goes into a successful season for a team and the department. I wanted to develop a better understanding of those roles and use that to help me to be a better member of the athletics department."

MH: "I decided to apply for the ELS so that I would have the opportunity to gain knowledge from other individuals who are doing what I want to do and I knew that the seminar would help me enhance my current qualities to become a better leader."


JR: "I thought that it would provide a great networking opportunity with other young professionals working in intercollegiate athletics, as well as serving as motivation to finish my internship at Student-Athlete Academic Support Services in a strong, positive manner."

What are your future career goals and how has/will the ELS help you attain those goals?

TB: "My goals are to continue working in athletics training at the Division I level. In athletics it's, as they say, 'all about who you know.' Networking is an important skill to have. Whether you're looking for a job, need advice, or have a project that you need assistance on from another school, it helps to have contacts and relationships with people at different institutions. Not only at ELS did I get to learn a lot about the skills it takes to meet and form a memorable contact with other people, I also got to put those skills into action and meet a lot of great people."

MH: "My ultimate goal is to become a collegiate athletics director, so that I can help build a winning program and be a positive influence for student-athletes. I want to help student-athletes be successful and achieve their goals in life. The ELS helped educate me on ways to improve in the areas of leadership where I may be lacking, so that I have the necessary tools and skills to be a successful athletics director."

JR: "My future career goal is to continue to support student-athletes in their academic endeavors, preferably at Virginia Tech. The ELS helped re-light my passion for working with student-athletes and reminded me why I chose to pursue a career in academic support: to help build a strong academic foundation for student-athletes, so they can be prepared for their future post-athletics."

While these three emerging leaders are on very different career paths, the opportunity to learn the necessary tools to be successful leaders in the industry was one in which they were truly grateful to have and will remember for years to come. 



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Gracee Hendrix is a starting midfielder on the Tech lacrosse team and graduates in December with a degree in agriculture and life sciences and a minor in animal poultry sciences. The “country girl” on the team will pursue a career in agriculture after graduation.

Q: Very few student-athletes pick agriculture and life sciences as a major. Why did you decide on that major?

GH: “I grew up raising pigs for 4-H [a youth development organization] back home in Vero Beach, Florida. I always had a passion for animals and agriculture, so I became involved in 4-H and started raising pigs. That’s how it started. I did that through middle school and high school and I knew I wanted to take that into a career path.

“When I was looking at schools, I knew I wanted something with agriculture. Virginia Tech was perfect because it had a great lacrosse program in the ACC, which I wanted because my parents went to Clemson, so I was already brainwashed. I knew I wanted agriculture and I knew Tech had a phenomenal program, so it was a perfect fit for me.”

Q: Have you done any internships related to your field?


GH: “Last summer, I worked with a citrus company called Indian River Select [in Fort Pierce, Florida]. Basically, I was an intern in the social media, sales, and marketing departments. I just did anything they needed me to do and I also started their Instagram page and ran their social media pages, like Facebook and Pinterest. I was involved with all that. It was awesome and I realized that I did like that.

“Right now, my major is very hands-on with animals. I work out at the barn for my minor. Last semester, in one of my classes, we put on a livestock auction for the Hokie Harvest Sale. Basically, Tech has a class where the whole class puts on an auction for Virginia Tech cattle. I was part of a committee that ran it. My sophomore year, I raised a heifer for one semester. I had to halter break it and take care of it with a partner. That taught me a lot because I had never been involved with cattle, so that was cool. In all the intro classes, they teach you so much from castrating to giving vaccinations to branding cattle. I’ve learned a lot. I know the hands-on stuff, but this past summer was cool working on the other side of it with marketing, sales, and social media.”

Q: What do you plan to do once you graduate?

GH: “Right now, I’m not exactly sure. I know that I want to stay in the agriculture industry. I’ve never had any other pathway. I’ve always been agriculture-minded. I’ve always wanted to do something with it and never thought twice about it. I don’t know why. I know it’s an industry that we always rely on. A lot of people forget how important it is and how it’s vital for human survival. Some people take it for granted.

“I find everything about the industry fascinating. I don’t know where I fit in right now, but I’m lucky to have these different pieces in my life to figure out where I should be.

“Having the internship this past summer, as cool as it is to be hands-on, I would see myself more in the corporate side, maybe in an office and working within a company. Extension is an option. Teaching is an option. Extension is a cool thing that I should look into more because it sounds kind of cool and I know that Florida extension is a little behind—I did a research paper and Florida lacks some things. Virginia is really into it and is great with everything they do. Florida is a little behind and it would be cool to maybe go back and work in my county. So we’ll see.” 

GRACEE HENDRIX

LACROSSE

Vero Beach, Florida

by Jimmy Robertson



Maclain Huge is the lone senior on Virginia Tech’s golf team and he hopes to play in the professional ranks after graduating in May. But his degree in public relations will leave him with many options.

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

MH: “I started in finance mainly just because my dad was a financial advisor and I was like, ‘Yeah, Dad has done this, so I can do this.’ Then I’m like, ‘I don’t know if I want to do this any more.’ So I decided to switch. I didn’t know that much about finance, but I quickly got out of that.

“Public relations is similar to marketing and public speaking isn’t something that I’m scared to do. It’s something I almost enjoy doing. As it relates to marketing and public relations, you’re just dealing with campaigns and helping out people and moving stuff along. You’re trying to sell products. That’s more marketing and not necessarily public relations because that deals more with campaigning, but I just enjoy being around the big groups and trying to get your product through or trying to move along a campaign that you’re working for.

“After I switched, I had a lot of catching up to do, but I made it. It’s been very enjoyable for me.”

Q: Most cringe at the thought of public speaking, but you actually enjoy it, don’t you?

MH: “I feel like it, yeah. Whenever I do presentations, I’ve never been nervous. I’ve never been nervous to go out in front of a group of people and speak to them. I don’t know why or how. I didn’t do anything to help myself in that way, but it’s something that I enjoy doing.”


Q: What’s been your favorite class?

MH: “Public Relations Campaigns, which I’m in now. This is my last public relations class and it kind of put everything I’ve done in the communication program together. We’re working with our client, which is Veterans@VT [a student veterans group on campus]. It’s always fun to work with veterans. My dad was in the Marines and my brother is in the Marines. My brother-in-law is in the Marines. My uncle works in Special Forces, so this is a project that is fun for me to do. It’s also fun putting everything together. It’s a lot of work, but I’m in a good group and we’re moving right along.

“We’re trying to spread awareness of them. We have a bunch of veterans here on campus. The group doesn’t have that much exposure. They’re kind of overshadowed by the Corps of Cadets. People think of the Corps and the Veterans@VT as the same, but they’re not. So we’re trying to spread their awareness and let the veterans know that when they come back to school, they can be in this group.”

Q: What do you think you’d like to do if professional golf doesn’t work out for you?

MH: “People think of public relations in terms of politics. For me, it was more like marketing campaigns and I’ve heard from other friends and students I’ve had classes with say, ‘Oh, I have this marketing internship with so and so.’ In the long run, I’ll probably get into marketing. For me, it would be about campaigning and marketing products.

“I’m not really into anything specific at the moment. I wouldn’t mind getting into the sports field, but I’m not into a specific sport. Golf would be fun, but I’m a big basketball fan and just sports in general would be intriguing to me.” 

MACLAIN HUGE

MEN’S GOLF

Lovettesville, Virginia

by Jimmy Robertson



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BROOKS TAKES OVER TECH WOMEN'S HOOPS PROGRAM

Kenny Brooks enjoyed unprecedented success during his 14 seasons as the head women's basketball coach at JMU and now he's been tasked with duplicating that success here at Virginia Tech
by Jimmy Robertson

Kenny Brooks vividly remembers his first visit to Blacksburg as a head coach.

It coincided with his first game as head coach of the James Madison University women's basketball team. He remembers Cassell Coliseum, he remembers then-Hokies' head coach Bonnie Henrickson, and he remembers his team losing in overtime. He also remembers standing outside the locker room following the game before addressing his team and seeing football coach Frank Beamer, who told him to keep his head up.

"It showed me what a class act he is and what a class act Hokie Nation is," Brooks said. "I was able to go in and talk to my team and to prepare them for the challenges that were to come. I will always remember that and now I've come full circle."

Brooks will be coaching many more games at the site of his first one, as Whit Babcock, Virginia Tech's director of athletics, named him the head coach of the Tech women's basketball program on March 28 and introduced Brooks to the media, fans, and athletics department staffers who gathered at the Hahn Hurst Practice Facility on March 30.

Brooks comes to Tech after spending 14 seasons as the head coach at JMU. He takes over for Dennis Wolff, who was relieved of his

duties on March 22 following five seasons as the head coach.

Babcock wasted little time in going after the 47-year-old Brooks, who came to Blacksburg on March 25 with his wife, Chrissy, and spent most of the day that Friday and Saturday on the school's campus.

"We had put together an interview committee of our best folks, people he would be working with on a regular basis," Babcock said. "I told our interview committee, 'We don't need to interview this guy. We need to recruit him.' It was like an official visit. We needed to recruit him and show him what was best about Virginia Tech. We were sold on Kenny. He was our No. 1 and only candidate."

"It was going to take something extremely special to pull me away," Brooks said. "I've had many opportunities to go elsewhere and I didn't look at them because Madison was so special to me."

"The leadership here with Whit and Dr. [Timothy] Sands [university president] and the excitement surrounding the programs ... it just felt right. Every time I thought about it, it just felt right. It was time. I'm at peace with my decision. It's a wonderful opportunity for me and my family."

Brooks' hiring came as no surprise given his

connection with Babcock, who first came in contact with Brooks while playing basketball as a sophomore at Harrisonburg High School in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Babcock jokingly said he watched as Brooks scored at least 25 points for nearby Waynesboro High School.

The two of them attended JMU at the same time. They played sports at the same time, with Babcock playing baseball and Brooks playing basketball. They both graduated in 1992.

Babcock also sought the counsel of his father, Brad, who used to be the baseball coach at JMU before moving into administration. Brooks used to be a men's basketball assistant coach at JMU and decided to take a job as an assistant on the women's staff of then-head coach Bud Childers in 2002. He received the head job on an interim basis early in the 2002-03 season after Childers took a medical leave of absence, and the following March, JMU AD Jeff Bourne lifted interim tag. Brad Babcock remembered a specific line from Brooks during their conversation about the transition from coaching men to coaching women.

"Kenny said, 'I'm going to coach them hard like athletes and treat them like ladies,'" Whit Babcock said. "In its simplest form, that's what it's all about."

Brooks' resumé speaks for itself, as he built

IHS extra

JMU into a respected powerhouse. A four-time Colonial Athletic Association Coach of the Year, he guided the Dukes to 11 straight postseason appearances, including six NCAA Tournament berths.

In 14 seasons, he compiled 13 winning seasons and a record of 337-122 (.756) on his way to becoming the winningest coach in school history. This past season, JMU went 27-6, including a 17-1 record in CAA play. The Dukes won the regular-season and conference tournament championships and received an automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament, where they lost to DePaul in the first round.

Primarily for those reasons, Babcock made a hefty financial commitment to lure Brooks to Tech – the new coach will make \$500,000 in the first season of a six-year deal, with subsequent \$25,000 raises each season.

"The reason we were sold on him was that he is a Virginia native, he's a winner and

he has done it with sustained excellence," Babcock said. "A lot of times, it's not easy, but it's easier when you're climbing the mountain. He climbed the mountain and stayed up there. He's sustained success. Not many people can do that."

"He's got Virginia and Mid-Atlantic recruiting ties that are strong. He's excellent in player development and he's widely respected in the profession. He reflects and personifies the values that are important to Virginia Tech."

Brooks inherits a program that has fallen on tough times of late. The Hokies recorded a winning season this past season, going 18-14 overall and advancing to the second round of the WNIT. But Tech's last NCAA Tournament appearance came in 2006.

The program's struggles in the ACC have been more prominent. The Hokies haven't won more than five conference games since

THE KENNY BROOKS FILE

Personal

Born: Dec. 20, 1968

Hometown: Waynesboro, Virginia

Wife: former Chrissy Stewart

Children: daughters Kendyl, Chloe and Gabby and son Nicholas

Education

High school: Waynesboro High (1987)

College: James Madison (business management, 1992)

Playing experience

James Madison (1987-91)

Coaching experience

1993-94 Part-time men's assistant, James Madison

1994-98 Men's assistant coach, VMI

1998-2002 Men's assistant coach, James Madison

2002 Women's assistant coach, James Madison

2002 Women's head coach (interim), James Madison

2002-2015 Women's head coach, James Madison

2002-03 (17-12, 11-7)

2003-04 (13-18, 7-11)

2004-05 (18-11, 10-8)

2005-06 (24-7, 14-4), WNIT first round

2006-07 (27-6, 16-2), NCAA first round

2007-08 (24-10, 14-4), WNIT third round

2008-09 (24-10, 14-4), WNIT second round

2009-10 (26-7, 13-5), CAA champion, NCAA first round

2010-11 (26-8, 16-2), CAA champion, NCAA first round

2011-12 (29-8, 14-4), WNIT runner-up

2012-13 (25-11, 14-3), WNIT fourth round (quarterfinals)

2013-14 (29-6, 15-1), CAA champion, NCAA second round

2014-15 (29-4, 17-1), CAA champion, NCAA first round

2015-16 (27-6, 17-1), CAA champion, NCAA first round

Record at JMU: 337-122 (.734)

2016-current Women's head coach, Virginia Tech

Continued on page 18



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BROOKS

Continued from page 17

2007 and they've never recorded a winning league record since joining the ACC for the 2004-05 season.

But Brooks remains undaunted about the challenges ahead. He hopes to model the Tech program after the Syracuse one that just lost to UConn in the national title game. He and Syracuse coach Quentin Hillsman are good friends.

"If Syracuse can do it, Virginia Tech can do it," Brooks said. "Four or five years ago, we beat Syracuse at James Madison. He and I had conversations before I came here, and I asked him, 'Can I get it done there?' He didn't hesitate. He said, 'Absolutely.' That was exciting to me.

"We're going to work extremely hard. It's going to be a fun product to watch. We're going to have young ladies who are going to represent Virginia Tech to the fullest. I've seen a lot of them play and I think the foundation is set. How are we going to get that done? I don't believe in quick fixes. I don't believe in sacrificing integrity for quick fixes. We're going to do things the right way. We're going to start from the ground up. Everything that

has happened, we're going to build upon that and put our finishing touches on it."

The road to respectability probably starts with improved recruiting. The Hokies have lacked an in-state presence of late and next year's roster features just three scholarship Virginians – point guard Chanette Hicks, forward Kelly Koshuta, and point guard Genesis Parker, assuming she comes to Blacksburg after signing with the Hokies in the fall. In contrast, JMU's roster this past season featured six Virginians and also two from Maryland.

Brooks knows how to evaluate talent. He has coached two WNBA Draft picks, including Lauren Okafor, who went in the third round of last year's draft. The last Tech player to be drafted by a WNBA team was Nare Diawara in 2007.

"You don't need the McDonald's All-American," Brooks said. "You need kids who are going to come in here and fit what you want to do.

"We'll look long and hard and see if those kids want to come in and do the things that we need them to do. There is going to be a lot of sacrifice, a lot of team bonding, and one of the things that my teams have done is play for each other. They will circle the wagons. That's what it's going to have to be because we're going to be on the road against some wonderful

opponents in some daunting arenas."

Brooks talked to many people about the Tech job and one of those happened to be Henrickson, who called him after Monday's announcement. Henrickson coached at Tech for seven seasons and guided the Hokies to seven postseason appearances, including five NCAA Tournament appearances, before leaving to go to Kansas. She recently completed her first season as the head coach at UC Santa Barbara.

"She said, 'Kenny, it's a wonderful place. You can get it done there. The fan base is excited. They're itching to get behind that program,'" he said. "Elements like that made me believe that this is a special place. We're going to get it done."

Tech loses three seniors off this past season's squad, but a nice nucleus returns. The Hokies will have four seniors next season, including guard Vanessa Panousis and forward Sidney Cook. Also, underclassmen Regan Magarity and Hicks return.

Brooks expects that group will enjoy his coaching philosophy. He believes in tough defense and getting up and down the court on offense. He also loves players who can shoot the 3-pointer.

"This will be a fun style," he said. "I think you guys will like it." 



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Buzz Williams (far left) and several players on the Tech men's basketball team celebrated with the student section following the Hokies' overtime win over Princeton in the NIT.

The Virginia Tech men's basketball team was disappointed after a season-ending loss to BYU in the NIT, but the Hokies made great strides in 2015-16, and with a little improvement in certain areas, could make even greater ones next season
by Jimmy Robertson

a SEASON to be celebrated

An honest self-assessment can be therapeutic for one's soul, and Buzz Williams, who counsels and coaches, always delivers honesty, both when it concerns himself and his players.

There are two quick and simple takeaways when listening to Williams talk about his self-assessment—he's not good at hellos and he hates good-byes.

That explains why he got a bit emotional in a postgame interview with radio color analyst Mike Burnop following the Hokies' 80-77 season-ending loss to BYU in the second round of the NIT on March 18. With the loss, the Hokies concluded the season with a 20-15 record—a whopping nine-game improvement from the previous season, Williams' first as the Hokies head coach.

“As bad as I am at saying hello, I'm 100 times worse at saying good-bye,” Williams told Burnop. “I hate that we lost. I'm not upset that we lost as much as I'm upset that the ability to coach these guys every day is over. I don't think that anybody other than God could author the story that we've had over the past few weeks. I'm humbled by that.”

Tech closed the 2015-16 campaign by winning seven of its final nine games, including six straight at one stretch. The string included wins over NCAA Tournament participants Pittsburgh and Miami and two wins over NIT

participant Florida State. The Hokies received a postseason berth for the first time since earning an NIT bid during the 2010-11 season.

The accomplishments of this past season were plentiful. Tech won 20 games for the first time since that 2010-11 season. The Hokies beat two top-10 teams for the first time since 2007. They snapped a seven-game losing streak to in-state rival Virginia, which advanced to the Elite Eight of the NCAA Tournament. Tech won 10 conference games for first time since 2010. The Hokies' 14 home wins tied for the third-most home wins in school history. All of that was not lost on Williams.

“The thing that I said that I typically never say after the last game is that I think ground is the hardest thing to make up in life,” he said. “When you have momentum, it becomes even harder to keep. What we've been through over the past few weeks allowed us to get really important reps and to feel and to sniff and to better understand where we're trying to go.”

All of those accomplishments came about despite fielding one of the youngest rosters in the nation. Tech recognized just one senior on Senior Day—forward Shane Henry, who averaged less than 10 minutes of playing time per game this season. Those accomplishments came about, too, despite losing Ahmed Hill, a 30-game starter as a freshman, and Ty Outlaw for the season with injuries. Also, prominent

freshman Chris Clarke missed 12 games because of a foot injury and another because of illness.

So how did the Hokies get it done? There are several reasons:

♦ **Zach LeDay**—The transfer from the University of South Florida was terrific and probably a better player than many realized coming into the season. He averaged a team-best 15.5 points and 7.9 rebounds per game.

♦ **Depth**—The Hokies certainly lacked size, but they exhibited more depth this season than in years past. No player averaged more than 31 minutes per game and nine players averaged at least 19 minutes per game. Eleven different players started games this season. Four players averaged double figures in points.

♦ **Free throws**—Tech took advantage of NCAA rule changes that helped ball handlers and allowed for greater freedom of movement for players on offense. Officials called the game tighter and that benefitted the Hokies, even though they ranked just 10th in the ACC in free-throw percentage (69.7). Still, they took the most free throws in the ACC (964) and made the most (672). Only two other ACC teams took more than 800 free throws (Duke and North Carolina) and only one (Duke) made more than 600.

♦ **Winning close games**—Tech probably played in more close games than anyone in the ACC. The Hokies played in 13 games decided by five points or less and won eight of those. They went 4-4 in one-possession games (games decided by three points or less). Quality guard play wins close games and Seth Allen, Justin Robinson, Jalen Hudson, Justin Bibbs and Devin Wilson often got the job done when it counted.

Given how they performed this season and since nearly the entire roster returns, the Hokies go into the 2016-17 season with extra large expectations. Late this season, the players talked of making this season's NCAA Tournament. Making it next year is a more realistic goal.

The Hokies, though, need to improve in some areas. Actually, Williams will tell you that they need to improve in every area. His mindset can be seen in his favorite Twitter hashtag—#getBETTER. It's a hashtag that knows no boundaries.

Everyone knows that the Hokies lacked size. They ranked tied for 13th in the ACC in rebounding margin (14th in conference games) and were one of four ACC teams to get out-rebounded this season. Williams played a lot of smaller lineups this season, so this is understandable, but the Hokies need more contributions from big guys.

They also need to improve defensively. They ranked 12th in the ACC in scoring defense (72.6 ppg), though they ranked a respectable seventh in field-goal percentage defense (43.1 percent).

Of more pressing concern to Williams, though, might be the turnovers. Surprisingly, given the Hokies' talent on the perimeter, they turned the ball over more times (447) than any team in the ACC except for Wake Forest.

Allen, an extremely talented player, averaged 14.7 points per game for the Hokies. But he turned the ball over 102 times. In fairness, he often finds the ball in his hands with the shot clock winding down, forcing him to act quickly—which can result in turnovers. But that number needs to be reduced, as it does for every player.

Better defense, better rebounding, and fewer turnovers will lead to success on the court. Yet improvement requires focus—and the Hokies cannot be satisfied with what they accomplished this past season if they want to make the NCAA Tournament in 2017.

“We can't lose that momentum, nor that ground,” Williams said. “We need to have the best spring, summer, and fall that we can have. If we start next November where we're at today, then we haven't continued the pace of maturity that we've been on this season.”


men's basketball season recap

At the very least, the Hokies took a huge step this season and that certainly needs to be celebrated. They regenerated interest in basketball here in Blacksburg. The Hokies' average attendance increased by more than 800 fans per game and four games were listed as sellouts.

Those fans deserve a portion of the credit for those 14 home wins, particularly that overtime win over Princeton in the NIT. The atmosphere for that game was as good as it has been at Tech's home venue in quite some time. Williams showed his appreciation, as he and the players went into the student section after the game to celebrate.

“I think we're getting to the point where, regardless of opponent and regardless of month, we need to make Cassell [Coliseum] like that every game,” he said. “I know that's a lot of work, but that's what this is when you're trying to make up ground.”

Though Williams and his staff have done a great job, they admit the program needs to make up even more ground. That's just an honest assessment of Virginia Tech basketball today—and Williams knows all about honest assessments.

He hates good-byes, as he has said on several occasions. Hopefully, next year, saying good-bye to his players comes much, much later in March. 



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VIRGINIA TECH'S new offensive coordinator, Brad Cornelsen, inherits an offense with a lot of talented players, including tailback Travon McMillian, tight end Bucky Hodges and receiver Isaiah Ford. Plus, four offensive linemen return from the group that started in the bowl game.

But the Hokies need to improve on that side of the ball, too. Even with a lot of talent last season, Tech did not rank in the top 50 nationally in any of the major statistical categories. The Hokies finished 81st in rushing offense (159.2 ypg), 74th in total offense (385.1 ypg), 64th in passing offense (225.8 ypg), and 53rd in scoring offense (31 ppg). In fairness, losing quarterback Michael Brewer for five games early in the season certainly did not help the situation.

The process toward an improved offense — one that returns eight starters — began with offseason workouts and continued through the 15 NCAA-allotted spring practices. Midway through spring ball, Cornelsen took the time to answer several questions related to the offense:

Q: At the time of this interview, we're nearly at the halfway point of spring practice. How have things gone so far?

BC: "It's been a lot of base install and trying to get guys used to the operation and the new terminology. We've gotten most of our base install in and hopefully guys will start to feel more comfortable. As they feel more comfortable, they should play a little faster and with more confidence. There has been a lot of thinking going on up to this point, but the guys have been working hard. We have to continue to do that. We have a long way to go."

Q: How complex is your offense?

BC: "I don't think it's a real complex offense. We try to make it as easy as we can on those guys. You hate to have a good player who can't get out there and make plays because he doesn't know what he's doing. We don't want to be too complicated that we have our most talented guys standing on the sideline because they don't know the offense. You have to be able to do enough to give your guys an advantage scheme-wise on the field and you need to put them in good positions, but you never want to be too complex that your kids can't learn it."

Q: You and Coach Fuente have said several times that you were taking it slow this spring as far as implementing everything that you want to implement. Have the players progressed as you expected?

FINDING THEIR WAY

Offensive coordinator Brad Cornelsen and the Hokies' assistant coaches on offense have been patient with the players this spring as they learn about their personnel, while also installing their offense

by Jimmy Robertson

BC: "It's been what we thought. They've picked it up at that pace and done a decent job with it. There are guys who did a great job of working on their own before we got to spring ball and they're well ahead of the others. There are guys who did not take advantage of that time and they're struggling. As a group, as a whole, we've been able to move at the pace that we thought we could move at coming into spring ball."

Q: Obviously, the biggest question centers on the quarterbacks and who ends up winning the job. How are the quarterbacks adjusting and playing?

BC: "Those guys have gotten equal reps so far. Now that we're getting into more team situations and getting into down-and-distance situations, we'll start to get a better feel for them. As a whole, we have a long way to go. I see flashes from all of them. They're all talented kids. I see things from all of them that encourage me and all of them have a long way to go at the same time."

Q: Are you comfortable letting the quarterback competition go into preseason practices in August before solidifying the depth chart?

BC: "You let the competition go as long as you need to. We've let it go into fall camp before. Each situation is different. You let it play out as long as you need to and the thing you have to keep in mind is that, if you do make a decision on a starter, then that could change from day to day, too. That goes for any position."

Q: Does this make you appreciate having a guy in Paxton Lynch, a multi-year starter for you at Memphis?

BC: "Well, it's nice when you do have a guy who is established and has been the guy for multiple years. That is certainly a nice thing to have, but on the other side of it, it's nice to have a large group of guys who are talented enough to compete for that starting spot, too."

Q: Who on offense has stood out to you so far?

BC: "As a whole, I've been impressed with the offensive line. That's been, by far, the most impressive group on offense. Those guys have really been the group to set the tone for us. It's our deepest position right now. As a whole, that group has stood out. There are some guys who have stepped up in a good way, some guys we weren't sure about in the beginning. That's comforting as a quarterbacks coach. That makes everyone better. That makes everything tick." *Continued on page 24*

FINDING THEIR WAY

Continued from page 23

Q: You guys put up impressive numbers offensively at Memphis, but perhaps the most underrated part of your attack was the running game. Does this Tech team have the makings of being a good running team?

BC: “I think so. It all starts up front and I’ve been encouraged by that group up front. I think we’ve certainly got a chance to run the ball. Our quarterbacks are going to have to be involved in that and find a way be a threat and be a part of that running game for us. Any time you feel good up front, you have a chance to put together a running game.”

Q: To play at a faster pace, you need an offense with well-conditioned players. Do you get a sense that the players are struggling with conditioning or have they adapted pretty well?

BC: “There is always a little bit of an adjustment when you get to spring practice and in fall camp of being in shape enough to make it through practice, even if you’re not an up-tempo team. That can show its face a little more if you are trying to get more plays run at a faster tempo. It’s going to take some

time. The biggest thing is getting in shape and getting in game shape and practice shape to where they can go play after play after play at full speed.”

Q: Do you have a time in which you’d like to run consecutive plays—a play every ‘X’ number of seconds?

BC: “No, but we will at some point. When we do have our fastest tempo calls, we do put a clock to those. We have a time frame that we’ll push toward. It can be so much different based on the ball getting spotted and there are some other factors that go into it. It’s not something that we clock every play in every practice. If you ask the players, they would have no idea how quickly we’re trying to run plays. We’re not to that extent. Later on, we’ll talk to those guys a little more about that timing between plays, what we’re shooting for and that sort of thing.”

Q: Is this team in shape enough to go at warp speed right now?

BC: “No, not anywhere close. Knowing the offense affects how fast you can play, too, because you play faster if you know what you’re doing. Right now, we’ve got depth issues at some of the skill spots and that makes it tough. Some young guys are in there, guys who haven’t played much — or at all.

“We have a long way to go before we can play at the pace we want to play. We want to

play fast and play well. You can snap it as fast as you want. You also can go three-and-out really fast, too, if you’re not in shape. We want to play fast and move the chains and not put our defense in tough positions.”

Q: There certainly is a lack of depth at receiver. Isaiah Ford hasn’t practiced much this spring and he and Cam Phillips were the only two receivers with any experience coming into spring practice. How would you assess the receiver situation?

BC: “They probably have the least experience of all the groups. We have young guys and ones who haven’t played much. It’s new to all of them. It’s a balance between getting our system installed and having them show us what they can do.

“We also don’t have a lot of depth at running back. Travon [McMillian] and Sam [Rogers] are really the only two backs who have played much. It’s a big spring for the rest of those guys, so that we can figure out what we have. There’s talent there behind those two guys that we’ve got to get something out of and develop. It’s a little bit of an unknown for us now with exactly who and how much depth we have.”

Q: What do you think of Bucky Hodges and Chris Durkin at tight end?



Cam Phillips, who has caught 89 passes in two years, is one of the few experienced receivers on the Hokies’ roster and is leading a young group this spring.

BC: “Bucky gives us some depth [at receiver]. He’s a guy you have to use out there. He’s talented, he’s big, and he can run. He has receiver instincts and skills. We’ll use him a lot of different ways.


“Durkin has done a nice job jumping into the tight end spot. He’s learning a new

position. It involves a lot. You have to be pretty smart and versatile. We’re excited about him. He’s really gone to work. He’s embraced the move. We’re looking forward to seeing how far he progresses at that spot.”

Q: Have you been able to get a feel for the different personalities on offense?

BC: “You get a little bit of feel for them. It’s always different when you put the pads on and actually throw the football and make plays. You get a feel for if guys like to get out there and work and how coachable guys are. There’s always a surprise or two both ways. There are some guys whom you’re really excited about and then they put pads on and you’re not as excited and vice versa. As a whole, offensively, we’re pleased with how they went through the offseason and with being coachable.”

Q: How much do you try to keep the players’ expectations realistic given the numbers that the Memphis offense posted the past two seasons?

BC: “You try to keep them grounded. It’s not as hard as what it seems sometimes. When guys show up here and you get a chance to give them the work, it’s pretty simple. We have simple goals every day. What is put out before them, they know exactly what they’re supposed to do. Sure, it’s [the reputation for big numbers on offense] part of the deal, but we try not to get caught up in that. They know we have a long way to go. Regardless of what they did last year or what we did a Memphis last year, none of that really matters. They know what’s in front of them. We have a lot of work to do.” 

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Less than 36 hours into the NCAA Wrestling Championships held this year at Madison Square Garden, all but one of Virginia Tech's eight wrestlers who qualified for the event had lost and the Hokies' string of top-10 team finishes appeared to be in peril.

One Tech wrestler lost in the first round, three others lost in the second round and three more lost in the quarterfinals. The performances were enough to leave Kevin Dresser grappling with what to say to his squad before the Friday evening session.

"Obviously, things unraveled on Friday morning—just like last year," Tech's head coach said. "Friday morning has always been tough and that's because the quarterfinals are tough. We were underdogs in some of those matches.

"When you get your back pushed up against the wall, you either let them hold you against the wall or you fight back. We decided to fight back and Zach Epperly really led the charge."

Epperly and Nick Brascetta spearheaded the Hokies' charge through the wrestleback rounds and they, along with Solomon Chishko, David McFadden, Jared Haught and Ty Walz, fought their way to All-America honors. For those unfamiliar with wrestling, the top eight in each weight class are considered All-Americans. As a result of those efforts, Tech finished a program-best fourth place with 82 points.

The collective performance tied for the best performance at a national event by a team in school history. The Hokie men's and women's soccer teams made it to the College Cup in 2007 and 2013, respectively, when both lost in a national semifinal, while the men's cross country squad came in fourth in 1987.

More importantly for the wrestling program, the performance enabled the Hokies to get on the podium for the first time, as the top four teams take home a trophy. Penn State won the national title, followed by Oklahoma State, Ohio State and the Hokies, who edged Iowa for the spot by a point.

Tech now has finished in the top 11 five straight times and in the top 10 in four consecutive years. The six All-Americans tied for the most at this year's Championships and marked a program best.

Following the event, Dresser was named the National Wrestling Coaches Association's national Coach of the Year.

"We've been in the top 10 for basically five straight years now," Dresser said. "If you're going to have a great program, consistency has to be a part of that. You don't want to be a one-hit wonder."

The Hokies' rally started with Epperly, who suffered a shocking loss to unseeded Casey Kent of Pennsylvania in the first round. But the redshirt sophomore from Christiansburg, Virginia did not lose again. In fact, he dominated, winning one match by technical fall and three others by major decisions.

In the third-place match, he met up with Kent again. This time, he exacted revenge, beating Kent 8-4 to claim third place at 174 pounds.

"Sooner or later, you're going to have a bad match," Dresser said. "Every now and then, you win that match, but most of the time, you lose it. I wanted him [Epperly] to show his character and how tough he is. I challenged him to tear it up and make a statement. You could see him get momentum after every match. He just got stronger and stronger and started having more fun.

"He was a good catalyst. When guys lost, they saw how he had to come back right away. I think he set the tone and the way he set the tone was to crush everybody instead beating everybody 4-3, which had been his reputation. He really tore through it."

Brascetta helped the cause, too, finishing in third place at 157 pounds. The lone senior of the group became the program's second three-time All-American behind Devin Carter.

Brascetta lost to the top seed at 157 pounds, Illinois' Isaiah Martinez, in the quarterfinals for the second consecutive NCAA Championships—and Martinez would go on to win his second straight national title. But Brascetta would win his final four matches.

That stretch included a win over NC State's Tommy Gantt, who had beaten Brascetta twice this season, including once at the ACC Championships. Brascetta knocked off Gantt 8-4, then beat Rider's Chad Walsh and finally claimed third place with a 4-1 win over the No. 5 seed, Cornell's Dylan Palacio.

"I saw him wrestling great in the room prior to when we left and I knew he was ready to go," Dresser said of Brascetta. "I know Nick well enough to tell by looking in his eyes. I knew he was dialed in. Besides that match [against Martinez]—and he almost won that match—he tore

through it, too. He beat some really good guys."

Walz, the No. 3 seed at heavyweight, was the only Tech wrestler to win in the quarterfinals. He beat Illinois' Brooks Black 4-1 to advance to the semifinals, where he lost 10-6 to eventual national champion and No. 2 seed Kyle Snyder of Ohio State.

In the consolation bracket, Walz beat Oklahoma State's Austin Marsden 9-4, but he lost in the third-place match to Michigan's Adam Coon, the No. 5 seed.

"There were four good guys and any of those guys had the ability to win a national title," Dresser said of the heavyweight class. "It might be the deepest it's been. He has nothing to hang his head about getting fourth place. He's right there. He's a huge leader for us.

"If we don't get in the finals there [at heavyweight] next year, we're going to be disappointed. That has to be the goal for him."

In addition to Brascetta, Solomon Chishko and Zack Zavatsky also lost in the quarterfinals, but Chishko rallied to earn All-American honors. The No. 7 seed at 141 pounds, he lost 6-1 to Stanford's Joey McKenna in the quarterfinals. Chishko then won twice in the consolation round, beating San Diego State's Seth Gross and Lehigh's Randy Cruz. He lost 11-3 to No. 4 seed Anthony Ashnault of Rutgers and then fell 5-3 to Old Dominion's Chris Mecate 5-3 to finish in fifth place at 141.

Zavatsky wasn't quite as fortunate. The ACC champion at 184 pounds, Zavatsky, the No. 5 seed, lost in the quarterfinals to NC State's Pete Renda—the wrestler whom he defeated at the ACC Championships for the title. Then, he lost 2-1 to Lehigh's Nate Brown, the No. 10 seed. Zavatsky and Joey Dance, the Hokies' 125-pounder, were the only two wrestlers not to earn All-America honors.

Tech's David McFadden and Jared Haught both finished in sixth place in the 165- and 197-pound weight classes, respectively. McFadden, a freshman who went in as the No. 14 seed, lost to Bo Jordan, the No. 3 seed out of Ohio State, 8-3 in the second round. But McFadden won four straight matches in the consolation bracket to earn All-America honors before falling to Jordan again. This time, he lost 8-2, as Jordan would go on to finish third in the weight class. In his final match of the Championships, McFadden lost to Illinois' Steven Rodrigues to finish sixth.

Haught, the No. 6 seed, was upset by Iowa State's Patrick Downey in the second round, as Downey pinned him at 8:45. But Haught came back to win four straight matches to earn All-America honors, including a win over Duke's Connor Hartmann, who had beaten Haught six straight times.

"He is one of those guys who doesn't believe in himself as much as he should," Dresser said of Haught. "He's hard on himself. He goes out there and sometimes he looks like he's afraid to lose instead of going for it. I felt like he went for it at the tournament and I still think there's more there. If you watch him and Ty Walz wrestle in the room, it's dead even.



(Front row, left to right) Ty Walz, David McFadden, Nick Brascetta, Joey Dance, Solomon Chishko, (back row, left to right) Zach Epperly, Zack Zavatsky and Jared Haught led the Hokies to a program-best fourth-place finish at the NCAA Championships.

So I still don't think we've seen the real Jared Haught, but we're seeing a lot more of him."

The biggest disappointment for Tech probably came when Dance lost consecutive matches and failed to become an All-American despite going into the tournament as the No. 2 seed in this weight class. He fell 5-3 to No. 15 seed David Terao in the second round and then lost in the consolation round to Old Dominion's Brandon Jeske by a score of 4-3.


Terao went on to finish fourth at 125 pounds. The national champion, Penn State's Nico Megaludis, was a wrestler whom Dance had beaten 4-3 in a dual meet on Nov. 15.

"He's got great defense, but historically, he's wrestled a lot of close matches," Dresser said of Dance. "He has to learn how to separate himself. He has to work on his offense.

"The good thing is that Joey knows how to win a close match. Sooner or later, the nail-biters go the other way. It's like in basketball. If you try to win by a point every night, sooner or later, someone is going to throw one in. That's what happened."

Dance, though, returns for next season, along with every qualifier except Brascetta. The Hokies need to find his replacement and they need to improve collectively at each weight class. But there are worse situations to be in than building a team that returns five All-Americans and a guy with All-America potential in Dance.

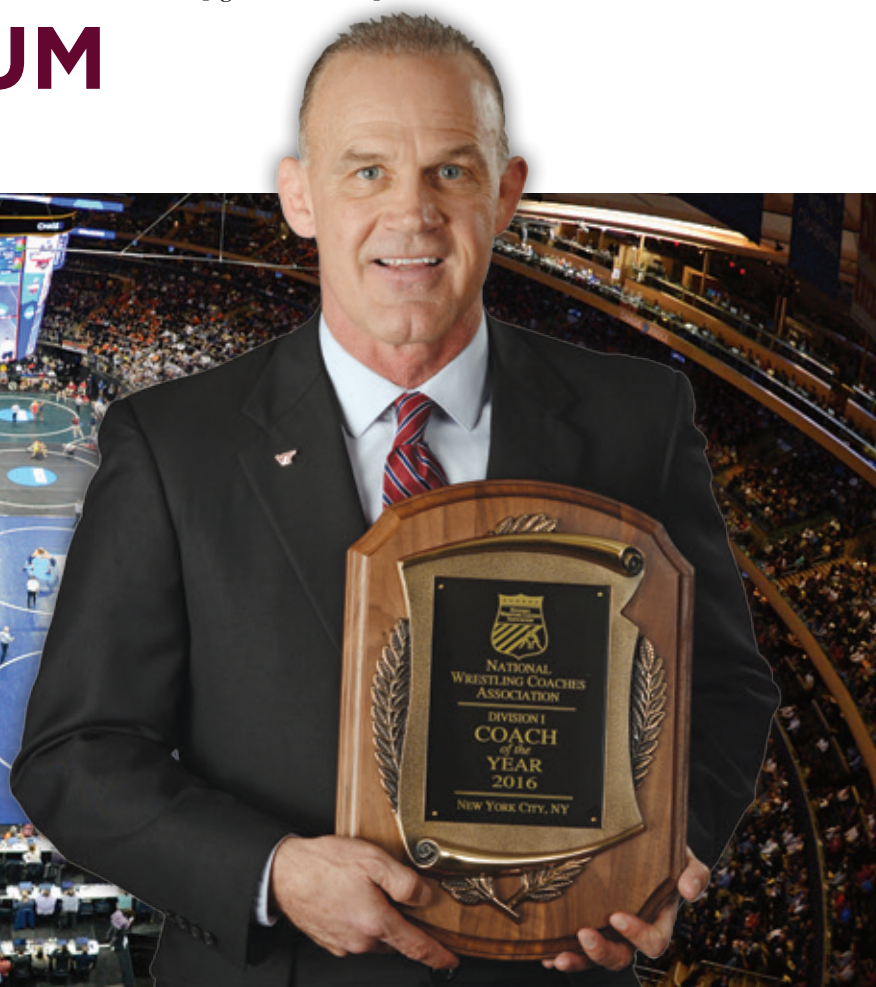
"On paper, we look pretty good," Dresser said. "But with that, we have to understand that there are no automatics and no 'gimmies' in this sport."

For sure, the Hokies were proof of that at this year's NCAA Championships. 

ON THE PODIUM AND PROUD

Led by six All-Americans and national Coach of the Year Kevin Dresser, the Virginia Tech wrestling team finished a program-best fourth at the 2016 NCAA Championships

by Jimmy Robertson



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TECH SWIMMING AND DIVING TEAMS END SEASONS ON HIGH NOTES

Both squads finished in the top 25 at the NCAA Championships, with Brandon Fiala leading the men’s efforts and Klaudia Nazieblo highlighting the women’s performances
by Jimmy Robertson



Brandon Fiala became the first Tech swimmer ever to earn All-America honors in three events both in a meet and in a career.

Dr. Ned Skinner recently celebrated Easter at home with his family, but it certainly felt like Christmas.

Tech’s swimming coach received a couple of nice gifts when both his men’s and women’s swimming and diving squads recorded top-25 finishes at the 2016 NCAA Division I Swimming and Diving Championships, which were held in consecutive weeks in Atlanta in mid-March.

The Tech men’s team finished 19th with 44.5 points, recording the second-highest finish in program history. The Hokies came in 18th in 2012 with 55 points.

The Tech women’s squad finished in a tie for 25th place with 23 points. It marked the team’s fourth top-25 performance in the past five years.

The programs combined to earn All-America honors in four events and honorable mention All-America status in four others.

“I was a little surprised,” Skinner said of his team’s performances. “With the women, I thought Klaudia [Nazieblo] was in position to make the finals and be an All-American. Our 400 medley relay finish was a pleasant surprise. The women fought hard for it. It did not come easy. We left a few things on the table on the middle day, so to come back really swinging on that last day was excellent.

“With the men, everyone shared in that performance. Not everyone who made the NCAA meet scored, but the environment with that men’s team was great.”

Brandon Fiala headlined the men’s efforts by earning All-America honors in three events. He became the first Tech swimmer to do that

in a single meet and in a career. The junior from Centreville, Virginia came in eighth in the 200 individual medley with a time of 1 minute, 42.77 seconds after breaking the school record in the preliminaries (1:41.95).

He also finished fifth in the 200 backstroke (1:41.34) and tied for fourth in the 100 breaststroke (52.14 seconds). His fourth-place finish was the best by a Tech swimmer since Gus Calado came in fourth in the 200 butterfly in 2006.

“I’d have to do that math, but only a handful of guys scored in the top eight of all three events,” Skinner said. “That puts him among the nation’s elite. He scored 39.5 points. That’s just ridiculous. Kids would dream of doing that at ACCs, much less at NAAs.

“He had gone there [the NCAA Championships] as a sophomore and he was disappointed in his performance. It’s an intense environment. The best swimmers in the world are there. So I was pleased that he did what he did.”

Robert Owen, a junior from Bridgewater, Massachusetts, aided the Hokies’ efforts by earning honorable mention All-America honors in two events. He came in 14th in the 400 IM (3:43.10) and was just four-hundredths of a second away from being an All-American in that event. He also came in 15th in the 200 backstroke (1:41.32). He earned honorable mention All-America status in both events at last year’s Championships.

“I’m really proud of Robert,” Skinner said. “That was tough [in the 400 IM], but he took it like a man, like a Hokie, and came back and

had one of the fastest times in the 200 back. I’m proud of him for fighting the way he did.”

In addition, the 400-yard medley relay team of Owen, Fiala, Brent Benedict and Lucas Bureau came in 18th overall with a time of 3:09.05.

Bureau finished 31st in the 100 freestyle and 34th in the 200 freestyle. Norbert Szabo recorded career-best times in the 100 butterfly, 200 butterfly, and 200 IM.

Four divers—Logan Stevens, Mauro Castro-Silva, Eduardo Castro-Silva, and Ben Schiesl—also competed for Tech. Stevens recorded a 23rd-place finish in the 1-meter event, while Schiesl came in 27th. Mauro Castro-Silva’s best performance came in the platform event, where he finished 30th. Eduardo Castro-Silva’s best performance came in the platform event as well. He came in 33rd.

On the women’s side, Klaudia Nazieblo and Weronika Paluszek paced the Hokies.

Nazieblo, a sophomore from Wroclaw, Poland, earned All-America honors in the 200 butterfly event, finishing in seventh place with a time of 1:53.77. She earned honorable mention All-America status in this same event a year ago.

She also earned honorable mention All-America honors as a member of the 400 medley relay team that finished 14th overall with a time of 3:33.48. Paluszek, Maggie Gruber and Jessica Hespeler were also a part of that relay team, and in this event, Nazieblo led off and swam a split time of 52.21 seconds, which is a new school record.

“The women’s 400 medley relay scoring was a big deal for us,” Skinner said. “It had been six years since we had scored in a relay, so to get back to scoring in a relay was important.”

Paluszek, a senior also from Wroclaw, Poland, earned honorable mention All-America honors in the 200 breaststroke as well after coming in 12th. She swam the event in a time of 2:08.03.

Paluszek closed her career at Tech with an All-America honor, three honorable mention All-America honors, an ACC gold medal and five ACC bronze medals. She also earned an ACC gold medal and two bronze medals as part of 400 medley relay teams.

“Her scoring in the 200 breaststroke [at the NCAA meet] was a great completion to a great career,” Skinner said. “For me, it was awesome that Weronika was the captain of that relay team [400 medley relay]. She took ownership in it and charged up the girls. To see an international swimmer come to college and take ownership made me feel like we’ve done our job. In college, it really is about the cause, so that was a rewarding moment to see her care so much about her teammates.”

Paluszek also competed in the 100 breaststroke and came in 17th with a time of 1:00.23. She narrowly missed earning honorable mention All-America honors in this event as well.



Klaudia Nazieblo earned All-America honors in the 200-yard butterfly and honorable mention honors as part of the 400 medley relay team.


Likewise, Nazieblo competed in another event. She came in 35th in the 400 individual medley with a time of 4:13.81.

The 800 freestyle relay team of Hespeler, Fiona Donnelly, Alice Boutant and Adriana Grabski finished 20th with a time of 7:07.20.

Hespeler competed in four events overall—the two relay teams, the 500 freestyle and the 200 freestyle. She finished 30th in the 500 freestyle with a time of 4:43.65 and 23rd in the 200 freestyle with a time of 1:45.77. Gruber competed in three events, including the 400-yard medley relay. She swam in the 50 freestyle and came in 45th with a time of 22.76 seconds

and she also finished 22nd in the 100 butterfly with a time of 52.51 seconds.

Ashlynn Peters, a freshman from Cypress, Texas, competed in the 1-meter and 3-meter diving events. She came in 42nd in the 1-meter diving event at her first NCAA Championships, recording a score of 239.70 points, and she was 18th in the 3-meter event, scoring 305.85 points.

“It was a strong finish and there is a lot on the horizon, with a lot of these kids returning,” Skinner said of his teams’ future prospects. “With the newcomers we have coming in, we’re really pumped to build on this.” 



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GO Hokies!



Virginia Tech's Thomas Curtin and Hanna Green nearly won national championships in their respective events to headline a Hokie effort that led to four earning All-America honors
by Jimmy Robertson

CURTIN, GREEN COME UP JUST SHORT

Virginia Tech sent five athletes to the 2016 NCAA Indoor Track and Field Championships — and the Hokies certainly got a lot out of mileage out of this group.

Thomas Curtin and Hanna Green both nearly won national championships and four of the five earned All-America status to highlight the Hokies' performances at the NCAA's annual indoor meet held March 11-12 in Birmingham, Alabama.

Curtin led the men's team to a 15th-place finish nationally, while Green was the lone reason as to why the women's team came in 25th. The Oregon men's and women's teams swept the national titles.

The performance by the Tech men's program marked its best NCAA indoor performance since back-to-back top-10 finishes in 2012 and 2013. The men have finished in the top 25 in

six of the past eight seasons.

The performance also eased some of the disappointment felt by Dave Cianelli, Tech's director of track and field and cross country who saw the men's team finish fifth at the ACC meet. Injuries and illness really curtailed the men's team during the indoor season, specifically to jumper Manuel Ziegler (hamstring) and runner Patrick Joseph (mononucleosis).

"A top-10 finish ... I think you should celebrate that," Cianelli said. "In most cases, a top-15 national finish should be celebrated, but I guess we, as a coaching staff, go back and ask ourselves, 'What if?' Now that it's been a couple of weeks since the meet, I think I appreciate that finish more now than I did at the time just because of all those things going the other way. I realize that's a good

performance for that group."

Curtin certainly spearheaded the efforts. Competing in the 5,000-meter run, he and Oregon's Ed Cheserek jumped to a big lead, with Curtin leading for most of the race. With roughly two laps to go, Cheserek — whose only loss at a collegian was to Curtin during the cross country season at the NCAA Pre-National Meet — made his move and passed Curtin. Cheserek would go on to win the national title in the event with a time of 13 minutes, 47.89 seconds.

The pack, though, never caught up with Curtin, who claimed silver in a time of 13:50.70. His finish marked the highest for a Tech distance runner at the NCAA Championships. The senior from Leesburg, Virginia claimed his fifth All-America honor in track and field and cross country.

"Tommy has come a long, long way," Tech distance coach Ben Thomas said. "From never winning an individual state title in high school to winning five ACC titles and five All-America performances at Virginia Tech ... he's worked very hard for this and I'm so proud of him. I'm really looking forward to seeing what he can do outdoors."

The Tech men also got an All-America performance from pole vaulter Deakin Volz, who won a bronze medal at his first NCAA meet. The freshman from Bloomington, Indiana cleared a height of 17 feet, 6.5 inches and finished behind Washington's Jax Thoires and South Alabama's Sean Collins.

"He was very cool," Cianelli said. "He made first-attempt clearances all the way up to the height he went out on and tied for third. I don't think anyone penciled him in for that. So that was exciting for him."

Another pole vaulter, Torben Laidig, became sick the day that the Hokies left for Birmingham and did not record a height. Laidig went into the event ranked second nationally. A regular performance from Laidig probably would have propelled the Hokies into the top 10.

On the women's side, Green guided the program to its best indoor finish since 2010 when the Hokies came in 10th. She led from the opening lap in the 800-meter run, but Oregon's Raevyn Rogers, the favorite in the event, saved her kick for the final 100 meters and took home the championship. Rogers, the favorite, ran the event in a time of 2:04.68, while Green finished second in a time of 2:05.90.

Green's finish marked the best of her career — she came in third in the 800 during the outdoor season last spring. The junior from Latrobe, Pennsylvania became a four-time All-American with her performance.

"Hanna ran a very smart and aggressive race despite not feeling her best after a tough preliminary [race]," Thomas said. "She shook


it off and ran a much more aggressive race. She made all the right moves, giving herself a chance to win."

The Hokies also got an All-America performance from distance runner Shannon Morton. The senior from Chesapeake, Virginia competed in the mile and ran a time of 4:38.60 in the preliminaries, but did not qualify for the finals.

Still, the school record holder in the mile was a second-team All-American — the top 16 finishers in each event earn All-America status — and capped a memorable indoor season in which she was disqualified in the mile event at the ACC Championships, but qualified for the NCAA meet after participating in a "Last Chance" meet at Boston University the next day — the final day to qualify.

The Hokies have started their outdoor season in preparation for the ACC Championships, which will be held May 13-15 in Tallahassee, Florida. The NCAA East Regional will be held May 26-28 in Jacksonville, Florida, while the NCAA Outdoor Championships will be held June 8-11 in Eugene, Oregon.

"We're a much better outdoor team overall," Cianelli said. "We bring in the javelin guys, the discuss, the hammer [all outdoor events] and we get people back healthy.

"I think the men have a good chance of winning the conference, though things have to come together and you have to be healthy and all that. The women are probably a year away from that, but we are in a position to be in the top 10 at nationals. That's what I'm looking to — to have both teams finish in the top 10 in Oregon. But I first want to see this men's team go to Tallahassee and win a conference title. I want us to go in healthy and show our true abilities because this is a very good team." 



Hanna Green's second-place finish in the 800-meter run at the NCAA Indoor Track and Field Championships secured her fourth All-America honor since she arrived at Tech.

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ACE — at Home — IN HER CIRCLE

Maggie Tyler nearly gave up the game of softball as a kid, but she decided to try pitching — and her performances for the Hokies, including a recent no-hitter, prove she made the right choice

by Matt Kovatch

Special to Inside Hokie Sports

The game started no differently than any other for senior pitcher Maggie Tyler. It was against ACC foe Boston College on March 18 just a few days shy of the official start of spring. She liked that it was a night game, and she liked that it was warm, or at least as warm as one can expect in the Blue Ridge Mountains during what was technically still winter.

As always, she stepped aside from the circle, looked at the left-field foul pole at Tech Softball Park, and twirled the ball against her hip. She stepped back to the rubber and fired. Ball one. Nine more pitches followed to that batter, along with nine more glances to left field. After all, a superstition isn't a superstition unless you do it every time. The 10th pitch was ball four. The leadoff hitter was on base, and as baseball or softball fans know, that usually spells disaster.

It's not the best way to begin a game, but in a way, it kind of parallels how Tyler began her pitching career, both as a child and when she arrived in Blacksburg to become a Hokie.

Born and raised in Poquoson, Virginia, Tyler grew up playing tee-ball and fell in love with the game (and the Cubs) thanks in part to annual summer visits to Wrigley Field in her mother's home state of Illinois. She eventually landed on a travel softball team, but she wasn't getting much playing time as a catcher or an outfielder. At age 12, she thought about finding something else to do, but figured she'd try pitching first.

"I was sitting the bench all the time and I remember telling my mom that I wanted to start going to pitching lessons," Tyler said. "She said 'All right, but if I take you to pitching lessons, it's either going to be all in or all out. You're not going to do this in between. You're going to work really hard at it.' From that day forward, I was nothing but a pitcher."

Her mother, Melanie, wasn't kidding. Maybe because of the movie, *Field of Dreams*, people usually associate the dad as the one who goes out into the backyard to play catch with the son. But in this case, it was a mother-daughter combo.

"She never played softball or baseball, but I didn't really have anybody else who could go out and catch me," Tyler remembered. "We went to the thrift store and she got some Little League catching gear and a pair of cleats. She would put it all on every single day and drag me out to the field."

All the hard work paid off, as Tyler had a hugely successful high school career, becoming a three-time

Daily News Player of the Year and the 2012 Virginia Group AA Pitcher of the Year as a senior. Fairly highly recruited, she chose Virginia Tech, but was caught a bit off guard when she arrived and was no longer the biggest fish in the pond.

"When I came in my freshman year, I was the third-string pitcher and I had never assumed that role before," Tyler said. "It was hard to fit into that role after pitching every single inning during high school. You just have that never-ending desire to want to be out there."

Tyler only threw 60.2 of the Hokies' 402.2 possible innings as a freshman, usually only seeing time in emergency relief or when the other starters were unavailable. Though it was tough being on the bench, Tyler understood the situation.

"I think that process of transitioning from high school to college is something a lot of people go through," she explained. "Every person on this team was the best at her high school or in her state. It's really humbling. I really had to process that and work through that. I knew I wanted better than that for myself."

As a sophomore, her workload more than tripled, as she split the Nos. 1 and 2 spots with Kelly Heinz, going 15-9 with a 3.28 earned run average. She assumed the role of ace last year, and as of April 1st, owned a career mark of 45-34, with a 3.15 ERA and 589 strikeouts in 560 innings pitched. She ranks fourth on Tech's career strikeout list and seventh in total innings pitched.

"Now as a senior, I'm just happy that I can look back at where I was," Tyler reflected. "I didn't have four years of

softball spotlight maggie tyler

pitching 200 innings, but I don't look back and stress about that. I think what I learned from sitting the majority of my freshman year was more valuable than anything else."

Though her softball career may have started out slowly as a youth and as a Hokie, Tyler is not following the same pattern with her burgeoning sports broadcasting career. Being a student-athlete is time consuming, and as a result, many of them either choose to attend graduate school, get into coaching, or head out into the real world with very little work experience. That's not the case with Tyler, who already has built herself an impressive resumé.

Studying multimedia journalism and broadcasting, Tyler interned with the sports department at WSLS 10 in Roanoke, Virginia last summer.

"I went up there every single day," Tyler said. "I loved it. I helped them write shows and scripts and covered all kinds of events. We covered the Greenbrier Classic, which is a golf tournament out in West Virginia and I got to hold the microphone up when we were interviewing Tiger Woods. We covered the ACC Football Kickoff, some Salem Red Sox games, and even some NASCAR stuff. It gave me an appreciation for a lot of different sports."

This academic year, she's working as an intern for IMG College — Tech athletics' multimedia advertising rights holder and broadcasting arm — and that has given her the chance to do color commentary and sideline reporting at many campus events for ESPN3 and HokiesXtra. She has broadcast women's basketball, volleyball, and soccer events

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ACE at Home IN HER CIRCLE

Continued from page 33

and recently got a chance to announce a baseball game.

“That was probably my favorite experience ever because I’m so passionate about baseball and I love the sport,” she said. “I knew what I was talking about, so I was confident and I was enjoying it.”

She’s also done work with HokieVision (Tech’s in-house video department), the Big South Network, and has even written for some online blogs. Her next step will be a move to Statesboro, Georgia, where she will work for Georgia Southern University’s athletics department.

“I’ll do a little bit of media relations and sports information stuff like running social media pages, but it will mostly be a lot of broadcasting with the video department, writing packages, and doing coaches interviews and event previews,” she said. “It will be a good experience to learn and get a good foundation for what I want to do with the rest of my career.”

Tyler is still deciding in which area of broadcasting she wants to specialize, but she’s leaning toward being a reporter, either for a news station or in a sideline capacity.

“I love talking,” she said. “I love telling people’s stories and asking questions, learning behind what’s happening on the field and who these athletes actually are as people. Sideline reporting is especially tough because you pitch ideas all game long, and when you finally get the OK, you have to run with it. It’s definitely nerve racking, but it’s a fun experience. You have to learn to be comfortable at being uncomfortable.”

And that brings us back to March 18. Remember that leadoff walk? It was a perfect reason for any pitcher to become uncomfortable, but thanks to her years of experience in the circle, or perhaps because of her

recent time in front of the camera, Tyler never panicked. Over the next seven innings, 21 batters walked to the plate and 21 batters went back to the dugout without reaching first base. It was the rare no-hitter — the first of her Virginia Tech career.

“I can graduate happy now,” Tyler joked. “It all fell into place that night.”

Only eight other individuals in school history had thrown a no-hitter prior to Tyler — with the most notable being her own pitching coach, Angela Tincher, whose jersey number is retired on the outfield wall. Did the master of the no-no offer any advice during the game?

“The first rule of the no-hitter is you don’t talk about the no-hitter,” Tyler quipped. And besides, she joked that Tincher’s advice would have been simple anyway.

“She tells me before every game— ‘It’s really easy. You don’t throw balls unless they’re going to swing at them. You only throw strikes if they’re going to miss them. And if they’re going to hit the ball, make sure they hit it right to somebody,’” Tyler said.

Sound simple enough? It makes sense and Tyler particularly followed the last part. Of the 21 outs recorded that game, only six of them came by way of the strikeout, which is quite low considering that no-hitters usually are accomplished with the help of pure swing-and-miss dominance.

“That just goes to show how good the defense was behind me,” Tyler said. “There were some outstanding plays where they [her teammates] just saved me. When you throw a no-hitter, you can’t really take the credit for yourself. Only six of those outs were mine. All of the credit goes to them because they played really well behind me.”

Tyler said she first gave thought to the possibility of the no-hitter in the fourth inning after the Hokie offense pushed three runs across the plate to break a scoreless tie.

“We all kind of knew it was happening,” she admitted. “You look up at the scoreboard and you can’t really miss it. We had an opportunity



to close the game in the fifth with the bases loaded, but we didn’t. That’s when I told myself it was time— ‘I’m going to shut everybody down from now on. I have to get six more outs.’ It was then that I talked myself into it.”

So Tyler went out there for the sixth inning and maintained her routine. She stepped aside from the circle, looked at the left-field foul pole, and twirled the ball against her hip.

She stepped back to the rubber and fired. In total, she threw 101 pitches during the game. She also looked to left field 101 times.

It may have been her mother who got her pitching career started, but it’s a nod to her father, Mark, that’s helping her to the end.

“It’s just something I’ve done ever since I started pitching,” Tyler explained of the superstition. “My dad always stands or sits out in left field. He always told me when I was

playing high school ball that I would look out to him between every pitch.

“He actually got really sick right before this season started and was in the hospital for about seven or eight weeks. We’re lucky he made it through and he’s home now starting to recover, but he hasn’t been able to watch me play. He texts me before every game— ‘I’m always in left field.’ So I always look out there before every pitch.” **VT**

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Most international students go through an understandable adjustment period when they arrive in Blacksburg, whether they come from Asia, Africa, Europe, or another continent.

They struggle to find their way around town and Virginia Tech's sprawling campus. They battle the language barriers. They combat the differences in cuisine between their native land and the United States.

Joao Monteiro pretty much breezed through those obstacles after arriving in Southwest Virginia in January of 2013. But the Portugal native and standout on the Tech men's tennis team has found one riddle that he just cannot solve.

Blacksburg's infamous weather changes.

"Did you see it yesterday?" he said, smiling and shaking his head simultaneously. "How is it possible? Yesterday's weather was completely perfect. Tomorrow is going to be good as well. Then on Sunday, they predict snow. Some days, you leave your house with a huge winter jacket on and you'll go home at 3 or 4 p.m. in shorts and a t-shirt. I don't understand it."

Trying to decipher how one procures frostbite and a sunburn on the same day is a fool's errand, as many locals can attest. Such things go far beyond one's control anyway and even Monteiro knows that lobbing groundstrokes against Mother Nature would be a futile game.

Besides, Blacksburg's finicky weather hasn't exactly deterred Monteiro on the court or in the classroom since he arrived here. He will graduate in three and a half years this May with a degree in economics and he ranks as the top player on a Tech team in pursuit of its ninth straight NCAA appearance.

Ranked the No. 21 singles player nationally by the Intercollegiate Tennis Association as of this writing, Monteiro continues to ace his tests. His latest conquest came when he served defeat to Notre Dame's Quentin Monaghan 6-4, 6-4 in South Bend, Indiana. Monaghan entered the match ranked No. 33 nationally.

The win moved Monteiro to 11-5 in the top spot in Tech's lineup and 29-10 overall on the season. Those aren't shabby numbers for a young man who grew up in soccer-crazed Portugal and learned tennis from an old timer who pounded balls on the court at his parents' condo complex in the coastal town of Porto.

"My father loved tennis, so he decided to put me down there with this old man when I was 4 years old," Monteiro said. "We started doing some ball drills, not touching the racket, just playing some soccer with a tennis ball and doing some running drills and all that. When I was 5, I started touching the racket for the first time. I had my father's big racket. I'd put it alongside my arm and start playing. I just kept playing until now. It's been 17 years of playing tennis."

Monteiro connected with the sport. At the age of 9, he started competing in tournaments. At 10, he started competing nationally. By 11, he was the national champion in his age class.

Sure, he loved soccer as a kid. Who doesn't want to be Cristiano Ronaldo, one of the best soccer players ever and one who happens to hail from Portugal? Monteiro and his pals emulated Ronaldo and other players when they played on Porto's playgrounds.

But he delivered a backhand to soccer once he started having success in tennis.

"When you're in school and you're on breaks with the other kids, all you want to do is play soccer," he said. "When you are a kid in kindergarten, all you dream about is being a soccer player and all you want to do is play soccer. I played soccer with my friends whenever they would come to my house. Whenever I would go to their houses, we would play soccer."

"I always wanted to play tennis when I was on my own and when I had time. I kept both sports until I was maybe 10 or 11, but then I decided I wanted to play tennis more. I wouldn't say professionally, but more because I was pretty good nationally, and in soccer, I'd be just another player."

Monteiro gradually started attracting the interest of colleges in the U.S., including Virginia Tech. Then-assistant coach Stephen Huss heard good things about Monteiro and started following his results online. He reached out to him.

Reaching out, though, doesn't mean calling or sending an email. Huss used much more modern technology, sending Monteiro a friend request through Facebook and then a personal message through one of the world's most popular communications platforms. Social media has morphed into the easiest way to communicate international prospects.

College tennis isn't really an option for those living in Europe. One either plays professionally or goes to work in one's chosen field after graduation. So the idea of coming to America intrigued Monteiro.

"They [Tech's coaches] just reached me on Facebook and I knew about this English coach — he's from Great Britain and I met him in a tournament," Monteiro said. "He told me that a new assistant coach [Huss] was taking a position at Virginia Tech. He asked me if I wanted help to go to college."

"I was pretty much set up to talk to San Diego State and some other colleges. I told him [Huss] to give me his contact info and I would talk to him. From the beginning, I really liked him and was interested in the place. After a few weeks talking to them [Tech's coaches], in my mind, I decided that I was going to come to Virginia Tech."

Monteiro knew very little about Virginia Tech. Technology again came into play, as he used Google to educate himself on the university, its academic offerings, and the surrounding area.

Continued on page 38

"The only bad thing about Virginia Tech — and it has nothing to do with Virginia Tech — is the weather. All the rest is perfect. All the people are nice. Everybody is friendly. I know, everybody says, 'This is home, this is home.' But you actually feel like you're at home because everyone is nice to you."

Tech tennis player Joao Monteiro
on his college experiences

TENNIS AND TECH *a Perfect Match* for MONTEIRO

Men's tennis standout Joao Monteiro is a native of Portugal, but quickly adjusted to life in Blacksburg to find success both on the court and in the classroom

by Jimmy Robertson

TENNIS AND TECH

Continued
from page 37

Unfortunately, most of what came up on the Google search centered on the 2007 shootings. Fortunately for Tech, Monteiro looked past that incident.

“I wasn’t concerned about it because I knew there would be a lot of security after what happened,” he said. “The probabilities of it happening again at Virginia Tech are slimmer than at any other place right now because of all the security.”

Monteiro decided to sign with Tech, but did not enroll in time for the fall semester.

On New Year’s Eve of 2012, Monteiro had no idea of his future. A week later, he said Tech tennis coach Jim Thompson called and told him to get on a plane. He wanted Monteiro in Blacksburg in time to start the spring season.

“At first, I thought I was going to be in the big city, and I come here and everything is kind of small,” Monteiro said. “Athletics is huge here and everything goes around football. Athletics is bigger here than in Portugal, but everything else was kind of smaller.”

Monteiro struggled with the transition at first, but only briefly. He knew English, so that

wasn’t a particularly big problem and three Brazilian teammates who spoke Portuguese helped him with any issues. He lost weight because he was used to eating fish at home, as opposed to the pastas and sandwiches served in Tech’s dining halls. On the court, he needed a little time to adjust to the fast surfaces of American courts. They contrasted with the clay courts he often played on in Portugal.

Unlike most international student-athletes, he quickly transitioned to the American lifestyle and game. That spring, he finished 12-6 overall, including an impressive 8-2 mark in ACC matches. He mostly played in the Nos. 4, 5 and 6 spots in the Hokies’ lineup.

Since then, he’s been one of the Hokies’ most consistent players — and one of the best. He went 24-14 as a sophomore and 25-9 last season, earning All-ACC honors both times.

This season has been his best. He opened some eyes by advancing to the semifinals of the ITA Indoor National Championships held at the Billie Jean King Tennis Center in Flushing, New York, this past November, beating UVA’s Thai Kwiatkowski 6-1, 7-6 (4). Kwiatkowski had beaten Monteiro three times previously and entered the match ranked No. 8 nationally.

Shortly thereafter, Thompson moved Monteiro into the top spot of his lineup.

“I thought I had the tennis to play in any spot, but it’s all about the mind and how hard you work and how badly you want something,” Monteiro said. “Before last semester, I thought I had a chance and was playing well. I wanted to focus more on my tennis and those first few tournaments helped me a lot to be where I am right now—winning regionals and going to national indoor championships helped me take the No. 1 spot now. Our top four have the ability to play No. 1, so we’re all kind of even.”

Monteiro hopes the Hokies can do some damage at the ACC Championships and avenge last year’s showing when they went in as the No. 2 seed and lost in the quarterfinals. He also wants to see his team perform better at the NCAA Championships after a second-round exit a year ago ended the Hokies’ season.

The season’s end then brings forth a difficult decision—to attempt professional tennis or work in the U.S. courtesy of a special visa. When pursuing professional tennis, young players run the risk of losing money as they attempt to become established. Also, leaving the U.S. to pursue professional tennis would mean sacrificing opportunities to stay here and pursue a career.

His parents desperately want him to stay in the U.S. because of Portugal’s stagnant

economy. His father, a businessman, knows the pitfalls facing his son if professional tennis doesn’t work out, forcing a return to Portugal.

“My family tells me every day that I need to stay here,” Monteiro said. “I just think that one year or two years here would help me a lot financially and with a career. I know you say that you’re going to stay one year or two years and then leave and then you usually end up staying your entire life. I don’t know what will end up happening, but I think even though I want to go back, I think the best decision is to stay here.”

If he made the decision to stay here, he would not be surprising anyone. He loves Virginia Tech, he loves his teammates and classmates, and he loves the area.

In fact, he has loved everything about his experiences at Virginia Tech except for one thing.


“The only bad thing about Virginia Tech—and it has nothing to do with Virginia Tech—is the weather,” Monteiro laughed. “All the rest is perfect. All the people are nice. Everybody is friendly. I know, everybody says, ‘This is home, this is home.’ But you actually you feel like you’re at home because everyone is nice to you. It’s not like you’re in a big city like New York or Chicago or wherever. No one



Joao Monteiro is arguably the Hokies’ best tennis player and is in position to earn All-ACC honors for the third straight season.

knows you, but here, you feel appreciated and people like what you do.”

Portugal is home for Monteiro, but Blacksburg has been his home for the past

three and a half years. Like most student-athletes who spend any significant amount of time here, he’s finding that it’s not a place he wants to leave any time soon. 

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ENGINEERING A SUCCESSFUL CAREER

Where
are they
Now?

After playing professional basketball overseas for a few years once his playing days at Tech ended, Eddie Lucas returned to school and earned his undergraduate and master's degrees in civil engineering — and now he's helping rebuild homes in North Carolina

by Jimmy Robertson

Eddie Lucas vividly remembers the day. He walked into Virginia Tech's basketball office and a few staff members asked him if he had thought about an academic major. Lucas said that he wanted to declare engineering as a major.

"They looked at me like, 'Are you crazy?'" Lucas said, laughing. "But I accepted that as a challenge. I wanted to get a degree that meant something. I'm glad I did. I think it's one of the most valuable things that I got from Tech. I think they [employers] really respect your degree from Tech, particularly the engineering degree. It really opened a lot of doors for me. I value that tremendously."

Lucas certainly has been putting his degree to use, having worked as an engineer for Highland Construction, a company in Fayetteville, North Carolina, for the past three years. Highland does a lot of renovation and restoration of homes and businesses for insurance companies. Most of these buildings have been destroyed or partially destroyed by floods or fires.

That keeps him busy, along with keeping up with his family. He and his wife, who teaches at Fayetteville State, have four children — three boys and a girl, all under the age of 8. They met while both were in graduate school at Tech.

Of course, Tech fans remember Lucas more for his exploits on the court during the Bobby Hussey era. He spent the first two years of his career near his home of Gaithersburg, Maryland, playing at the Naval Academy for former Tech head coach Don DeVoe before transferring to Tech. Then-Tech assistant Chris Ferguson offered him a chance to walk on and Lucas saw an opportunity — considering the Hokies were losing five senior starters off retiring coach Bill Foster's final squad.

Lucas quickly earned a scholarship. His work ethic was the model for others and his sweet jumper created havoc for his opponents. As a junior during the 1997-98 season, he averaged 9.1 points per game off the bench, shooting 37.5 percent from beyond the 3-point arc. As a senior, he averaged a team-best 15 points per game and started all 28 games. He shot a staggering 43.4 percent from beyond the arc. He wasn't just a scorer either — he finished second on the squad with 42 assists and averaged 4.2 rebounds per game.

Tech didn't win a lot during his two years, but he left feeling grateful for his opportunities and accomplishments.

"My most memorable moment was when I first got there," Lucas said. "I remember walking into the gym for the first time and thinking, 'Wow, I really want to play here' because I was a walk-on. Then, to make the team was a big hurdle to overcome. Obviously, getting drafted was the biggest thing for me, just seeing the hard work pay off and getting the reward for my accomplishments."

In the 1999 NBA Draft, the Utah Jazz selected Lucas with their second-round pick (No. 58 overall). He became the first Tech player in nine years (Bimbo Coles) to be drafted by an NBA team and only two players have been drafted since him (Deron Washington and Erick Green).

Lucas' tenure with the Jazz was short — the team's brass cut him before the season started. That decision started him on a path that led to him playing basketball literally around the world.

His first stop — Argentina.

"I played in Argentina for a couple of months," he said. "They weren't too professional — the payments weren't on time.

I said, 'All right, I've got to get out of here.' It was tough to live down there. It was really hot and the bus rides were really long. You had to play the game starting at 9 because the gyms didn't have air conditioning. There was all sorts of crazy stuff going on. I called my agent and asked him to get me out of there."

His agent connected him with a team in France, so Lucas flew directly there from Argentina. He played the rest of that season in France.

The following season, he signed with a team from Russia and spent six months there. But that stint, too, ended early.

"They stopped paying me," he said. "It's tough because some of the countries don't pay like they do in U.S. I went straight from Russia to Israel and played out the year there."

The following year, he played in Poland — and the same thing happened. He left and went to play in Israel, though for a different team than the previous year. He finished out the season with that team, and after the season, he decided to give up professional basketball.

"It's not as glamorous as people think it is, as far as playing overseas," Lucas said. "That's what wore me down. You had to worry about payment and the living conditions aren't too good. You're taking overnight bus trips and trains and all sorts of crazy stuff. The contracts are year by year, so you have to worry about where you're going next and keep training for an unknown destination. It's a little bit stressful. After a while, I thought, 'This isn't what I thought it was going to be.' I'm glad that I got the education that I did because I knew I could get other opportunities."

Lucas came back to Blacksburg in the summer of 2002 to finish his coursework toward an undergraduate degree in civil engineering. When he left following his senior season at Tech, he needed two more courses.

As he was finishing his coursework, he decided to apply to Tech's graduate school. The school accepted his application and he spent two more years in Blacksburg getting his master's in civil engineering, construction engineering and management.

"I'm glad I did it," he said. "It really opened a lot of doors for me and provided job opportunities. I'm glad it worked out the way it did because when I stopped playing basketball, I called back to see if I could come back to apply for the graduate program and finish my undergraduate degree. They said, 'Yeah, come on back.' They were willing to help me out. So it was good timing."

While in graduate school, he worked as an intern for Pulte Homes, a national homebuilder. Following his graduation, he landed a job with the company's regional office in the Maryland/Washington, D.C. area.

Lucas helped build homes and he also worked some in land development. He stayed with Pulte for a few years before moving on to another company in that area — Balfour Beatty, which focuses more on commercial construction than home building.

"I did this building, the NGA building [National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency], and it's the second-largest building next to the Pentagon in the D.C. area," he said. "I was an engineer on that job in charge of all the interior finishes and purchasing. I stayed with that job for two years."

In 2009, Lucas and his wife — whom he married in 2006 — decided to move to Fayetteville after she received the job offer from Fayetteville State. He helped build homes for a while before resuming a career with Balfour Beatty, which had a regional office in that area. The company landed a big contract at Fort Bragg, a major Army installation in Fayetteville, and he spent three years helping to build tactical equipment facilities.

Not wanting to have to travel once the job was complete, Lucas decided to take his current job with Highland Construction.

"Most of the time with these commercial jobs, when they're finished, you have to do a lot of traveling," he said. "I didn't really want to do that with the kids, so I linked up with this company locally [Highland Construction] that does a lot of renovation and restoration work for insurance companies. It's a good line of business because there is always something going on. It's very recession proof, which is good."

Lucas has achieved many of his goals throughout his life — making the Hokies' basketball team, earning a scholarship, playing professionally, and now working for major corporations. But he has even more goals in front of him — like owning his own company.


"My ultimate goal would be to start up my own restoration company," he said. "It's gratifying. You go into these people's homes and they've had a major crisis. You help them put the pieces back together. It's pretty challenging. Each job is so unique and it's heart-warming to help families get back to where they were before — if not to a better place."

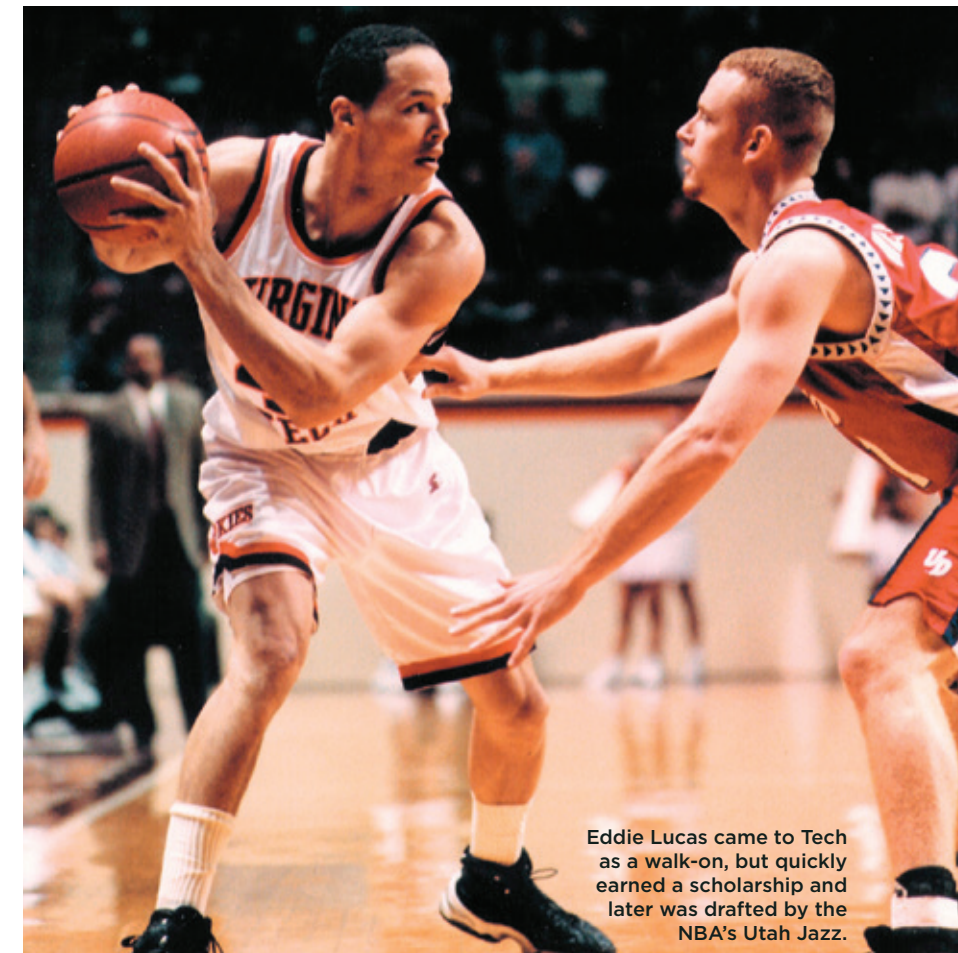
Life in general is good for the former Tech star. He keeps up with his alma mater and came to Blacksburg for a game this past November.

He also took two of his sons to Winston-Salem, North Carolina in February to see the Hokies play Wake Forest.

He said he may bring his sons back to Tech for a basketball camp this summer.

"We'll see how it works out," he said. "But I do need to get up there and visit some more people."

For sure, they — and many others in these parts — would like to see him do just that. 



Eddie Lucas came to Tech as a walk-on, but quickly earned a scholarship and later was drafted by the NBA's Utah Jazz.

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VIRGINIA TECH WOMEN'S SOCCER PLAYER RAISES FUNDS FOR DOMINICAN VOLUNTEERS

Inspired by a leadership class that took her to the Dominican Republic, Jordan Coburn is now making an effort to raise money to send three Dominican volunteers to college

by **Freddy Mesmer**
Special to Inside Hokie Sports

In 2011, Danny White, assistant athletics director of student-athlete development, traveled to the Dominican Republic to figure out the logistics for sending a leadership course of student-athletes to the Caribbean nation. In 2012, the first class arrived there, starting what has become an annual summer tradition.

The class—called Global Citizen Leadership—is made up of several different activities. The student-athletes visit some of the impoverished neighborhoods of the children whom they will later teach. They also tour a Peace Corps project site, where over the past few years, volunteers have worked on a water sanitation plant and those volunteers show the student-athletes around their community and where they live. In addition, the student-athletes tour a “batey,” a small town next to the sugar cane fields where workers come to live and work.

But the main activity for the class is a five-day sports camp for children in the town of Veron, one of the poorest places in the Dominican Republic. Veron primarily houses Dominicans who work in the resorts of Punta Cana. Children from other neighborhoods come to the camp, including those from where the Peace Corps members live. This sports camp gives the children the opportunity to have an activity after school, while also giving the student-athletes a chance to experience a new environment and put their newly learned leadership skills to use.

Punta Cana Ecological Foundation and Deportes Para La Vida (DPV) are two non-profit organizations that send helpers to make sure the camp runs smoothly. Aside from helping with the camp, the volunteers teach the children about sex and health education. This is important because these subjects are seldom talked about in the Dominican Republic and drug abuse and HIV are prominent there.

Of the many volunteers, three men from DPV stood out — Victor Manuel Reynoso

Fransua, Julio Luis Sanchez and Miguel Angel Smera Mercedes.

Fransua is studying hematology at Universidad Central del Este (East Central University) in San Pedro de Macoris, Dominican Republic. Sanchez is a student at Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo. Originally, Sanchez was going to study English, but decided to pursue a career in social work instead. Mercedes studies social science at Universidad Nacional Evangélica.

These men do not have enough money to continue their schooling. Jordan Coburn, a four-year starter on the Tech women's soccer team and a three-time All-ACC selection, has been working with White and several others to raise money to help these students pay for school.

The goal by the end of the year is to raise \$10,000. So far, \$5,700 has been raised. The platform for raising the money has been through Facebook. Originally, donations could come only in the form of a check, but now Coburn and her group have created an online donation page to make the process simpler.

“Raising awareness is really what we need,” she said.

There have been approximately 50 student-athletes to take the class and go to the Dominican Republic over the past four years. Practically all of them return to the United States with a greater appreciation for their opportunities.

Perhaps more importantly, they come back with a feeling of wanting to help others, whether it be in a professional capacity or as a volunteer for any number of organizations outside of their chosen career paths. Such a feeling fits in well with the university's *Ut Prosim* motto (“That I May Serve”).

“I learned so much,” said Tech women's tennis player Kelly Williford, who took the class and went to the Dominican Republic last

summer. “I learned about myself and obviously a different country. I've been to Europe, but there are so many things they take for granted. When I came back, it was just crazy to see the difference between a first-world and a developing country. So much is taken for granted and some kids are never going to have what you have.

“When we went on one of our trips to Orlando [for tennis], there are all these things, like Disney World. But for the kids there [in the Dominican Republic], a fun day for them is playing baseball. They don't have Disney, but they're still having fun. There is still a smile on their faces. I could go on for hours about that trip, but it was a great experience.”

Comments like those have Coburn and her group remaining optimistic about reaching the \$10,000 goal. She, White, and others want people to understand how this class and trip impact Tech student-athletes—thus the need to raise awareness. After all, the more people who become involved and become aware of the need, the greater the chances of achieving this short-term goal and the eventual long-term goal.

Aside from talking about raising the monetary contributions needed to help these three men, Coburn also stressed the importance of knowing the situation in the Dominican Republic and being aware of how life is there. She encouraged all student-athletes to take this



For the past few years, different groups of Virginia Tech's student-athletes have traveled to the Dominican Republic in the summer as part of a leadership course, where they tour the areas and put leadership skills to use by running a sports camp for children.

class because it is more than simply a trip—it is an eye-opening experience.

These three men give up most of their time to volunteer for DPV and to help children in the Dominican Republic. Another part of Coburn's plan is to create a scholarship fund for those who volunteer with DPV.

“No one gives back more to their community than the volunteers from DPV and they deserve to be rewarded for their dedication,” she said. “The money wouldn't go to just anyone. They have to be deserving and a great volunteer.”

Coburn graduates in May with a degree in public relations. She would like to see others continue toward the goal.

“I am hoping someone from another class either in the past or an upcoming one can keep it going,” she said. “I'd like to see them continue what has already been started.”

For those interested in learning more about Deportes Para La Vida (DPV) and possibly donating, please visit <http://fotdr.org/site/default.aspx>.

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