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.
Union Bank & Trust is honored to make Virginia Tech’s vision for a first-class baseball stadium a reality. More than a new field, we hope English Field at Union Park will be a field of dreams. For the athletes who play here. For the fans, friends and family who cheer them on. For the children who watch and dream. From all of us at Union, thanks for letting us play ball.

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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 100% 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. 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 Centerville 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 Virginia 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. [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 2016-17 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 says, “be Hokieified.”

Tech fans should never discount how much their donations mean to student-athletes. They don’t need Babcock or Bill Lansdowne, 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. “I’m very appreciative,” he said. “I don’t have to worry about getting 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 Tajah 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 opportunities. They don’t need Babcock or Bill Lansdowne to tell them.

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.
Inside Hokie Sports

Football was Fitzgerald’s story: and earned the nickname “Incredible during his playing days at Virginia Tech coaches Jimmy Sharpe and Bill Dooley chose. He chose Virginia Tech. played college football anywhere he Woody Hayes, Fitzgerald could have legendary Bear Bryant and Ohio State’s programs and visited in his home. Highly recruited by all the major college players in America his senior year. was one of the top 10 high school School in the mid-1970s, Fitzgerald tight end at Lynchburg’s E.C. Glass High success. An outstanding fullback and Mickey Fitzgerald’s springboard to Fame in 2002. He was inducted into the Virginia Tech Sports Hall of Fame in 2002.

The Donor File

Mickey Fitzgerald

HOOKIE 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-Rascals, to help underprivileged children through the same wrenching experience. We started workouts with those on our current roster and we’re recruiting class. We started workouts with those on our current roster and we’re ultimately signed a recruiting class. We started workouts with those on our current roster and we’re

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 and why 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 very satisfied and proud. Virginia Tech are reasons for him to be 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.

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I deeply appreciate that support and will not take it for granted.

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The past three months have been incredibly busy. We met with our team, visited with many recruits and ultimately signed a 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 recruiting class. We started workouts with those on our current roster and we’re ultimately signed a recruiting class. We started workouts with those on our current roster and we’re recruiting class. We started workouts with those on our current roster and we’re

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

Football coach, Virginia Tech
YOU COULD WIN THE

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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.

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Thinking of Medical School?

Join the 332 Virginia Tech alumni who have chosen to attend the private state-of-the-art osteopathic medical school in Blacksburg, Virginia.

VCOM is a proud partner of Virginia Tech athletics and has a Sports Medicine Fellowship program with physicians who provide care for Hokie athletes.

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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, a 137-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.

“In 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 ‘gimmies’ 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 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.

Dresser has Tech wrestling getting closer toward national title

The two trophies sat on his desk, two halting 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 lights, but you can tell 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. Consistently 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 1990s.

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 few weeks fielding 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.

Now he has the evidence to prove otherwise. It’s sitting on his desk.
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 loooong! 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 would all 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 in the sun. But the realization I had the other day was that it was long. I mean looooong! In early December.

The bottom line was we had made it through another winter. There was a badge of honor that came with that accomplishment and we revered 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 knew 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.

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!
Marcus Haskett (left), Tracy Bayer (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-Lowery 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.

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 Bayer, 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,” Bayer 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.
Q: Why did you decide to focus on a degree in public relations?

GH: “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.”

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

GH: “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 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, which is fine. I’m not really into anything specific at the moment, which is fine. I’m into 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 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.

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

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.

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MH: “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.”

MCLEAN HIGE

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by Jimmy Robertson

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Brooks Takes Over Tech Women’s Hoops Program

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-Hokie’s 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.

“The leadership here with Coach 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 into 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 more games at the site of his first one, as Whit Babcock, Virginia Tech’s director of athletics, named 47-year-old Brooks, who came to Blacksburg on March 23 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 nearly 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 jokingly 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’ résumé speaks for itself, as he built the Hahn Hurst Practice Facility on March 30. athletics department staffers who gathered at introduced Brooks to the media, fans, and basketball program on March 28 and Virginia Tech’s director of athletics, named at the site of his first one, as Whit Babcock, “I’ve come full circle.”

“I didn’t look at them because Madison was so special to me. I’ve had many opportunities to go elsewhere and I didn’t look at them because Madison was so special to me.”

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

The Hokies haven’t won more than five conference games since 2003, and many thought that Brooks bringing in a new coach with only Division II experience meant the Hokies would be that same. However, despite losing in the first round last season, Brooks guided the team to a CAA championship.

“We are excited and proud to welcome Kenny Brooks to our Hokies program,” Tech athletic director Whit Babcock said. “He brings tremendous energy, enthusiasm and a winning attitude to our program.”

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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 Synarcus 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.”

Brooks discussed the key challenges ahead.

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 Virginia-born players: 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 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. You 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.

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Inside Hokie Sports
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

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 overtime win over Princeton in the NIT.

“As bad as I am at saying hello, I’m 100 percent sure that I’m not good 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 those 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 an overtime win over Princeton in 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.

“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 NCAAB 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 12th in the ACC in rebounding margin (4th 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 captured the pace of maturity that we’ve been on this season.”

They need to put together a step this season and that certainly needs to be celebrated. They regrouped their 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 momentum, 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.
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 last in rushing offense (159.2 ypg), 74th in total offense (385.1 ypg), 53rd in scoring offense (225.8 ypg), and 50th in scoring offense (31.9 ypg). 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?

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 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’re going to 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: “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: Which offensive linemen have stepped up in a good way, some guys we weren’t sure about in the offseason, who have, but on the other side of it, it’s nice to have a large group of guys who are 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.”

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
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 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 full camp of being in shape enough to make it through practices, 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 that. 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 dock 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 receivers’ 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?

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 guys like this that 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 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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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 it to be a one-hit wonder.”

The Hokies’ rally started with Epperly, who suffered a shocking loss to unseeded Casey Kurt 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 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 to go 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 crash everybody instead beating everybody 4-3, which he had 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 Devins 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 knew 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. 5 seed and second heavyweight, was the only Tech wrestler to win in the quarterfinals. He beat Illinois’ 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, 3-2.

“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 Zach Zavatsky also lost in the quarterfinals, but Chishko rallied to earn All-American honors. The No. 8 seed, he lost 6-2 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 2-3 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 149 pounds, Zavatsky, the No. 7 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-American honors.

Tech’s David McFadden and Jared Haught both finished in sixth place in the 149- and 157-pound weight classes, respectively. McFadden, a freshman who went in as the No. 14 seed, lost to Bo Zavatsky, the No. 3 seed at 157 pounds, in the second round. But McFadden won four straight matches in the consolation bracket to earn All-American honors before falling to Jordan again. This time, he lost 8-2. Chishko would go on to finish third in the weight class. In his final match of the Championships, McFadden lost to Illinois’ Steven Rodgers 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-American 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. “We’ve got him to realize ‘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 a dead heat.”

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

So still don’t think we’ve seen the real Jared Haught, but we’re seeing a lot more.

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 3-7 to No. 15 seed David Teras of the second round and then lost in the consolation round to Old Dominion’s Brandon Jeske by a score of 4-3.

Teras went on to finish fourth at 149 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-bitters go the other way. It’s like basketball. If you try to win by a point every night, sooner or later, someone is going to throw one. 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.

“When you lose, you take it on the chin and you move on.”

On paper, we look pretty good,” Dresser said. “But with that, we have to understand that there are no automatics and no ‘gimmes’ in this sport.”

For sure, the Hokies were proud of that at this year’s NCAA Championships.
Brandon Fiala became the first Tech swimmer to earn All-America honors in three events with 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, but we came back really strong on that last day was excellent.”

“The men, everyone shared in that performance. Not everyone who made the finals and scored, but the environment with the performance. Not everyone who made the finals and scored, but the environment with the performance.

In addition, the 400-yard medley relay team of Owen, Fiala, Brent Benedict and Lucas Bureau came in 18th overall with a time of 3:39.05.

Bureau finished 31st in the 100 freestyle and 35th 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 Schield—also took part in the 400 IM. Stevens recorded a time of 4:43.63 in the 1-meter event, while Schield 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 Wrocław, Poland, earned All-American honors in the 100 butterfly event, finishing in seventh place with a time of 1:00.23. She narrowly missed earning honorable mention All-America honors in this event as well.

Likewise, Nazieblo competed in another event. She came in 32nd in the 400 individual medley with a time of 4:19.81. The 800 freestyle relay team of Hospeder, Fiona Donna, Alice Boisvert and Adriana Grilli finished 20th with a time of 7:07.20. Hospeder competed in four events overall—the two relay teams, the 300 freestyle and the 200 freestyle. She finished 30th in the 500 freestyle with a time of 4:43.63 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 43rd with a time of 22.76 seconds and also finished 22nd in the 100 butterfly with a time of 52.53 seconds.

Ashlyn 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 those kids returning,” Skinner said of his teams’ future prospects. “With the newcomers we have coming in, we’re really Pumped to build on this.”

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

Inside Hokie Sports

28
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.

Curtin led the men’s team to a 15th-place finish nationally, while Green was the lone Virginia Tech female athlete to finish in the top 10 in a national championship. The senior from Chesapeake, Virginia competed in the mile and ran a time of 4:36.60 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 top 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 nationally. 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.”

Laidig went into the event ranked second (1.88 meters) and South Alabama’s Sean Collins.

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 4:36.60 in the preliminaries, but did not qualify for the finals.

Cheserek would go on to win the national title in the event with 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.

The Tech men also got an All-America performance from pole vaulter Deakin Ziegler, 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 Jan Theis 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 pencilled 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 2:05.00.

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 Green’s second-place finish in the 800-meter run at the NCAA Indoor Track and Field Championships earned her a 2016 All-America honor since she arrived at Tech.
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 faced 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 tenth pitch was ball four. The leadoff hitter was on base, and as baseball or softball fans know, that usually spells disaster.

‘It was 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 Blue Jays) 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.

“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, it 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 back yard 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.”

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 3.32 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 pitching zoo 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 résumé.

Studying multimedia journalism and broadcasting, Tyler interned with the sports department at WLS 70 in Roselle, Illinois 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 with the sports department at WSLS 10 in Roanoke, Virginia last summer.

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It was a perfect reason for any pitcher to become uncomfortable, but uncomfortable. "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 Stateline, 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’s just something I’ve done ever since 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 hit 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.

"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 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 teets me before every game — ‘I’m always in left field’! So I always look out there before every pitch."

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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 as 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 in a fool’s endeavor, 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 see his best. 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 21-5 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.

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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 regions 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 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 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.

Monteiro is arguably the Hokies’ best tennis player and is in position to earn All-ACC honors for the third straight season. 
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, working as an engineer for Highland Construction, a company in Fayetteville, North Carolina, from 2000 until 2007. High in the Carolina farming region, 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 engineering and management.

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In the 1999 NBA Draft, the Utah Jazz selected Lucas with their second-round pick (No. 50 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 bus crashed 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.”

He said, “All right, I’ve got to get out of here.” It was tough to live down there. It was really hot and the people were cold. You had to play the game starting at 9 because the gyms didn’t have air conditioning. There was all sorts of stuff, so I called my agent and asked him to get me out of there.”

His agent connected him with a team in France, so he flew directly there from Argentina. He played the rest of the 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 go up professional basketball.

“It’s not as glamorous as people think it is, as far as playing overseas,” Lucas said. “That’s what tore me down. You had to worry about payment and the major exceptions aren’t too good. You’re taking overnight bus trips and trains and all sorts of crazy stuff. The contracts are very, very long and it’s very stressful, you had 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.’ I’m glad that I got the education that I did because I know 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.

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“It’s not as glamorous as people think it is, as far as playing overseas,” Lucas said. “That’s what tore me down. You had to worry about payment and the major exceptions aren’t too good. You’re taking overnight bus trips and trains and all sorts of crazy stuff. The contracts are very, very long and it’s very stressful, you had 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.’ I’m glad that I got the education that I did because I know 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.

“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.”

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“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 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.
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 Leaders — is made up of different student-athletes.

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, Julio Luis Sanchez and Miguel Angel Simora Mercedes.

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

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, $5,750 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 Latin motto (“Thou 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 that take place over there. 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], it’s 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 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.”
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