

TSL Extra

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On the Cover
Photo of Kevin Jones shaking hands with Virginia Tech fans at Mountaineer Field in the waning moments of Tech's 35-0 blowout win. Photography by Will Stewart. Photo copyright 2001 Maroon Pride, LLC.

3 Letter From The Editor

by Will Stewart. Issue 12 - The big guys in the middle.

4 The Future: Breaking it Down

by Will Stewart. The question is this: after this season, when is the Hokies' next good chance to win the national championship?

13 In Search of Defensive Tackles

by Neal Williams. This year, the defensive tackle position is stacked, but starting next year, the Hokies have some holes to fill.

17 Dan Wilkinson: A Life on Track

by Neal Williams. An unheralded career backup on the field, Dan Wilkinson has made the most of his opportunities off the field.

20 Where Are They Now: J.C. Price

by Will Stewart. After a turbulent few years, former All-American J.C. Price has figured things out.

28 Popcorn, Pizza, and Pretzels

by Tamlin Bason. Everything you ever wanted to know about the concession stands at Virginia Tech sporting events.

32 Virginia Tech's Own "Rudy"

by Cary Whaley. It took five years for walk-on kicker Matt Felber to finally run out of the tunnel in a Tech uniform.

36 Inside the Numbers: Special Teams Dominance

by Will Stewart. So, exactly how much better are the Hokies at special teams than their opponents?

42 Inside TSL: Short Takes

by Will Stewart. A contest, a correction, a cover photo, and a compliment.

TSL EXTRA

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Dear Readers:

Usually, when I sit down to plan an issue of the TSL Extra, I don't pick out a "theme" for the issue. Sometimes, themes are unavoidable — recruiting wrapup issues, for example — but for the most part, I don't give them much thought.

This issue, though, concentrates on the big boys on the football team: the defensive tackles. Sure, the offensive linemen are bigger on average (at least, they are on the Hokie football team), but the DT's are the ones who take a beating down in the trenches. They're the run stoppers, the guys who sacrifice themselves to clog up the line of scrimmage, and who do their job with little glory or reward.

We catch up with a DT star from the past, J.C. Price. J.C. tells us the story of the rough treatment he got from the NFL and how a bad back cut short a promising pro career. But cheer up, the story has a happy ending.

We talk to an unheralded DT of the present, Dan Wilkinson, a quiet guy who exudes class and whose accomplishments in the classroom will make you proud. And we take a look at the future of the defensive tackle position, because after this season, the ranks of the defensive tackles thin out, to say the least, and question marks abound.

Speaking of the future, we also embark on an analysis the purpose of which is to figure out what upcoming season will present Tech's best chance to win a national championship. Let's just say that the answer will have you chomping at the bit to fast-forward a couple of years.

The remaining four articles in this rather large edition of the TSLX cover a variety of topics: concession operations at Tech, the Hokies' special teams dominance, and the inspiring story of walk-on kicker Matt Felber, Virginia Tech's own version of "Rudy."

Lastly, don't miss the contest presented in "Inside TSL." It's a chance to win a snazzy leather attache/laptop case, and it's our way of saying thanks to all of our subscribers for making the TSL Extra's first year a big success.

Now get crackin', because this is a big issue, and you've got a lot of reading to do.

Enjoy issue #12.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Will". The letters are cursive and fluid, with a prominent loop on the 'W' and a trailing flourish on the 'l'.

The Future: Breaking it Down

The question is this: after this season, when is the Hokies' next good chance to win the national championship?

by Will Stewart, TechSideline.com

Now that the Hokies are hanging around the top 5 on a yearly basis and ducking in and out of the national championship picture, the urge to predict what years Tech will have their best shot at the Sears Trophy is strong. In the last few years, it has become apparent that experience and talent — or the lack thereof — at a few key positions can mean the difference between playing for the championship, as the Hokies did in 1999, and taking a holiday trip to Jacksonville, as Virginia Tech did last year.

When you're striving to reach the championship game, the margin for error is razor thin. Once you get beyond the obvious issue of talent, injuries and experience/depth are the next factors that determine whether your top 10 team has a shot at 11-0 or will wind up 10-1, 9-2, or worse.

Just ask Florida State. The 'Noles, a championship game participant for three years running, still have talent this season. But injuries and a lack of experience and depth have combined to remove them from the championship picture with two early season losses.

Last year, an injury to Michael Vick and a young defensive line kept the Hokies from being able to handle a healthy, experienced Miami team in the Orange Bowl. Tech got waxed by the Canes, and that was the end of the championship dream.

This year, the awesome Canes notwithstanding, the Hokies have a team primed for a national championship run. The defense is deep and almost flawless, and the offense is run by an inexperienced but steady-handed quarterback who knows how to get the job done — so far, anyway. The O-line is young and still learning, and the running backs were dealt a serious blow when Lee Suggs went down, but still, the 2001 Hokies are a pretty good team.

But can they be better in the coming years? When are the offense, defense, and special teams going to synch up again like they did in 1999? Can anyone predict it?

The answer, of course, is no, but I thought it would be fun to try it, anyway. So without further ado, here's my attempt at analyzing all the positions on the team and predicting when they'll be the strongest in the coming years. In the end, I'll wrap it all up into a team-wide prediction for when the Hokies will be the strongest and will have their best shot at a national championship between 2002 and 2004.

Injuries are the big unknown here, of course, so let's play the game with the assumption that everyone stays healthy. That said, we'll give a nod to depth when assigning ratings and determining the outlook, because depth helps overcome injuries. We'll also assume that all players listed on the current depth chart will stay at Tech through their true senior or redshirt senior years (yeah, I know, I crack myself up, too).

In the following analysis, all players are shown at the positions they occupy on the latest BeamerBall.com depth chart. Only players who are currently in the program are included in the analysis, so, for example, January 2002 enrollees Andrew Fleck, Danny McGrath, Reggie Butler,

and Brandon Frye are not included. Players are listed in no particular order, so listing Will Hunt before Chris Clifton, for example, doesn't mean that Hunt will precede Clifton on future depth charts.

One obvious point is that you can't predict what new recruits will come along and have an impact. Had I written this story at this time last year, for example, Kevin Jones and DeAngelo Hall would not have been in the mix. Now they're projected as future superstars.

This is a long, detailed analysis, and those of you who like in-depth discussions about player personnel will appreciate it. If you're more of an "executive summary" person, you can flip forward to the handy-dandy table in the last section that sums things up nicely.

Let's start with the most important position on the field: quarterback.

Quarterback

The quarterback position is weaker this year than it will be over the course of the next four years. The starter (Grant Noel) is solid, but he only has six games under his belt, and the backup (Bryan Randall) is a true freshman who shows promise but would be a serious liability if he was thrown into the starting lineup because of an injury to Noel.

Given that, Noel and Randall will be one year older and better next year, and Chris Clifton and/or Will Hunt will provide a great third, or maybe even fourth, option behind them. And looking out to 2003 and beyond, I truly believe that the Randall/Clifton/Hunt trio will produce at least two good quarterbacks, maybe all three.

2002: Noel, Randall, Hunt, Clifton

2003: Randall, Hunt, Clifton

2004: Randall, Hunt, Clifton

2005: Hunt, Clifton, possibly Randall (if he redshirts some time between 2002-2004)

Best Year: 2004.

Assuming that Noel starts in 2002, backed up by Randall, that will be a strong year, but 2004 will be better. In 2004, Randall will be a true senior backed up by one or two redshirt juniors in Hunt and/or Clifton.

If Randall happens to redshirt for some reason between 2002 and 2004, then in 2005 he will be a redshirt senior backed up by one or two redshirt seniors. But if he doesn't redshirt, it's a safe bet that 2004 will be the strongest, deepest year at QB.

Running Back

The Hokies are crazy deep here and will be for years. 2002 will feature redshirt senior Lee Suggs, redshirt senior Keith Burnell, and sophomore Kevin Jones, plus ... well, it just goes on and on, doesn't it?

Here's how it looks at tailback:

2002: Suggs, Jones, Burnell, Hamilton, Humes

2003: Jones, Hamilton, Humes

2004: Jones, Hamilton, Humes

2005: Hamilton, Humes

Best Year: 2002, with 2004 close behind.

Suggs is a known quantity, and next year, he'll be backed up by Burnell and Jones, both with critical experience under their belts. 2004 could be a very strong year, as well, but Hamilton and Humes may not be backing up Jones with as much experience as Burnell and Jones will be backing up Suggs next year. In any even, there will not be a weak year here for the foreseeable future, and trying to call one of the coming years better than any other is splitting hairs.

Fullback

In my opinion, Tech lucked into Jarrett Ferguson, a walk-on who has turned into the prototypical VT fullback. No other current fullback on the roster has Ferguson's combination of size, speed, toughness, and durability. Some VT fullbacks are bigger but don't block as well, or they aren't the receiver that Ferguson has blossomed into.

In any event, Ferguson is gone after this season, and he will be sorely missed. Wayne Briggs will be gone, too, and the heir apparent is Doug Easlick, who is showing some promise. Here's the rundown:

2002: Doug Easlick, Joe Wilson, Marvin Urquhart, Josh Spence

2003: Doug Easlick, Joe Wilson, Marvin Urquhart, Josh Spence

2004: Josh Spence

Best Year: 2003, hands down, at least with the current cast of characters.

Easlick will probably get the starting nod in 2002 and will develop nicely, and in 2003, the position will be deep and experienced.

The wild card here is Spence. If he stays at fullback (a move to linebacker is possible) and can come along and earn the backup spot behind Easlick, and if a new player can come in and develop behind him, there might not be much dropoff in 2004. But there's little argument that 2003 will be deeper than 2004, barring a sudden flood of fullback recruits.

Wide Receivers

Tech has great balance in the age of their flankers and split ends. The wide receiver position will not be gutted by graduation at any point in the coming years. The Hokies must develop a go-to game breaker after Andre Davis finishes this season, but a steady stream of experienced wideouts will rotate through the starting positions in the coming years. Here's how it shapes up:

Flanker:

2002: Terrell Parham, Richard Johnson, Chris Shreve

2003: Richard Johnson, Chris Shreve

2004: Richard Johnson

Split End:

2002: Shawn Witten, Ernest Wilford, Ron Moody

2003: Ernest Wilford, Ron Moody

2004: ???

Best Year: 2003.

In 2003, Johnson will be a junior and Wilford will be a senior, and Moody and Shreve will be capable backups.

Beyond 2003, though, things get very, very cloudy, and that brings up some interesting speculation. Fred Lee, the only receiver to sign with Tech last year, failed to qualify and may or may not be in the mix down the road. With Lee as a question mark, the lack of projected depth in 2004 signals that Chris Clifton, who has been wowing observers as a scout-team wide receiver, is a strong candidate for a switch to wide receiver. Justin Hamilton might move as well.

As a matter of fact, if Clifton is moved and develops well, and Richard Johnson turns out to be as good as advertised, 2004 may be stronger than 2003. It's hard to say, but at this point, 2003, with the known players currently in the system, will be the best year for receivers in the next three years.

Tight Ends

Tech takes a big hit with the graduation of Bob Slowikowski and Browning Wynn after this season, but Keith Willis looks good, and behind him, the Hokies have some talented redshirt and true freshmen who should provide good depth. The Tech coaches have done a very, very nice job in stocking the team at this position. Here's the outlook:

2002: Keith Willis, Jared Mazetta, Mike Jackson, Jeff King

2003: Keith Willis, Jared Mazetta, Mike Jackson, Jeff King

2004: Jared Mazetta, Mike Jackson, Jeff King

2005: Jeff King

Best Year: 2003, with 2004 a close second.

The difference between 2003 and 2004 is that the projected starter, Willis, will have a year of starting experience under his belt. In 2004, Mazetta, if he continues to be behind Willis on the depth chart, will be a first-time starter.

Offensive Line

Tech's offensive line went through a very tough time in 1997 and 1998 as the Hokies were thin and were forced to move players and play some true freshmen. The line rebounded nicely, coming on very strong on 1999, and in the coming years, it is stocked with a nice rotation of players of varying

ages. The situation that occurred last year, where Tech started four seniors, will not happen again in the near future, so the line will not be gutted by graduation as it was the past year.

Here are the projected players, with an attempt to list them by position. Current starters are listed in parentheses.

Left Tackle (Anthony Davis)

2002: Anthony Davis, Tim Selmon, Thenus Franklin, Curtis Bradley

2003: Curtis Bradley

2004: Curtis Bradley

Left Guard (Luke Owens):

2002: Luke Owens, Jake Gibson, Anthony Nelson

2003: Jake Gibson, Anthony Nelson

2004: ?? (Miller or Montgomery? See right guard)

Center (Steve DeMasi)

Assumes Jake Grove moves to center:

2002: Jake Grove, Robert Ramsey, Travis Conway

2003: Jake Grove, Robert Ramsey, Travis Conway

2004: Robert Ramsey, Travis Conway

Right Guard (Jake Grove)

2002: Jim Miller, Will Montgomery

2003: Jim Miller, Will Montgomery

2004: Jim Miller, Will Montgomery

Right Tackle (Matt Wincek):

2002: Jon Dunn

2003: Jon Dunn

2004: Jon Dunn

Best Year: 2004.

2002 is strong, but two starters, Wincek and DeMasi, will have to be replaced, and Grove may move to center, so I ruled it out. The line will be good, but 2003 and 2004 look more promising.

2003 is very strong. Bradley will be a first time starter, but the other positions will be stocked and experienced. If the coaches get a lot of playing time for Bradley in 2002, then 2003 could be an excellent year for the OL.

In 2004, though, Dunn and Miller/Montgomery are projected as three-year starters, and Bradley will be a second-year starter. Ramsey or Conway will be a first-year starter at center, but they'll both be redshirt seniors. The only shaky spot is left guard, and it's quite possible that the loser of the Miller/Montgomery battle at right guard next year will be moved to left guard and will play there as a junior or senior in 2004.

It's impossible to predict how deep the OL will be in 2004, but almost all of the projected starters will

be very experienced juniors or seniors. If KJ stays and is a senior running back that year, holy cow, look out. Even if he doesn't stay, Hamilton or Humes will probably take advantage of what should be one of the best Virginia Tech offensive lines in history.

Defensive Line

Losing five senior defensive tackles will hurt the Hokie D-line in 2002, and it will take a couple of years to recover. Figuring out which year will be best for the defensive line is easy. Here's the breakdown:

Tackle/Nose:

2002: Mark Costen, Kevin Lewis, Jason Murphy, Tim Sandidge, Kevin Hilton

2003: Mark Costen, Kevin Lewis, Jason Murphy, Tim Sandidge, Kevin Hilton

2004: Kevin Lewis, Jason Murphy, Tim Sandidge, Kevin Hilton

Defensive End:

2002: Lamar Cobb, Nathaniel Adibi, Cols Colas, Jim Davis, Jason Lallis, Chris Pannel

2003: Nathaniel Adibi, Cols Colas, Jim Davis, Jason Lallis, Chris Pannel

2004: Jason Lallis, Chris Pannel

Best Year: 2003.

This is a no-brainer. The new crop of defensive tackles and nose guards will have one year of playing time under their belts, and the three-headed defensive end monster of Adibi, Colas, and Davis will all be seniors.

Linebackers

At the end of the 2001 season, Ben Taylor, Jake Houseright, and Brian Welch will all hang up their helmets. Ouch. Much like the defensive tackle/nose positions, the Mike and Backer positions will be cleaned out after this season. Here's the outlook:

Whip:

2002: T.J. Jackson, Deon Provitt, Brandon Manning, Mike Daniels

2003: Deon Provitt, Brandon Manning, Mike Daniels

2004: Brandon Manning, Mike Daniels

Mike (Houseright/Welch's position):

2002: Alex Markogianakis, Chris Buie, Jordan Trott

2003: Chris Buie, Jordan Trott

2004: Jordan Trott

Backer (Taylor's position):

2002: Vegas Robinson, Mikal Baaqee, Chad Cooper, James Anderson, Blake Warren

2003: Vegas Robinson, Mikal Baaqee, Chad Cooper, James Anderson, Blake Warren

2004: Mikal Baaqee, Chad Cooper, James Anderson, Blake Warren

Best Year: clearly 2003.

In 2003, all three linebacker positions will be manned by seniors backed up by experienced/older players. The Tech coaching staff has done a nice job of filling the linebacker positions with good young players who will step in when Houseright and Taylor step out. And if the Hokies can add a blue-chipper here or there (Ahmad Brooks and Justin London, anyone?), they'll be in even better shape than projected.

Given that the coaches are happy with Jackson and Provitt at Whip and Robinson and Baaqee at Backer, the best place for a blue-chipper to step in and play would be Mike. Markogianakis, Buie and Trott could all be overtaken in 2002 by a top-quality recruit who shows great promise in the long term.

Defensive Backs

The Hokies have good depth at cornerback, and at safety, Vince Fuller has earned high praise and should step in and take over nicely for Willie Pile in the 2003 season. Rover is a little bit more wide open.

Corners:

2002: Ronyell Whitaker, DeAngelo Hall, Eric Green, Garnell Wilds, D.J. Walton

2003: DeAngelo Hall, Eric Green, Garnell Wilds, D.J. Walton

2004: DeAngelo Hall, D.J. Walton

Safety:

2002: Willie Pile, Vince Fuller

2003: Vince Fuller

2004: Vince Fuller

Rover:

2002: Billy Hardee, Michael Crawford, Sam Fatherly

2003: Michael Crawford, Sam Fatherly

2004: Sam Fatherly

Best Year: 2003, due to the depth at cornerback.

Fuller and Crawford are projected to be first-time starters at safety and rover in 2003, but they'll be a junior and a senior, respectively, so they should be solid as first-time starters. Overall, the Hokies have nice transitions occurring at all positions in the next few years (they won't get cleaned out by graduation in any given year), but 2003 looks like the best year to me.

Kickers

This is a pretty simple analysis, and very clear-cut.

Punter:

2002: Vinnie Burns, Robert Peaslee

2003: Vinnie Burns, Robert Peaslee

2004: Vinnie Burns

Placekicker:

2002: Carter Warley, Jon Mollerup

2003: Carter Warley

2004: ??

Best Year: 2003.

Warley will be a senior, and Burns will be a junior. It's possible that Nic Schmitt from Salem, a kicker who has verbalized and will join the team in 2002, could overtake Warley if Warley continues to struggle as he has this season, or if his back continues to bother him. But at this point, 2003 looks like the best year for kickers.

The Best Team? 2003

The defense will clearly peak in 2003, according to my analysis here, and the offense will be strong for the entire 2002-2004 time period. If you take a look at the following table, out of 10 units analyzed, 7 will peak in 2003:

Position	Best Year		
	2002	2003	2004
Quarterback			X
Tailback	X		
Fullback		X	
Wide Receiver		X	
Tight End		X	
Offensive Line			X
Defensive Line		X	
Linebackers		X	
Defensive Backs		X	
Kickers		X	

Best Team: 2003

Among the positions that don't peak in 2003, they'll still be strong in 2003. Quarterback, running back, and offensive line, though they don't peak in 2003, will still be outstanding units. So the nod for best team in the 2002-2004 time slot is easily the 2003 team.

Tech will be good in 2002, but on defense, the losses at defensive tackle and linebacker will take a bite out of this season's top-ranked defense. And in 2004, a mass exodus at the defensive end spot will slow them down again.

Offensively, the Hokies will be very steady in 2002-2004. You're likely to see a very consistent output from the offense over the next few years, and all three years should be better than this year's offense, which is hampered by a rebuilding offensive line.

And when you throw the schedule into consideration, 2003 is no doubt Tech's best shot at a national championship in the near future. In 2003, the Hokies get Miami, Boston College and Syra-

cuse at home. In 2002 and 2004, they don't.

In 2003, the Texas A&M game is at home, whereas in 2002, it's on the road. And 2004's road schedule is a killer: BC, Miami, Syracuse, LSU, and North Carolina. Even if the 2004 Hokies are a great team, that road schedule is a serious roadblock to winning a national championship. The 2003 road schedule, on the other hand, is Tech's easiest road schedule in the next three years: Rutgers, Pitt, Temple, WVU, and Virginia.

Circle 2003 on your calendars, Hokies. It's Tech's next, best shot at the national championship.

In Search of Defensive Tackles

This year, the defensive tackle position is stacked, but starting next year, the Hokies have some holes to fill.

by Neal Williams

Bud Foster, Virginia Tech's defensive coordinator, has been called a genius in his field by a variety of people. Tech's skilled (and fast) defense just might be the best in the country this season.

Bud Foster is a head coach in waiting. His reputation is that solid. But it doesn't take a genius to figure out one thing.

"We're going to be young at tackle" in 2002, Foster said. "I like the kids there, I like the way they're working, the way they're understanding the level of play and the expecta-

tions of college football. (But) we will have some growing pains there."

Ain't no doubt about that.

Coaches do plenty during the season. Their day starts early and ends late. Sometimes the days run together. While they are preparing for the coming game, they're also preparing for the future. It goes beyond recruiting. It includes assessing the talent on hand and figuring out who might fit where when openings become available.

If coaches look to the future while taking care of the present, fans ought to be allowed to do the same. Surprise. They do! And a fan doesn't have to be exceptionally astute to figure out Tech's situation at defensive tackle.

Starters David Pugh and Chad Beasley are excellent. They're perhaps the best tackle pair in the country. Both could end up playing in the National Football League.

They're seniors.

Backups Dan Wilkinson and Derrius Monroe keep the level high when they're on the field. Monroe has improved rapidly since being reinstated to the team. His conditioning is improving, and his speed is amazing. Wilkinson makes the most of every play he's in and his sacks-to-plays ratio is as good as anyone's.

They're seniors.

Think about that. How many positions see the entire two-deep wiped out? Tight end, maybe, though Browning Wynn and Bob Slowikowski share the position at Tech. Keith Willis and Jared Mazzetta will return. Three of the four inside linebackers are seniors.

Nowhere is the destruction as deep as it will be at tackle.

Furthermore, No. 5 tackle Channing Reed – who was in the two-deep before injuring a foot – is a senior.

Yow. Talk about a house that will empty out fast.

Before looking at the future of that position, let's take a look at the position itself.

There is very little traditional about Foster's defense. It's billed as a 4-3 and technically that's correct. There are four down linemen – two tackles and two ends. There are three linebackers – two "inside" and one "outside." There are four backs – two corners, one free safety and one "rover," which would translate to strong safety in a regular 4-3.

That's all pretty traditional looking. It doesn't work out that way.

Foster places more of a premium on speed than he does on size. We'll-get-there-before-you-do. He'll gladly take a small, strong, fast guy over a big lug. A big lug who is strong and fast is a bonus.

The ends, in particular, are smaller than most and faster than most.

The outside linebacker is a lineman sometimes, a traditional linebacker at other times and a defensive back as well. The rover is literally that. Kevin McCadam, this year's rover, is seemingly everywhere.

The tackles are about as close to traditional as you can get. They're the anchors, "the bell cows" as Foster calls Pugh and Beasley. One tackle position is called nose tackle, but that doesn't mean he lines up directly over the center. "It's basically just a name for the spot," Foster said. "They're tackles."

Beasley is 6-5, 295 pounds, Pugh 6-3, 276. Monroe, the fastest of the bunch, is 6-4, 275. Wilkinson is the shortest at 6-1, but he weighs 261 and doesn't lack for speed.

Good tackles make it virtually impossible to double up on one of the ends. Rare is the team that doesn't have to use a back to try and block one of Tech's linemen.

"They solidify the inside," Foster said of his tackles. "With the speed we have on the field, if people can't run inside on us we have gained an advantage. The way these guys are playing, it's hard for people to run inside.

"Just like in baseball, you have to be good up the middle."

Next year, the names will change.

The obvious starting place for replacements are Kevin Lewis and Mark Costen.

The 6-1, 280-pound Lewis, from Varina High in Richmond, was considered by the coaching staff to be Tech's third best defensive tackle in preseason. He was redshirted this season, but not because he's not good enough to play.

He wasn't so far ahead of Wilkinson and Reed (Monroe joined the team late in preseason and wasn't activated until the second game) that the coaches didn't feel comfortable with those two in there. It made sense for Lewis to sit and wait and have three full years remaining.

“We really think he can be one of the ‘bell cow’ types,” Foster said.

Costen is from Virginia Beach, and he was playing more early this season before Monroe got into game shape. The 6-3 Costen is up to 270 pounds. In his early days at Tech, the walk-on struggled to keep on weight. He attacked the weight room a little harder in the most recent offseason and was able to put on 20 pounds (and keep it on).

“That is part of the reason why we redshirted Lewis. We knew we had a lot of depth this year,” Foster said. “We’ll be able to use him for another three years.”

Everyone at Tech is hoping they’ll get a little confused for those three years. Kevin Lewis’ brother Jonathan is a standout lineman at Varina who may end up at Tech and provide the Hokies with a Lewis-Lewis tackle tandem.

But having another Lewis is not a guarantee – yet.

Foster said he’s happy with the candidates on hand among this year’s freshman class. No defensive linemen are among the group of true freshmen who are playing. Among the candidates:

Kevin Hilton — From Silver Spring, Md., Hilton recently underwent foot surgery but is expected to fully recover and be able to compete in the spring. He’s listed at 6-2, 255 pounds.

Tim Sandidge — From Pugh’s hometown (Madison Heights) and high school (Amherst County), he’s a young one in terms of experience. He only played his final two years of high school and still managed to become second-team all-state. He’s 6-2, 275.

Jason Murphy — From Baltimore, he was the Baltimore Sun’s defensive player of the year last season. He had 17 sacks as a senior and 60 during his career. He’s 6-3, 255.

Andrew Fleck — He’ll enroll in January. Fleck is from Edmond, Okla., and is listed as a defensive lineman and tight end. He’s 6-4, 240 pounds.

Brandon Frye — Another January enrollee. Frye is from Myrtle Beach, S.C., and was a tight end until moving to the defensive side as a senior. He’s 6-4, 255 pounds.

Will Montgomery — The walk-on surprise of the preseason, Montgomery was moved to offense but is redshirting this season. Foster wouldn’t mind seeing him moved back to the defensive side, and that’s a possibility. He’s a 6-2, 275-pounder from Clifton in Northern Virginia.

“We’d like to get him back if we could,” Foster said.

Is there a Pugh in the bunch? Is there a Beasley? The dropoff may seem considerable at first. Consider that neither became a full-time starter until his fourth year in the program. They were redshirts for a year, backups for two and then starters for two.

“No question we’ll be a little more inexperienced there,” Foster said. “But I like the kids we’ve got.”

Other Positions

It isn't just the defensive tackle position that will look vastly different next year. Other positions will have different looks as well.

Jarrett Ferguson has been entrenched so long at fullback that it will definitely be odd to see someone else starting. Sophomore Doug Easlick has supplanted senior Wayne Briggs as the backup and will presumably move in for Ferguson.

With Wynn and Slowikowski gone at tight end, look for sophomore Willis and redshirt freshman Mazzetta to have an arrangement similar to the Wynn-Slowikowski time share.

The receiving corps loses Andre Davis and Emmett Johnson. Terrell Parham, Richard Johnson and Shawn Witten will have some work to do to cover those slots. If Fred Lee enrolls in January (he's at prep school now), he could very quickly join the mix.

Inside linebacker? Vegas Robinson, a sophomore, is the only non-senior in the two-deep. Redshirt freshman Mikal Baaqee could become a factor. How about redshirt freshman Josh Spence? He's listed as a fullback, but has moved back and forth and could find playing time quicker on the defensive side if he gets down to some serious work at linebacker.

Chris Buie, a sophomore, is another possibility. True freshman James Anderson went to high school with Chris Clifton and DeAngelo Hall and is well regarded. Jordan Trott, from Torrance, Calif., is listed as a linebacker and defensive lineman. There's also Blake Warren of Centreville, son of former Washington Redskins' tight end Don Warren.

Hokie fans, no doubt, would love to think of Ahmad Brooks in that position. He's a 6-3, 230 pounder with 4.4 speed in the 40.

But, first, Brooks has to sign with the Hokies. He's finishing up his senior season at C.D. Hylton High in Woodbridge.

Dan Wilkinson: A Life on Track

An unheralded career backup on the field, Dan Wilkinson has made the most of his opportunities off the field.

by Neal Williams

Tailback Kevin Jones shows up at Virginia Tech and is part of the playing mix pretty much before his bags are unpacked.

Free safety Vincent Fuller takes a redshirt season and then becomes part of the two-deep. He's a player with a terrific future, Tech coaches say.

The dream of every player heading off to play Division I football is to have things work out like that. Play right away, or play pretty

darn quick. By the time your collegiate career is over, you've played a whole lot.

It doesn't work out that way for all of them. As a matter of fact, it doesn't work out that way for very many of them at all. For every Jones, for every Fuller, there are probably two guys who labor in the shadows their entire career. They come and they go and hardly anyone notices.

The Hokies' Dan Wilkinson could have been one of those guys, but thanks to an excellent work ethic and a champion's attitude, Wilkinson won't go away quietly.

He won't go away as a star. He's not a threat to have his jersey retired. But he's taking advantage of a small, late chance to make his presence felt. A fifth-year senior, Wilkinson is a backup defensive tackle. He'll have fewer tackles for his career than some guys post in half a season. Is it the role he wanted? Nope. Is he complaining? Nope.

When he leaves, Wilkinson will have a master's degree. And just enough dirt on his uniform to make all those two-a-day practices with no playing time in sight worthwhile.

"The plays I get, I'm grateful for," Wilkinson said. "I've been there, where you get no plays.

"Life doesn't always go the way you want it to go. I came here wanting to be the man, to be the starter. I've had to overcome a lot just to get to this point and it makes me feel good to have been able to do that."

To understand Wilkinson's perspective, it's important to take a quick look at his past.

From West Palm Beach, Fla., Wilkinson had a glittering resume at Palm Beach Lakes High. That doesn't make him special at Virginia Tech. You have to stand out at the prep level to earn a chance in a high-powered program like Tech.

He was a defensive end, a linebacker and a fullback. He was his team's Most Valuable Player as a senior. He had 14 sacks. He rushed for four touchdowns. He got to play in the Outback Steakhouse All-Star game.

Wilkinson headed to Tech and, like the overwhelming majority of new players, sat out his first season as a redshirt. Even with the raves the 2001 recruiting class at Tech received, only four

members have played as true freshmen.

Wilkinson did what a non-playing freshman is supposed to do. He worked like crazy. He got stronger. He showed his stuff in spring practice, with two sacks in scrimmages and another in the spring game.

He was ready.

Then disaster struck in the 1998 preseason before his redshirt freshman year. Wilkinson tore up a knee and required reconstructive surgery. There went the season. He learned the painful lesson all injured players learn: the football world spins away while yours is stuck on hold.

"I never had a sense of giving up, never wanted to give up," Wilkinson said. "That wasn't in my character. I think it's fair to say that before the injury I was in position to really contribute and become an integral part of the team. I was fighting for the No. 2 spot. Things were looking good. The injury set me back. It also caused a position change (from end to tackle).

"Most of what kept me going was my spiritual belief. God got me through it. When you're hurt, you feel so alone. You're not around the guys as much, you feel a little isolated. The coaches are just figuring out what you can do, and then you get hurt. They have to move on. I know you're not forgotten. But that is the feeling you get."

Injuries are as hard sometimes on the mind as they are on the body. They can devastate a player. Some don't handle it well.

Camm Jackson, a highly-touted prospect featured in last month's TSLX, is an example. He admitted as much. He never got back on the field and his life was derailed by legal troubles. He's just now pulling himself together, though his football days are long past.

Wilkinson is on the other side of the spectrum from Jackson.

Sure, he was hurt mentally as well as physically, but he didn't see his injury as the end of things. He attacked his rehabilitation. More important, he attacked his books. Wilkinson has a degree already, in Urban and Regional Planning. He's working toward a master's degree and plans to have it completed in another year.

"My degree is so important to me," Wilkinson said. "That should be the No. 1 reason anyone goes to college. Unfortunately, some guys come just for football.

"When I got hurt, I realized it was a great time to concentrate on my classes even more. I wasn't practicing, so I was able to direct all that extra energy to the classroom. My body might have been hampered. My brain was fine."

Wilkinson wasn't completely forgotten upon his return to the playing field, but others had passed him by on the depth chart, and he became sort of a backup to the backups. As a sophomore in 1999, he played in seven games and recorded 12 tackles. One was a sack.

As a junior in 2000, Wilkinson played in all 11 games and had 23 tackles. He was credited with 2.5

sacks. He started against Virginia and had a sack in that game. He added another three tackles in the Gator Bowl.

Competition remained intense at tackle during the 2001 preseason. David Pugh and Chad Beasley were entrenched as starters. Fellow senior Channing Reed, sophomore Kevin Lewis and up-and-comer Mark Costen were vying for playing time.

Wilkinson's continued development made Tech's coaches feel comfortable about having Lewis redshirt this season. Wilkinson was able to slide into a backup role, one that isn't like most second string jobs. At Tech, the second string defensive line plays a lot.

Through six games of the 2001 season, Wilkinson has 19 tackles and a sack.

"I've been very pleased with the way Dan has worked and developed," said Charley Wiles, Tech's defensive line coach.

A starter's job would be ideal, but at least Wilkinson is getting onto the dance floor before the music stops playing.

"One thing I've learned is never, ever take a single snap for granted," Wilkinson said. "Nothing is guaranteed. Our defensive line is so talented. Everybody can really play. I'm so happy just to be a part of that."

Take a tour through Tech's media guide and you'll find others like Wilkinson. Wayne Briggs is a senior fullback who keeps chugging along despite limited playing time. He caught four passes through the first six games.

Chris Krebs, a senior rover, has been primarily a special teams guy. Wayne Ward is a tailback by trade who is getting more carries this season but remains known as another special teams player.

All have been buried deeper than deep on the depth chart, yet they've kept plugging away. Their contributions may be smaller than those of the stars. That doesn't mean their contributions aren't important.

"We love the game," Wilkinson said. "Everybody is a piece of the puzzle."

When his playing days are over and his master's degree is in hand, Wilkinson plans to put his degrees to work. His daughter Danielle turns two on November 12, and he's proud that his degrees will allow him to be a better provider for her.

His career goal is to work with groups that provide low-income housing for poor families. He wants to act as something of a liaison and make sure the housing goes to people who truly qualify.

"People who work hard, people who need help. Not everybody strikes it rich," Wilkinson said. "I know people, have friends, who don't have much to eat besides bread and water. Those are the people I want to help."

Where Are They Now: J.C. Price

After a turbulent few years, former Tech All-American J.C. Price has figured things out.

by Will Stewart, TechSideline.com

The dusty football practice fields behind Radford High School are only a 20-minute drive from Virginia Tech's Lane Stadium, but for former Hokie defensive tackle J.C. Price, it's worlds away from his playing days at Virginia Tech. And that's just fine with him, because he has found his calling, and he's where he wants to be.

Price, a third-team All-American defensive tackle for the Hokies in 1995, has landed here after a turbulent few years

that saw him bounce around the NFL and Arena League football, get his Tech degree, and try his hand at a few jobs he didn't like.

This one he likes. He's the defensive line coach now at Radford, an A-class school of just over 400 students with a proud football tradition that includes two state championships in the early 1970's. Frank Beamer made a brief stop here early in his coaching career, when he served as an assistant coach from 1969 through 1971.

That was a long time ago, and in that funny way that things have of coming full circle, Price now serves as an assistant under the same man who was the head coach for the Radford Bobcats when Beamer was here back in 1971, Norm Lineburg.

For J.C. Price, his arrival at Radford High two years ago marked the end of one phase of his life -- his football career — and the beginning of another — his coaching career. Price, a solid but unspectacular defensive tackle for most of his career at Tech in the early 90's, exploded on the scene in his senior year in 1995 with a four-sack performance against the Miami Hurricanes. He never let up that year, and he eventually earned third-team All-American honors, which he used as a springboard to get drafted in the NFL in the spring of 1996.

But two years and many back problems later, Price's playing days were over, and he had to find something else to do. It took a while, but Price, who married former Tech basketball star Jenny Root along the way, has now found a place he can call home, and an occupation that he wants to make his life's career.

The transition from player to coach wasn't an easy one, but he's happy and ready to move on. And by the way, he's pretty good at coaching, too.

1995: A Breakout Performance

Price was a key player for a 1995 Hokie football team that rebounded from an 0-2 start, including an ugly home loss to Cincinnati, to win ten straight and finish 10-2, capturing Tech's first major bowl win (a 28-10 victory over Texas in the Sugar Bowl) and the Hokies' first season-ending top 10 finish.

Like most Hokie fans and players from the mid-90's, the 1995 season was special to J.C. Price.

After losing at home to Boston College 20-14 in the season opener, the Hokies dropped a hideous 16-0 loss to Cincinnati the next week, also at home. With the nationally ranked powerhouse Miami Hurricanes coming to Blacksburg for game #3, the Hokies were staring down the barrel of an 0-3 start and a long season.

Those who follow Tech football know what happened next. Tech downed the Hurricanes 13-7 in what many call the most important win in Tech football history. Price played a key role in the game, dominating the line of scrimmage and racking up four sacks, including a crushing sack of Miami quarterback Ryan Clement after the Canes had driven to Tech's 24 yard line with under a minute to go and Tech leading 13-7. Price's sack resulted in a ten-yard loss for the Canes, who couldn't recover.

When the clock expired on Tech's victory, it set off a wild celebration in Lane Stadium, and it also galvanized the team into making their ten-game run to close the season.

"I remember the week between the Cincinnati game to the Miami game, where you could feel as low as low could be," Price reminisced in a recent interview with the TSL Extra. "Then we go the following week to being on the ultimate high, and then riding that high the rest of the year. It still blows my mind how we were able to turn that thing around, from the top of the coaching staff, all the way down to the equipment managers. It was everybody that turned it around, not just the players or the coaches."

The game was Price's own personal coming out party, and it started off a season that ended with him being picked as a third-team All-American by the Associated Press. His senior season was his best at Tech by far, and there's little mystery as to why. Price's back, which had bothered him throughout his entire football career (he calls the bad L5 disc in his back a "genetic gift" from his father), was pain free his entire senior season.

"Something just clicked that senior year," he says. "I had battled back problems my whole career. I only went through one spring ball. I always had problems with my back, and we always had to work on it in the spring. That spring (1995), I was going to see Cindy Henderson (a Tech trainer) every day. I didn't practice, and the best I've ever felt was that fall.

"I remember there were games my junior year where I was getting the stem treatment right before the game. Southern Miss, my junior year, I wasn't even sure I was going to be able to go out for the coin flip, my back hurt so bad. For some reason, I just never had the pains my senior year."

Playing without pain for the first time, he was awesome, and his senior stats were eye-popping for a defensive tackle: 104 tackles, 8 sacks, 15 tackles for loss, and 38 QB hurries. Previously unheralded, he came from nowhere to draw the attention of the NFL scouts, and the Miami game started it all.

"That game got me drafted more than any 40 I ever ran, or any bench press I ever lifted," Price notes. "I had four sacks, but the one play where I chased (Miami receiver) Yatil Greene all the way down the field and made a tackle 40 yards from the line of scrimmage ... it's things like that that got me drafted."

That, and a little help from his friend, the late Tech trainer Eddie Farrell, who died in 1998.

“The other thing that helped was Eddie Farrell,” Price says. Then he pauses. “I miss Eddie. Everybody does. Me and Eddie were close, because I spent so much time in the training room for my back. When the NFL people came around before my senior year and gave him a list of players they wanted (health and injury) information on, I wasn’t on the list. Eddie wrote my name on that list and said, ‘You need to have this guy on your list.’”

Farrell put Price on the radar screen, and J.C. did the rest. When all was said and done, Price was drafted in April of 1996 by the Carolina Panthers, who picked him in the third round of the draft as the 88th selection overall.

It was a storybook ending to a storybook senior season ... right?

Actually, that’s when things started to go south for J.C. Price. He had no idea that his best playing days were already behind him.

The NFL Experience

“I was shocked to get drafted in the third round to begin with,” he remembers, “because I figured I was going to the Jets in the fourth round. The whole fact that Carolina drafted me shocked me, because I didn’t even work out for Carolina. I never worked out for them here at Tech.”

But beyond being surprised, Price was confused, as were many observers. Carolina ran a 3-4 defensive scheme at the time, and Price, undersized for noseguard at just 270 pounds, was ill-suited for the role the Panthers wanted him to play.

“To tell the truth, I had trouble adjusting to it. The way they wanted me to play, a 3-4 scheme is based around keeping the offensive line off of the linebackers. And here I am at 270 pounds trying to take on 300 pound guards and centers. I never really had to take them on here at Tech, and I just couldn’t do it.

“My whole career and style of play was based on me being able to get into you and be gone before you could get your hands on me. I’m not a very big statured person. My speed was always my greatest asset.”

But as ill-suited as he was for the noseguard position, Price worked hard and did well. He even returned an interception for a touchdown in a preseason game. Carolina was sold on him and wanted to keep him. Or so Price thought. But it didn’t work out that way, and Carolina released him on the final cut-down before the 1996 season started.

“What made me mad,” Price recalls, “was that I did everything they asked me to. I didn’t hold out, I moved everything to North Carolina, I went to all their lifting sessions that summer. They released me, and I found out a year later, after (former Tech teammate) Waverly Jackson went down there on their practice squad, that what happened was I was a salary cap casualty.

“I was the second of two third-round picks,” he explains. “That was the year they signed Rocket Ismail. They basically signed Rocket for one of their third-round draft pick’s salaries, so one of us two third-round draft picks had to go. The other one was Wendell Oliver, and he was the starting

punt returner, so it wasn't going to be him. So, technically, I was a salary cap casualty my first year."

Getting cut at the last instant meant that all Price could hope for was to make someone else's practice squad. Within days, he got his chance when the Arizona Cardinals called him up. Things were looking up, because Arizona ran a 4-3 that would allow Price to utilize his speed and skills.

And then his father's "genetic gift" started acting up again.

"I went there (Arizona) and was on the practice squad, but as soon as I got out to Arizona, I started having trouble with my back. I ended up spending the last 2 or 3 weeks on IR (Injured Reserve). I had shooting pains down my leg from a disc in my back, and I really couldn't do anything, so they put me on IR."

Out for the season, Price returned to Blacksburg and rehabbed, once again making himself pain free. He went back to Arizona for the 1997 season, and he was in a good position, battling it out for the top defensive tackle backup spot on the team. It was between Price and a tackle named Jerry Drake. Throughout two-a-days, Price and Drake waged a war, alternating day by day on the depth chart.

"Then one day," Price recalls, "all I did in practice was put my weight on my left leg and reach around Eric Swann to get a towel, and boom! — shooting pains down both legs." His back was giving him trouble once more.

"As soon as that happened, I tried my best to get back on the field. I missed five days of two-a-days, and they wanted me back on the field. I sucked it up, and probably did something I shouldn't have. I went and got back on the field. I took as many aspirin as the human body can probably take, and I went on the field."

Price was just trying to make the team, but he was about to get his second dose of the business end of professional football. The Cardinals had encouraged him to get back on the field, but it wasn't because they wanted him to play. They had other plans.

"Well, little did I know, they wanted me on the field so they could tape me practicing and then release me without having to pay me. Once they had me on film (practicing after the injury), they thought that I couldn't say that I was still injured, so they could release me without having to pay me severance pay, or pay for my rehab.

"So here I am, battling with this guy Jerry Drake, and I make it through a practice, and right after the practice, they pull me into the office and release me, saying they've got to go in another direction, or whatever. I'm just — I'm livid. Here I am, this is my shot, and in my mind, I'm beating this guy (Drake) out for a spot on the active roster.

"So they try to slip a waiver past me, and try to get me to sign it really quick. They didn't think I would read the thing, but they were trying to get me to sign something that said I was healthy. I wouldn't sign it. I said 'I'm not healthy, I'm not fine.'"

"I came home, but they had to keep me on the roster and put me on IR, which means that my season was done. So I came back to Blacksburg and started rehabbing again."

Price rehabbed during the early months of 1998 and was picked up by the Chicago Bears in the summer of 1998. The Bears wanted him to play in the World League of American Football (now called NFL Europe), and he went to Chicago for his physical.

He failed it, and the reason why is still a mystery. “I had been rehabbing my back and had been pain free for five months, no problem. I go see the doctor, and he pokes and prods me, and he fails me. To this day, I don’t know why. They never gave my agent a clear reason why I failed the physical.”

Upon hearing that he had failed the Bears’ physical, the World League dropped him as well.

Three strikes, and J.C. Price was out.

“My career was over.”

Life After the NFL

That was the summer of 1998, and Price decided to go back and finish his degree at Tech. But to do that, he needed some money. So when former Tech teammates Jim Baron and William Yarborough called him from Nashville, where they were playing Arena Football, and told him he should come down, Price did.

By then, his back was killing him. “Arena League practice is about as hard as a college walk-through,” Price laughs. “It’s that easy. But even with that, I couldn’t make it through a week of practice. The NFL people wound up being right about my back, for whatever reason, because it started deteriorating so bad — when I was in Nashville, I would play on Friday nights, and that’s it. I wouldn’t practice all week. The team would go and practice, and I would go sit in the hot tub or the swimming pool to rehab and work out. I would never practice, I would just play.

“I finally said to myself, ‘What am I doing? I can’t even make it through an Arena Football season. What am I doing to myself?’ And that was that.”

Arena Football cash in hand, Price headed back to Blacksburg and finished his undergraduate degree in Arts and Sciences (now called Interdisciplinary Studies) in the fall of 1998. But his journey to finding a career was just beginning, and he made a few false starts along the way.

“I tried a few jobs. I sold cars (during spring/summer 1999), but I didn’t find anything I liked until one day I bumped into a guy I didn’t know, and he asked me what I was doing. I told him nothing.

“He said, ‘Do you want to coach high school football?’

“I said, ‘Sure, I’m not doing anything.’

“That’s when I went and met Norm Lineburg for the first time.”

At Home With the Bobcats

Radford High head coach Norm Lineburg is an icon in this city of approximately 16,000 residents that sits along the New River and is home to Radford University. Lineburg has been the head coach at Radford High since 1970, when he and fellow assistant coach Frank Beamer applied for the job, and Lineburg won it.

In his 30-plus years of coaching, Lineburg has seen plenty of assistant coaches, and he thinks the world of J.C. Price. When asked about Price, the first words out of Lineburg's mouth are, "He's coaching at the wrong level."

Lineburg thinks that Price, who coaches the defensive line for him, could easily coach at the college level, and perhaps even in the NFL. "We certainly think it's one of the best finds we've had in coaching. He is so intelligent and well-schooled in football, and I really think that he can coach on the Division 1 level, or higher. He knows the skills and techniques of defensive line play as well as anyone I've been around, and he does a wonderful job of teaching the kids. He relates so well to kids."

But when Price arrived at Radford in the fall of 1999, he wasn't sure what he wanted to do. He quickly found out that coaching appealed to him.

"I went and started working for Norm in the fall of '99. I wanted to be around the kids all the time, so I substituted and was a teacher's aide during the day, so I could see if this is what I wanted to do. That's when I decided this is what I wanted to do. This is something I might enjoy.

Price went back to school at Tech in the fall of 2000, while still coaching at Radford, and started to work towards his second undergraduate degree, this one in Physical Education. "And right now, all I have to do is finish student teaching in the spring (of 2002), and I'll get my P.E. degree. So I'm about to get my second degree, and then I'll be able to teach P.E. and coach.

"Right now, I'm working as a teacher's aide with some special education students, some kids with Attention Deficit Disorder, and things like that. It's kind of neat, because one of the things I've learned is that each kid's home life is different, and their home life is the reason why they act the way they do at school. It (their behavior) is never really right or wrong, because you don't know what they're going through at home. It has really taught me a lot and has taught me to be understanding about different things. The first year I was here, I wasn't really understanding about a lot of things. It's been a good experience for me."

While Lineburg thinks Price could coach at the collegiate level, J.C. has a narrow set of criteria that would entice him to move up to coaching in the college ranks. Namely, he would only do it if he could start out on staff at Virginia Tech.

"To be honest, if I did it (coaching college football) I would want to do it at Tech. I mean, by starting the GA process. I probably could have gone other places, but to me, it would be kind of like giving your heart to somebody else, and I just couldn't see myself doing that. Maybe that's the wrong point of view, but I love being a Hokie so much that I just can't fathom going somewhere else.

"If I started coaching at Tech, and the opportunity (to move up) wasn't there, then I would go get a

job coaching somewhere else. I could do that, because that would be my livelihood. But to actually get started, I just couldn't fathom myself doing it anywhere else but Tech. And if it ever happens, great, if it doesn't, I'll be just as happy coaching high school every day for the rest of my life.

"I'm going to be a lifetime coach," Price says. "The level on which I coach is yet to be determined."

For now, he's happy at Radford, and Lineburg is happy to have him.

"The thing about J.C. is he's a full-speeder," Lineburg says with admiration. "The best way I can say it is that he's as highly motivated as a coach as he was as a football player.

"He demands excellence, as it was when he played. He was that kind of football player. He was going to give his best effort at all times, and he demands that out of the kids, on and off the field. He really requires that the kids are going to give it their best effort, or it's not accepted by him. With him, you do the job, and there's just not any excuses allowed. I really appreciate that, and the kids appreciate it."

In his two-plus years at Radford, Price has brought a little bit of Blacksburg to the Bobcats. Radford recently completed construction on a \$1.5 million workout center at the high school called the King Center that was funded almost entirely by private donations from Radford citizens and businesses. Price raves about it, calling it a "Mini-Merryman," and he has brought some of Tech strength and conditioning coach Mike Gentry's techniques to the Bobcats and the King Center.

Not to mention his coaching of the defensive line. Lineburg says, "Virginia Tech, I respect them for everything they've done as far as football goes, but especially on the defensive side of the football. J.C. has brought so much of the (Tech) defensive scheme to our football team, plus the fundamentals of the game. Having recently played, he's able to coach and coach it well. He brings that back to us.

"There's so few people that have the drive that he has," Lineburg says. "When J.C. coaches, you can just see in his eyes what kind of football player he must have been. It's written all over him. He coaches the way he played, full speed. I love that part of it."

And now that he's ready to get started with the rest of his life, you can tell that J.C. Price loves it, too. Price admires Radford High School ("Everything Radford does is first class") and the way the community embraces the football team ("This town *shuts down* on Friday night"). When you listen to him talk, you can see that although college coaching interests him, he could very easily wind up spending the rest of his life here, or at another high school.

"One thing that intrigues me about college coaching," he says, "is that you get to go recruit, and you get to go test your people skills on an every day basis. It's more fulfilling for your ego: am I outcoaching this guy? Am I outreaching this guy? Whereas in high school, those elements are there, but it's not to the same degree. Everybody pretty much gets dealt the same hand talent-wise, but the thing that intrigues you about high school coaching is ... "

He trails off for a second. "Take Norm Lineburg. Having coached all four of his sons, and being able to walk anywhere in the city of Radford and run into people that you have coached — he's coaching kids now that are second and third-generation Bobcats — that to me is special. To be in some place

30 years, having coached all four of your own kids, having guys you used to coach come back and see you coach their sons.”

“That’s what attracts me to high school coaching. Not the money. To be honest, the one time in my life I had money, I wasn’t all that happy. When I was in the NFL, I was miserable. I wasn’t happy. My wife had to kick me out of bed to get me to go to practice in the morning. These days, I’m coaching, my body doesn’t hurt anymore, I’m up at 5:00 and 6:00 every morning, ready to go. It’s just a different feeling.”

Popcorn, Pizza, and Pretzels

Everything you ever wanted to know about the concession stands at Virginia Tech sporting events.

by Tamlin Bason

On Saturday mornings, Bobbi Hinkle can't afford to sleep in late. She, her two sisters and daughter wake up at 5 a.m. and start preparing food for the day ahead. In a sense, what Hinkle and her family does is no different from what any other southern family does on a Saturday. They spend time together, and enjoy the outdoors. They uphold the southern tradition by cooking some old fashioned barbecue and, of course, they watch college football.

Well there is one small difference: Hinkle and family cater to some 56,000 Virginia Tech football fans every time the Hokies play at home.

The three sisters, dubbed "The Three Little Pigs," hail from West Virginia but can be seen every Saturday under the West Virginia school flag on the alumni side of Lane Stadium. They began their business 17 years ago, selling beef-bbq sandwiches at the West Virginia State fair but have since moved into different venues.

"We had a recipe for a beef sauce that we knew was really good," said Hinkle. "Back then everyone was doing pork, so we wanted to be different."

So, why the swine connotations when the sisters sell beef?

Hinkle said that her and her sisters, Linda Powell and Ernestine Atkinson, used to dine every Sunday with their parents.

"One Sunday, we were all sitting around eating and somebody said that we all ate like pigs... We just started laughing. Since we had been looking off a name, we just kind of used it," Hinkle said.

Recently the trio has been joined by Hinkle's daughter, Amber Hinkle, but they opted to keep the name despite the four members of the group. Bobbi Hinkle prides her business on being health conscious.

"We pull all our own beef by hand and we make sure there is no fat in it," Hinkle said.

Hinkle also said that being from West Virginia, division among the Big East Rivals runs strong.

"We have family that went to both schools. My daughter went to West Virginia, so did Ernestine...Ernestine's husband went to Tech and it was his idea for us to come sell here," said Hinkle.

The Three Little Pigs make up one of the many independently-run concession stands seen at every Tech football game. There are approximately 40 concession stands in the entire stadium. Of those, 30 are owned and operated by Virginia Tech. The other 10 stands are operated by independent companies, such as Hinkle's. They are given the space for free and then are asked to share their

profits with the university.

According to Doug Dodson, the food service director at Virginia Tech, the independent operators are usually asked to share anywhere between 25-and-50% of their take home profits with the university.

This marks the first year that “The Three Little Pigs” have sold concessions at games.

Other newcomers this year include Burkley Roberts and Joe Lambert. You may have seen their merchandise in the stands and mistaken it for a weapon. Their stand, which is also located on the West side of the stadium, sells turkey legs. The 1½ to 2-pound leg serves as a competent adversary to hunger, and with a flip of the wrist, the thick bone is a great deterrent for anyone who tries to smuggle a taste from the owner.

The unusual product is in a sense a byproduct of a tandem of unusual partners. Roberts also teaches martial arts and sells tropical ice at state fairs, and Lambert bounces around the tent doing numerous things at once. When Tech played Boston College, Lambert had his left hand bandaged but continued to hold a tong in his right hand so he could still tend to the grill.

Lambert jokes that the turkey leg is only a weapon “if you keep it frozen.”

The two sell their poultry under a large white banner, reading “Turkey Legs”. Lambert said that despite the fact that Tech’s mascot is itself a turkey, business has been booming.

“We are all huge VT supporters and we are not scared to eat our own!” Lambert said with the conviction of a high school football coach rallying his players at halftime.

However, the independents are not the only ones making money. Virginia Tech’s 30 stands sell a tremendous amount of food, much of it more traditional than mammoth turkey legs.

Dodson went on to say that every Saturday, 6,000 hot dogs, 15,000-30,000 sodas, 2,500 pretzels and a few thousand bags of peanuts are consumed by fans. The school concession stands employ anywhere from 300 to 350 people and are often run by local community groups, including the Humane Society, and local fraternities and sororities. The groups operate the stands and share the profits. The rest of the money goes back to the school in forms of scholarships and other improvements, according to Dodson.

Pi Sigma Epsilon, the business fraternity on campus, runs a concession stand on the East side of the stadium. The organization panders popcorn, peanuts, candy, soda and bottled water. The fraternity usually fields eight people for each game, with four working the first half and a different four taking over after halftime.

According to Pippy Kravchonok, Football Concessions Project Manager for Pi Sigma Epsilon, the fraternity takes home 10% of the profits made each game. Since the stand typically sells between \$1,500 and \$2,100 a game, the fraternity will rake in a few hundred bucks a game, and close to a thousand dollars a year.

“Concessions involves a lot of work and long hours, but it’s a great way to make a significant

amount of money for our organization,” said Kravchonok.

In the previous years, Dominoes Pizza and Taco Bell have been the only two large corporations allowed to sell their products in the stands. However, after last year, the contracts ran out and Tech out bid Dominoes. Not to fear, pizza lovers still have choices.

“We not have Top Hat Pizza,” said Dodson. “People have been going more and more, and it has been getting better with each home game.”

Something that fans won’t have a choice in is soft drink selection. The university recently signed a contract with Coca-Cola, limiting sales of any competitor’s products on the entire campus. Pepsi had sold its products at the stadium for the last 10 years but lost the bid to Coke this year.

Dodson, who himself graduated from Tech in 1982, says that it takes almost two weeks to get everything set up for games. Fortunately, every home game this season save two have been separated by two or more weeks.

“It takes a few days just to get the stadium cleaned up and everything organized,” Dodson said.

One thing fans are sure to groan about is the price of concessions. At Lane Stadium, sodas are sold for anywhere from \$2.75-\$3.00, depending on the size. Hotdogs sell for \$2.50-3.50, depending on condiment preference. Even the price of a candy bar can cost up to two bucks. Cracker Jacks sell for \$2.50, and just a pretzel can put a good divot in a hungry fan’s pocketbook. However, inflated prices at public events are hardly anything new, nor are they confined to Blacksburg.

Dodson said that he called school across the nation prior to the season to see if Tech’s prices were in line with other stadiums.

“On average our prices are still lower than a lot of places,” said Dodson. “Before I make any changes in our prices, I call to see what everybody else is charging for the same products.”

The prices are so high, because the school takes a cut out of every sale. Dodson said that since the school was making an investment by purchasing the goods, it had to charge extra to make a profit.

Dodson would not comment on the amount of money that Tech makes of concessions every year, but simple math can give an idea of how much it is. If 6,000 hot dogs are sold every game, at an average of \$3.00 a sale multiplied by six home games, the total comes to \$108,000. That is just for hot dogs, and keep in mind that many sell for more than \$3.00. Assuming 20,000 sodas are sold, again at an average of \$3.00 a pop, then the total for soda is \$360,000.

Marketing ploys, such as selling sodas in collector editions cups (featuring, among others, Lee Suggs, Ben Taylor and Frank Beamer), have been used to try to increase sales.

“People come up and ask about the cups a lot, but I don’t know if it has improved sales,” said Dodson. “Sometimes you see people walking through the stands after games picking them up, so if nothing else it helps our cleanup crew.”

With the new stadium expansion, the concessions department will also grow. Dodson says that he plans to put another six to eight stands in the South end of the stadium once renovations are complete.

Clearly the concessions at football games is a lucrative market for Virginia Tech, but Dodson is also responsible for selling at basketball games.

He says that basketball season is easier, because there is less preparation for the games. There is no grilling involved and there are fewer fans. Despite the success of the women's basketball team, Dodson says that men's games are better for sales.

However, basketball games are far off on the horizon. For at least a few more weekends, Hinkle and her sisters will be getting up early and traveling down 460. Roberts and Lambert will be grilling their gargantuan products, serving them with a smile and a quip. Dodson will be on the phone for hours at a time ordering more food and organizing the huge pantry located in the stadium. Kravchonok and her compatriots will be missing half of each home game as they try to raise funds for their fraternity.

Concessions at sporting events date back as far as anyone remembers. Just look at the famous song. Ever wonder why "root, root, root for the home team," comes in the second verse, whereas "buy me some peanuts and cracker jacks," is in the first verse?

Bon appetit!

Virginia Tech's Own "Rudy"

It took five years for walk-on kicker Matt Felber to finally run out of the tunnel in a Tech uniform.

by Cary Whaley

When #30 put on his jersey and took the field for the Virginia Tech Hokies against the University of Central Florida, it wasn't with heroic aspirations. He never even played in the game. However, in the case of redshirt senior kicker Matt Felber, it was noteworthy, since it was the fulfillment of a five-year quest for a seemingly unattainable goal....to wear a Virginia Tech football jersey.

Much like Notre Dame's legendary Daniel "Rudy" Ruettiger, Matt Felber's story is one

of a fierce determination to overcome obstacles and criticisms. His goals are to wear the maroon and orange jersey of the Hokies and to continue to be a part of a team that he now regards as family.

Felber's five-year career as an unrecruited walk-on has suffered many setbacks. He had to try out for the team, was cut from the team three times, and spent four years on the team without a jersey number. In spite of all of this, he has continued to display a steady work ethic and an inspiring dedication to the Hokies.

Making the Team

Matt Felber walked on to the Virginia Tech football team in 1997 with the dream of playing college football. During his high school years at Randolph Macon Academy, he was a kicker and played on the soccer team. While many colleges didn't recruit him, he decided that whatever college he chose, he would try out for their football team. He had no other reason in mind than to reach for a dream that seemed beyond his grasp. With that in mind, Matt Felber chose Virginia Tech.

Virginia Tech football has a storied walk-on program that has produced several NFL standouts, such as John Burke and John Engelberger. However, the Hokie football coaches specifically recruit most of the walk-ons. The remaining few players are selected from tryouts that the Assistant Athletic Director conducts. Most of these players are with the team for a short time, only a couple of months.

Felber attended the tryout with about 30 other football hopefuls, eight of which were kickers or punters. The tryout did not go well for him. He turned in the slowest time in the 40-yard dash. His first couple of punts were shorter than those of the other punters. He was given one more chance to punt and kicked it 55 yards. That punt was good enough to catch Coach Beamer's attention, and Matt was called over to practice with Tech's special teams.

Imagine if you will, an 18-year old dressed in a t-shirt and shorts lining up behind 10 players in full pads, blocking another 10 players rushing in to block the punt. Even with that pressure, Felber managed to make punt consistently and received a locker and a spot on the team.

Keeping Up

Making the team was only the beginning. For a tryout player, nothing is automatic. A player can be cut at any time. To remain with the team a walk-on has to give it his all in every workout and practice.

Felber spent his freshmen year as a placekicker and punter for the scout and jayvee teams. In the jayvee games, he was very nervous and inconsistent. After just his second jayvee game, he was cut from the roster. His dream of playing for the Hokies had ended, or so he thought.

After the 1997 Gator Bowl game, place-kicker Shayne Graham called Felber to see if he wanted to work out with him during the off season. Felber agreed to join Graham at his daily 7 am workouts. Felber was asked back during the first week of spring practice and punted 3 times for an average of 38.3 yards during the 1998 Spring Game.

Instead of going to summer school, Felber spent the summer working as an instructor for two kicking camps. When he returned to Blacksburg in the late summer, he learned that one of the realities of Division 1 football is that the summer workouts are extremely important. Players who had worked out the entire summer were less than pleased to see Felber return from a summer "break."

He spent his sophomore year kicking for the jayvee team. He kicked a 41-yard field goal and three extra points in a 24-21 jayvee win over Fork Union Academy. He traveled with the scout team to the Music City Bowl that year but he still didn't dress for the game. However, he didn't complain; being with his friends on the team and seeing them hold up the trophy was reward enough for his efforts that year.

While Shayne Graham and Jimmy Kibble solidly held down the kicking and punting chores, Felber continued to work hard in the weight room. He regularly attended Assistant Athletic Director of Athletic Performance Mike Gentry's 6 am winter workouts. In spring practice in 1999, he was bettering Jimmy Kibble's average distance. He stayed for the summer workouts, and a transformation began to occur. He was becoming an athlete.

Other players, including former Hokie quarterback Dave Meyer began to notice, "During the summer, you could always find Matt Felber with his bag of footballs out on the practice fields practicing his punting and kicking," Meyer remembers.

The Sugar Bowl Season

On the brink of what was to be the Hokies' greatest season ever, Felber was cut from the team. The Hokies had brought in two recruited walk-on freshmen, Bobby Peaslee and Carter Warley, to August two-a-days. Felber was offered the opportunity to continue to workout with the team in t-shirt and shorts. He was officially listed as a redshirt but wasn't assigned a locker and had to watch every game of the 11-0 season from the stands.

At the final game against Boston College, Felber was sitting with his kicking coach in the first row of the bleachers on the home side of the field. A Tech graduate assistant, Bill Houseright, saw him in the stands and told him to come down onto the field and join the team for the fourth quarter.

A month later, he watched the Hokies play for the National Championship in the Sugar Bowl on

television. Again it appeared his days with the team had come to an end.

However, the next spring he was asked to rejoin the team for spring practice and challenge Bobby Peaslee for starting punter. He outdistanced Peaslee's 37-yard average with a 41.7-yard average. He stayed in Blacksburg throughout the summer with the hope that he'd get to start in the fall. Instead, Coach Beamer invited redshirt freshman Peaslee and scholarship true freshman Vinnie Burns to the August two-a-days. Felber, who was a redshirt junior at the time, was again told that his services would not be needed and was cut from the team.

As the start of the season neared, Coach Beamer decided to redshirt Burns and gave the starting job to Peaslee. Peaslee got off to a slow start, so after the second game, Felber was called to rejoin the team. He kicked an extra point in a jayvee win over Fork Union and punted four times for a 38.8-yard average for the JV team in a victory over Hargrave Military Academy. He traveled to Jacksonville for the Gator Bowl and kicked with the scout team. All the while he had never appeared in a team photo or dressed for a game.

Getting a Uniform

Last April was Felber's last chance to impress. He went into spring practice thinking he had a good shot at challenging for punter. Coach Beamer had indicated that the position of punter was up for grabs, with Peaslee and Burns in the mix. However, during the very first day of practice, Felber was switched to placekicker to challenge Jon Mollerup, because returning starter Carter Warley was out all spring with a lower back injury.

The competition between Mollerup and Felber was head-to-head, with both listed on the first team of the depth chart. Mollerup had the strongest leg of the two, but Felber was more accurate and consistent.

Mollerup won the job as the backup to Warley, but Felber's strong spring performance as a placekicker led to a couple of personal firsts: he was asked to join the team for the August two-a-days, and his picture and bio were included in the preseason media guide. He had made the team.

With his dream within his grasp, Felber continues to display the work ethic that has kept him with the team. Prior to this season's Connecticut game, Felber had his appendix removed. Despite that, he was back at practice after just a few days, with tape holding his surgical stitches in place. Last month he was given Virginia Tech Jersey #30, which he proudly wore during the Central Florida game on September 29th. Last Saturday against Boston College, Matt Felber was in uniform for only the second time in his college career.

Getting Respect

While his name seldom appears on depth charts, and he can hardly be called a difference maker, Felber's determination and dedication to the team have earned him the respect of the players and coaches alike.

"The guy uses all the physical, God-given abilities he has to the max," recounts Meyer. "There is no questioning this guy's heart and desire to be on the Hokie football team."

While he hasn't gained success on the field, Felber has gained success in the classroom. He will graduate with a degree in Management Science. After college, he'd like to keep playing football on the side and plans on trying out for an Arena football team.

Will He or Won't He?

While his hard work has earned him jersey #30, whether or not Matt Felber will get to play for the Hokies has yet to be decided.

As with many things in his football career, conventional wisdom says he won't. He's listed as the 3rd string kicker behind Carter Warley and Jon Mollerup. If Warley's back injury is aggravated, Felber could be useful in extra-point and short field-goal situations. It is possible, but not likely that he could see some late-game action in a blowout. Kickers have only a few opportunities to play in each game, and it's important for the starters to get in as many plays as possible.

Even if he never plays a down for the Hokies, fulfilling his personal dream has rewarded Felber in many ways. He has built friendships with many of the players and coaches, been transformed by the Virginia Tech's strength and conditioning program from a wiry walk-on into an athlete ... and more importantly, into #30 for the Virginia Tech Hokies.

In the end, the most important thing that Matt Felber has accomplished is the fulfillment of a dream that even Rudy Ruettiger would approve of.

Inside the Numbers: Special Teams Dominance

So, exactly how much better are the Hokies at special teams than their opponents?

by Will Stewart, TechSideline.com

“Special Teams U.”

You hear it all the time: Virginia Tech has the best special teams in the country; Frank Beamer coaches the special teams himself; the Hokies blocked more kicks in the 90’s than any other college team; Tech has blocked 83 kicks in 14 seasons under Beamer; etc., etc.

After a while, it all starts to run together, and the gaudy stats start to lose their meaning. You *know* Tech’s good at special teams play. They block kicks, they run kicks back, they blow games open with special teams ... they

do it all.

Where else in the country do the fans make so much noise every time the punt block team comes out? Where else in the country do the fans smile and nod every time their kicker boots *another* kickoff out of the end zone? Where else in the country was the new punter a quasi-legend before he even stepped on the field for his first game?

Where else in the country do the special teams have their own nickname, “Pride and Joy,” because they’re the head coach’s ... pride and joy?

Nowhere but Virginia Tech. Other schools pay lip service to special teams, but at Tech, the Hokies walk the walk.

By now, you’ve grown used to it, and perhaps you even take it for granted. If you’re like most Hokie fans, you think Virginia Tech could block every single punt if they really wanted to, and you can’t understand why they don’t try to. And then Andre Davis returns another one for a touchdown, and you turn to your Tech buddy in the middle of your celebration and say, “ ... What were we talking about?”

So you know Tech’s special teams are good, very good. But how good? 83 blocks is a lot, but how good is it? In other words, how do Tech’s stats compare to their opponents’ stats?

Ah, that’s the key question, isn’t it? Because if you run a 9.85 in the hundred, it doesn’t matter if the other 7 guys in the race can all run 9.75’s. You’re going to come in last.

That brings us to the point of this latest edition of “Inside the Numbers.” We’re not just going to take a look at how good the Hokies are at special teams. We’re going to find out how much better they are than their opponents, and that will help us quantify the extent of Virginia Tech’s special teams dominance.

The Data

There are many, many aspects to special teams performance: return yardage, punting average, net

punting average, touchbacks, field goal percentage, etc. But what sets the Hokies apart in special teams are two things: blocked kicks and scoring. Tech blocks more kicks than most teams in the country, and the Hokies score off of those blocks and off of kick returns.

We're going to take a look at four sets of data for the Hokies and their opponents: blocks, touchdowns off of blocks, punt returns for TD's, and kickoff returns for TD's. When we're done, you'll be able to tell your friends exactly how many blocks and points per game Tech's special teams dominance is worth.

Note that the data presented here include bowl games, not just regular season data. The data do not include numbers for the 2001 season, just 1987-2000. Along the way, we're going to take a quick look at the numbers since 1998, because since then, the Hokies have really cranked up the heat.

Blocked Kicks

The blocked kick is the signature play of Frank Beamer's special teams, in particular the punt block. While other teams go for games on end without pressuring kickers, Beamer believes in using the special teams like a weapon to turn the game around.

Frank Beamer does what very few coaches do: he alternates pressure with setting up for the return, to the point where opposing teams can neither protect at maximum efficiency nor prepare properly for the return. In recent years, the Hokies have been able to pinball back and forth between blocking kicks and returning them for touchdowns, doing both with more effectiveness than most other teams in college football.

Here are the kick block figures for Beamer's tenure at Tech. The numbers include punt, field goal, and extra point blocks.

Blocked Kicks (all kinds), 1987-2000

Season	VT	Opp.
1987	3	0
1988	7	4
1989	2	3
1990	6	3
1991	6	0
1992	6	2
1993	6	1
1994	4	0
1995	8	5
1996	6	2
1997	7	5
1998	12	2
1999	2	2
2000	8	1
Total	83	30
1987-1997	61	25
Since 1998	22	5

The Hokies have “outblocked” their opponents by a ratio of 2.77 to 1 during Beamer’s time at Tech. But note that in his first 11 seasons, the ratio was only 2.44 to 1. In the last three seasons alone, the ratio has been 4.4 to 1, and that includes a middling 1 to 1 ratio in 1999.

The Hokies have never been shut out in blocked kicks in a given year and have only been outblocked in one season (1989). By contrast, they have given up 0 blocked kicks in a season three times and have only given up 1 in two other seasons.

Blocked Kicks for Touchdowns

A blocked kick for a touchdown is a disheartening play for the opposition, and it is often a back breaker. Some examples: The Hokies used an early blocked kick for a TD to silence the East Carolina crowd in 2000, and in the 1993 Independence Bowl, Antonio Banks returned a blocked field goal 80 yards for a touchdown to blow open a close game right before half time.

On the negative side of the ledger, in 1997 Miami of Ohio used a blocked punt for a TD (among other special teams plays) to help defeat the Hokies 24-17 in Lane Stadium. And no Tech fan will ever forget Florida State blocking a punt for a touchdown in the 1999 Sugar Bowl against Tech.

Out of all the blocked kicks listed in the previous section, how many have been returned for touchdowns, both by Tech and their opponents?

Blocked Kicks Returned for TD’s (1987-2000)

Season	VT	Opp.
1987	1	0
1988	2	1
1989	0	0
1990	0	0
1991	1	0
1992	0	0
1993	2	0
1994	1	0
1995	1	0
1996	1	1
1997	0	2
1998	3	0
1999	1	1
2000	1	0
Total	14	5
1987-1997	9	4
Since 1998	5	1

To sum it up, during Beamer’s tenure, Tech has outscored the opposition 84-30 on blocked kicks. That point ratio is almost identical to the 83-30 block ratio. The Hokies have returned 14 out of 83 blocked kicks for TD’s — that’s 16.8%. Their opponents have returned 5 out of 30 — that’s 16.7%.

And as you can see, since 1998, the blocked kick for a TD has almost disappeared from the opposition’s arsenal. The only exception is the FSU block for a touchdown in the Sugar Bowl (the absolute *worst* time to give up the only TD in the last three years).

Punt Returns for TD's

When you look at the punt returns for TD's statistics over Beamer's time at Tech, what Andre Davis accomplished last year is truly amazing. Take a look.

(One note: for those of you with VT media guides from seasons past, the statistical summaries that show punt returns for TD's include blocked punts that were turned into TD's. So Ricky Hall, for example, is credited with two "punt return" TD's in 1998, but they both came when he covered blocked punts in the end zone. I have removed blocked punts for TD's from the statistics shown here, and I show "true" punt returns for TD's.)

Punt Returns for Touchdowns, 1987-2000

Season	VT	Opp.
1987	0	0
1988	0	1
1989	0	0
1990	0	0
1991	0	0
1992	0	0
1993	0	0
1994	1	0
1995	1	0
1996	0	0
1997	0	0
1998	0	0
1999	1	1
2000	3	0
Total	6	2
1987-1997	2	1
Since 1998	4	1

In Beamer's first 13 years, Tech had just three punt returns for touchdowns. There were so few of them that I can remember every one without looking them up: Antonio Freeman against Pittsburgh in 1994, Bryan Still against Texas (Sugar Bowl) in 1995, and Ricky Hall against Miami in 1999. Of course, it helps that two of those three were very memorable plays, and for some reason, I have the Freeman return stored away in my mind, as well.

In 2000, Beamer's 14th season, Davis returned three punts for TD's, tying the number of punt return TD's from the previous *thirteen* years. Remarkable.

That gives the Hokies 6 punt return TD's in Beamer's tenure, and Davis has already turned in another one this year, against Central Florida, tying him with the great Frank Loria for career punt returns for TD's, with 4.

Since 1987, Tech's opponents, on the other hand, have returned just 2 punts for TD's. One came in 1988, and the other didn't happen for 11 years — that's right, Peter Warrick for FSU in the Sugar Bowl. Once again, a terrible time to let it happen.

But you can see that the sight of a Virginia Tech punt returner taking the ball to the end zone, which we have become accustomed to in the last two seasons, really wasn't a common sight before Andre Davis arrived — and it might not be after he leaves.

Kickoff Returns for Touchdowns

For all his special teams prowess, Frank Beamer is oddly unaggressive when it comes to kickoff returns. In his first 14 seasons with Tech, the Hokies returned just three kickoffs for touchdowns, and it's interesting to note that since the Hokies started winning in 1993, they have returned *zero* kickoffs for touchdowns.

Kickoff Returns for TD's, 1987-2000

Season	VT	Opp.
1987	1	1
1988	0	1
1989	1	0
1990	0	0
1991	0	1
1992	1	0
1993	0	1
1994	0	0
1995	0	0
1996	0	0
1997	0	0
1998	0	0
1999	0	0
2000	0	0
Total	3	4
1987-1997	3	4
Since 1998	0	0

The main reason why the Hokies don't return many kickoffs for touchdowns is that Beamer rarely puts his fastest player back to return kickoffs. Instead, he puts players who are "actively involved" in the game back to return kickoffs — mainly running backs. The idea is that he wants to use players who are used to contact and won't fumble the ball when hit.

This is uncharacteristically conservative of Beamer (on special teams, anyway), and it has resulted in him rarely if ever putting his fastest players back to return kickoffs. Therefore, when they break free, they usually don't have the speed to outrun the kickoff team and score.

Since 1987, the Hokies have been led in kickoff returns by running backs Jon Jeffries (87, 88, and 91), Tony Kennedy (92), Dwayne Thomas (93, 95), Shyrone Stith (98, 99), and Andre Kendrick (2000); wide receivers Marcus Mickel (89, 90), Bryan Still (94), and Shawn Scales (96); and defensive back Ike Charlton (97).

With the exception of Still, the players listed were not known for their speed. Scales and Charlton were the only kick returners other than Still who might have scored if they broke containment.

The kickoff return stats are where Beamer's teams do not outshine their opponents. In fact,

Beamer's Hokie teams have been outscored 4-3 on kickoff returns. Tech usually holds the advantage yardage-wise, but in terms of breaking free for scores, the Hokies don't dominate their opponents here. You might say it's the last frontier for Coach Beamer on special teams.

The Bottom Line

You can sum up all these stats thus:

1.) Beamer's football teams have out-blocked their opponents 83-30 in his first 14 seasons. Tech blocks about one kick every other game. Their opponents block a kick roughly every five games.

2.) In 162 games over 14 seasons, the Hokies outscored their opponents on special teams 23 touchdowns to 9, or 138 points to 54 (not including the extra points that get kicked after those touchdowns).

Beamer's Virginia Tech special teams aren't perfect. In 1997, Miami of Ohio scored two special teams TD's to grab a 24-17 upset win at Lane Stadium, and Florida State's 14-0 advantage on special teams in the 1999 Sugar Bowl game was a major factor in keeping the Hokies from a prized national championship win.

But the Hokies have turned the tide in a positive way in many other games by bludgeoning their opponents with their special teams. Even now, with special teams being a trendy area for teams to improve their performance, the Hokies stand out as one of the best.

Inside TSL: Short Takes

A contest, a correction, a cover photo, and a compliment.

by Will Stewart, TechSideline.com

This month's "Inside TSL" brings you a contest, information about subscription renewals, a correction from last month, and other miscellaneous notes.

Subscriber Contest: Win a \$300 Attache/Laptop Case!

In the month of August, we ran a contest that awarded a \$100 TechLocker.com shopping spree to the TSL Extra's 1000th subscriber. I had a couple of folks who were

already subscribers point out correctly to me that I should think about running a contest that would reward those who were already subscribers.

I agree, and to celebrate the TSL Extra's 12th issue and first year, and to thank all of our subscribers, we're giving away a whopper of a prize: a \$300 VT Attache/Laptop case!

The Prize: Our attache/laptop case is made of black, supple, fine-grained Nappa leather, with the official Virginia Tech seal embossed on a 23K gold plated medallion. A laptop computer fits nicely into one of the attache's twin padded compartments.

This is a striking piece of merchandise. If you're reading this TSL Extra on the web, you can click here to see it. If you're reading this issue as a PDF, you can look at the attache/laptop case by going to TechLocker.com and doing a search on the word "laptop."

This is the most expensive item we carry in TechLocker.com!

The Contest: This contest is related to the TSL Football message board, but even if you're not a poster, it's easy to participate. The objective? Predict when the 500,000th message will be posted to the Football board.

Here are some numbers that will help you make your prediction. As I write this, it's early in the morning on October 17, 2001, and post #465,430 has just hit the board. That leaves 34,570 posts to go before 500,000 is reached.

To help you out, I'll tell you that the board is averaging 1,190 posts per day over the last week, and that traffic should stay very steady — or rise a bit — over the remainder of the football season.

How to Enter: Now it's your turn. Do the math, adjust for temperature and wind, and make your prediction. When you've determined what your guess is, then drop an email to contest@techsideline.com with the subject: "TSL Extra Message Board Contest," and include the following information:

Your full name

Your email address

The date and time of day that post #500,000 will occur

Please predict the time down to the second. For example, if I wanted to predict that the 500,000th post will occur at 12:23 and 57 seconds on Oct. 21st, I would write:

Name: Will Stewart

Email Address: will@techsideline.com

Date and Time of Post 500,000: Oct 21st, 12:23:57

Your entry must be received by the end of the day November 1st for you to qualify.

The closest guess, whether you go over or not (this ain't "The Price is Right"), will win. So send in your guess now, and good luck!

Correction

In last month's "Inside the Numbers," I made a pretty big gaffe. The article compared the 1995 Tech defense to the 1999 Tech defense, and one category compared NFL draft choices. I mistakenly said that the 1995 defense had one draft choice (J.C. Price) and the 1999 defense had four (John Engelberger, Corey Moore, Ike Charlton, and Anthony Midget).

The following letter points out my error:

Will,

I really enjoyed the article "Inside the Numbers: The 1995 Defense Versus the 1999 Defense". It is a subject my friends and I have debated many times. My only beef with the comparison is with the category NFL players drafted. You have listed the 1995 number at 1 and the 1999 number at 4.

This seems to only account for players drafted that year. It seems that it would make more sense if you included players drafted in later years as well. So the comparison would look like:

1995 (5)

J. C. Price (drafted 1996)
Cornell Brown (1997)
Antonio Banks (1997)
Torrian Gray (1997)
Pierson Prioleau (1999)

1999 (5)

John Engelberger (2000)
Corey Moore (2000)
Ike Charlton (2000)
Anthony Midget (2000)
Cory Bird (2001)

This would result in a tie for the time being, however, the 1999 team has players on the current team who might still get drafted (most notably Ben

Taylor). So the results after the 2002 draft will likely still favor 1999 team.

Thanks,
Tom Brooks

Thanks for the correction, Tom. All I can say is, sometimes, when the TSL Extra deadline is fast approaching, I can really put my foot in it if I'm not careful.

TSL Extra Renewals

The TSL Extra has been out for almost a year now, and in about a month and a half, the earliest subscriptions will start to expire. Those of you who signed up on day 1 of TSL Extra availability will expire on December 5th of 2001.

When your subscription approaches the expiration date, you'll start receiving automated emails reminding you to renew. I believe the first one will arrive four weeks before expiration, the next one will arrive two weeks prior, and the last one will arrive on D-Day.

When you renew (notice I didn't say "if," Hokie fans!), a year will be added to your expiration date. So you don't need to "time" your renewal. Renew at any time.

KJ Cover Photo

Perhaps you noticed that this week's cover photo of Kevin Jones shaking hands with Tech fans in Morgantown was taken by none other than yours truly.

I worked the Tech/WVU game in Morgantown as credentialed media (WVU's SID is Web-friendly and will grant credentials to legitimate sites like TechSideline.com), and although I spent the large majority of the game in the press box, I and the other media were on the field for the last few minutes of Tech's 35-0 blowout.

I took my digital camera with me and managed to grab the shot of Jones reaching up into the stands and shaking hands with Hokies. After I got home and downloaded the picture from the camera to my computer, I realized how perfectly suited it was for a TSL Extra cover photo. Jones is almost perfectly centered, a title can be put in the turf at the bottom of the picture, and at the top of the picture, the crowd is a perfect back drop over which the TSL Extra logo can be laid.

So I thought, "Man, I've got to use that as a cover photo and write a cover story to go with it."

Since we hadn't planned a feature on Jones, I wasn't sure what to do that would relate to the picture. I found myself thinking that Jones represents the future of the tailback position at Tech, and a few mental leaps later, I decided to write a story analyzing the Hokie football team's future and predicting which year in the coming few years will be Tech's best shot at a national championship.

So I inserted the KJ photo into my TSL Extra cover template, slapped "The Future" in big bold letters at the bottom, and the next thing I knew, I had my cover and the accompanying story.

Most of the time, the cover photo is driven by the cover story, but this time, it was the other way around: the photo led to the story.

A Compliment from a True Professional

The middle of the month, when the TSL Extra is due, is a tough time for me (I stayed up until 3 a.m. two nights in a row getting this issue out), but on the day before this issue was due, I received a phone call that lifted my spirits.

The phone rang late in the afternoon, and a quick inspection of my caller ID box showed “Private Name” as the caller. That means that the caller’s phone number and/or name are not available for identification. That usually indicates an unlisted number or some such case, and isn’t necessarily to be avoided — unlike an “Unavailable” indication, which is nearly always a solicitor.

So I picked the phone up and said hello.

“Hi, may I speak to Will Stewart?” the caller asked.

“This is he.”

“Hi, Will, this is George Dohrmann. I’m a staff writer at Sports Illustrated.”

Gulp. The Mecca of sports journalism! I wondered what in the world George could want from me. Was I about to be interviewed for some reason?

Alas, no, you will not see any Will Stewart quotes in the next Sports Illustrated. It turns out that George had acquired a copy of the first installment of my “Money-Makers” series that appeared in issues 6-8 of the TSL Extra (how he got a copy, since it’s pay material, is beyond me, but so be it). He explained that he was doing an article on small colleges making the jump to Division 1 in basketball, and he wanted to crunch some financial numbers and include them in the article.

In short, he wanted my spreadsheets, so I gladly sent them on. But at some point early in the conversation, he said, “I read your article — which was very good, by the way — and ...”

I don’t mind telling you that when a fellow pro who writes for an outstanding publication like Sports Illustrated compliments me on my work, I get a lot of satisfaction out of that. That ought to keep me going for another month.

Speaking of which ... that’s all for this month. See you next month.

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