

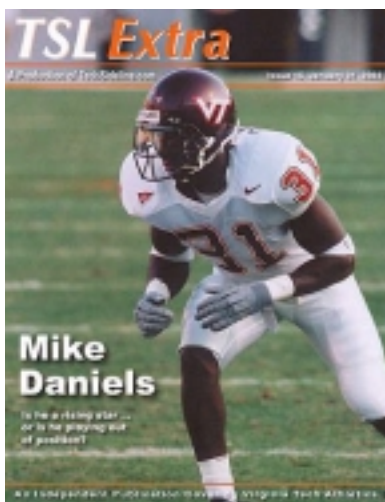
TSL Extra

Issue 15, January 21, 2002

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Photo of whip linebacker Mike Daniels by Michael Ingalls.
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TSL EXTRA

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Dear Readers:

Every month, when I sit down to do this Letter from the Editor, I take a look at the offerings for the month to see if a theme jumps out at me. At first, nothing did for this month's issue. This issue is all over the map and includes a player profile, a recruiting interview, an article about players in the pros, and not one — but two — "Inside TSL's." (that's to make up for gypping you last month by not including one).

I thought about the articles, and I thought, "Hmmm, that's a lot of information."

Take the Mike Daniels article, for instance. A lot of player profiles are fluff that doesn't contain any hard info. Interesting reading, but you don't miss anything if you don't read them. But not this one; it answers the critical question of whether or not Daniels has a future at whip linebacker, the spot he was forced to play this past season when injuries and poor play compromised the position.

Then there's the interview with QB recruit Patrick Dosh, a recent verbal commitment. Quarterbacks get the most attention, so many of you have a lot of questions about Patrick. He answers all of them, and more. You'll like his attitude, and once you've heard what he has to say about Virginia Tech football and how he thinks he will fit in at Tech, I think you'll be a Patrick Dosh fan from here on out.

The next article is the 2001 Season in Review. Okay, so there's not a lot of new info there, but I promise you, this one hits hard, and you may not like what it has to say. I try to wrap it up in a positive way, though.

This month's "Inside the Numbers" gives you a (sometimes painfully) detailed breakdown of which colleges put the most players in the NFL, and at what positions. Data like that tend to change frequently, but nonetheless, it's an interesting read.

Then there are the two "Inside TSL's," one about the experiences I've had interviewing recruits, and another about the experiences I had working in the press box in three of Tech's road football games this year.

This issue lives up to the TSL Extra's promise of being a different way of looking at Tech athletics. It's not an issue that has any central theme running through it, not like last month's bowl retrospective issue, but one thing's for sure: there's lots of info in here.

Enjoy issue #15.



Mike Daniels: Slipping in the Back Door

Tech's Gator Bowl star takes the road less traveled to a starting job.

by Neal Williams

Weird.

Many, many words come to mind when Mike Daniels discusses his 2001 football season with the Virginia Tech Hokies.

Enlightening. Exciting. Energizing. Fun. Frustrating. You can go on and on and on, but it all comes back to "weird." That one word pretty much says it all.

Oh, it's a good kind of weird. Daniels has no complaints about a season that saw him go from a deep reserve at one position to a starter at another. He went in wondering what he could do to secure a future on the field and came out knowing what he had to do to keep his spot on the field.

Still, the way it all worked? Weird.

"I'd say weird," Daniels said when asked the best word to describe his 2001 season. "I went from going against the varsity offense, being on the practice squad, to being out there with Ben Taylor and David Pugh and Ronyell Whitaker. I'm thinking, 'This is crazy.'

"I'm still in shock. If that was my only season to start for Virginia Tech, I'm thankful. What an opportunity, to be out there with guys who are going to the NFL.

"It's been weird. I know I keep saying that. It's just been so crazy. If someone had told me before the season what would happen, I would have told them they were crazy."

Let's back up for a moment. Daniels was recruited out of Fairfax High, where he was a standout safety. He intercepted a school-record 18 passes. He was his district's player of the year as a senior. He was a first-team all-state choice. He signed with the Hokies in February of 2000.

He headed to Tech and worked at free safety. He, like most of the players in his recruiting class, took a redshirt season during the 2000 season with the Hokies. A year later, as preseason drills wound down for the 2001 season, Daniels found himself No. 3 on the depth chart at free safety behind junior Willie Pile and fellow redshirt freshman Vince Fuller.

His goal?

"I was thinking I want to battle for the No. 2 spot," Daniels said. "I didn't think I'd see that much playing time. I just wanted to get to that No. 2 spot, maybe get some playing time at the end of the game. I wanted to do my part on special teams. Get in whenever I could."

Meanwhile, at another spot on the field, things were also developing according to plan. T.J. Jackson was ahead of the pack at whip (outside) linebacker. Deon Provitt was going to be his backup. Jackson suffered a muscle injury and Provitt ended up at No. 1.

The season started, and from Daniels' perspective, went about as expected.

Provitt did well at whip. Pile was an established star. Fuller held on to the No. 2 spot at safety. Daniels played on special teams. He figured it would stay that way for the season and tried hard to keep working despite a growing frustration.

Separate conversations with his father Fletcher Daniels and brother Nathan Daniels ended up with Daniels receiving the same message. Nathan Daniels is a former player at Ferrum. He spent last season with the Roanoke Steam of arenafootball2. Both dad and brother saw plenty of Tech football.

"Both of them said they had a feeling," Daniels said. "They said I'd have some kind of chance. I didn't believe it. I was kind of frustrated. It was so strange, getting a little down. They weren't together when they told me that. It's hard to see what they were talking about when you're going through a struggle."

The dominoes started to fall. Provitt tore up a knee in the season's fourth game. Jackson moved up to No. 1 at whip.

Daniels didn't see how any of this would affect him. He was still behind Pile and Fuller. Unbeknownst to him, Tech's coaches had already met to discuss a position that had just become too thin for their liking. Provitt and Jackson were both inexperienced to begin with, and now one of them was gone.

Daniels' name was brought up. Though he was buried at free safety behind two pretty good players, he'd shown a few things. Toughness. A hitter. Smart. Willing. Too good to be a No. 3 somewhere.

Sitting in study hall the day after Provitt got hurt, Daniels had a visitor. It was defensive coordinator Bud Foster.

"He's sitting there talking to me about moving and I'm still clueless," Daniels said. "I'm thinking he's talking about later, not during the season. I knew it could possibly lead to good things in the future. I was thinking that if I did move in the middle of the season, no way I play by the end of the season.

"I'd be working with a different coach. I had to learn different techniques. I had no experience at the position."

Daniels wanted to make the move anyway, figuring he could learn and earn playing time there quicker than he could at free safety.

Little Did He Know

Soon after the switch, Tech lost back-to-back games at home against Syracuse and on the road at Pittsburgh. The loss at Pitt was particularly bad, a 38-7 whipping at the hands of a team that was 2-5 at the time.

Jackson, solid against the run, was proving to be a liability against the pass.

After another coaches meeting, another change was made. Daniels, with his experience in the secondary, could help in pass coverage. And despite the fact that the 6-footer was somewhat undersized at 190 pounds, he could hit and didn't care if it was a Mack truck coming his way.

You're starting Saturday at Temple, Daniels was told.

He'd been in for fewer than two dozen plays with the defense all season. He'd been a whip less than a month. Now he was the starter. It says a lot about his makeup that Daniels didn't freak.

"It really helped my self-esteem," Daniels said. "Obviously, somebody believed in me. It makes you feel good. If you can start at the collegiate level, you can do a whole lot of things."

Daniels started the final three regular season games and the Hokies' Gator Bowl game against Florida State. It would make for a wonderful story to be able to report that he was an absolute star, that he tore up opposing offenses and made All-Big East despite his limited experience.

It didn't happen quite that way. He made some plays all right, and he showed why the Tech coaches felt he'd make a good whip. He showed plenty of promise. He also showed his inexperience at times.

He had 16 assists and 12 solo tackles for the season. He really stood out in the Gator Bowl, with a team-high seven tackles and two sacks. He also recovered a fumble. Assistant coach Jim Cavanaugh, who is in charge of whips and rovers, said Daniels only had two bad plays in the Gator Bowl.

"I'd give myself a B," Daniels said of his overall effort at whip. "I think I did OK. I think I did above average. I think I performed about average, handled everything above average."

Said Cavanaugh, "Mike was a good example of putting that round peg though the round hole. It sort of worked. He got a lot of quick lessons, had a lot of extra meetings and such to get him caught up. He's still a little frayed around the edges. We thought he might one day make a good whip when we recruited him. You hate moving kids after the season has started but we said heck with that and moved him. I think he responded very well."

Daniels said he's not sure what was his best play. He knows what was his biggest play.

"I know the one I'll always remember came against Temple in the first game I started," he said. "All my family was there. The quarterback was back on the goal line, I had a blitz. He threw and I batted it down. It wasn't that big of a play, but it was the first play I was involved in, it was on the Hokie web page and my mom blew it up. They announced my name on the loudspeaker. It made me feel good, feel a part of it."

His worst play?

"Probably against Virginia," Daniels said. "I was supposed to hit a guard, make the run bounce outside of the blocker. The guard was some freshman, just a huge guy like 6-7 and 320 pounds. I hit him and fell backwards. That was an embarrassing moment. He was like sitting on my chest and I'm laying there thinking, 'Jeez, I need to get a lot stronger.' I'll remember that one for a while."

Now comes the fun part. Daniels said it's fair to say he's still a free safety who is playing at whip. Before spring practice commences in March, he has to make himself into a whip playing whip.

He'll go into the weight room with a serious goal, to add 15-20 pounds by the time the 2002 season starts. He'll attack his playbooks and manuals and learn everything he can about whip linebacker.

"Free safety and whip are more similar than say rover and free safety," Daniels said. "It still has a lot of things a safety does. I still get to roam free around the middle sometimes. I like to say I'm a weak-side safety.

"I'll build my body, learn things, so I'm better equipped for the position. I'm definitely ready to stay at this position. At points, it got me frustrated. You have to let go of some of the things you learned in the defensive backfield and other things you pick right up from safety. There's ups and downs. You do some safety stuff and get to blitz and do more with the running game."

Provitt had reconstructive surgery on his left knee. He'll be back, probably in time to participate in spring drills. That doesn't mean a backward movement for Daniels. He'll go into spring drills No. 1 at whip. He's king of that mountain for now.

Brandon Manning, another redshirt freshman, is also in the mix. He became the backup when Daniels became the starter. Jackson is gone. He transferred to Division I-AA Illinois State and will use his final year of eligibility there.

"Provitt still has to prove himself physically with his knee. Until I see the young man on the field, I will have doubts," Cavanaugh said.

Said Daniels, "I'm very confident going into it and I know I can lose the spot. I know I can win it also. Competition is good, it brings out the best in everybody. My mentality is different this time around, my approach. I know what I have to do in the weight room. I'm faced with a new challenge."

Interview with Patrick Dosh

Patrick Dosh, Tech's first QB commitment for 2002, would rather run into a linebacker than run out of bounds.

by Will Stewart, TechSiideline.com

On January 14th, quarterback Patrick Dosh out of Benedictine High School in Richmond committed to the Hokies. Standing 6-3 and weighing 215, Dosh runs a 4.6 forty and passed for over 8600 yards and 74 touchdowns as a four-year starter. Dosh had the following to say about his commitment to the Hokies:

"There were three reasons that I selected Tech. The first was the people — Coach Beamer and his staff, and the way Coach Cavanaugh recruited me. He's the best recruiter I had throughout the whole pro-

cess. He makes you feel like you're wanted so much.

"The second reason was the fans. When I was at the Miami game and they blocked that punt, that was an incredible experience for me. You can tell, the fans care so much.

"The third was seeing their Hall of Fame room and the spot they have reserved for the national championship trophy. That was a big eye-opener."

So Dosh is impressed by Tech, but the questions remain: what kind of a quarterback is he? Can he throw when needed and run when necessary? Is he capable of making the leap from a private high school to one of the top 20, perhaps top 10, programs in the country?

Only time will tell, but we caught up with Dosh a few days after his commitment and asked him some of the tough questions he's already facing as the latest player to decide to don a quarterback's jersey for Virginia Tech. Here's what he had to say.

When did you really make your mind up that VT is where you wanted to go?

I was pretty sure after my official visit (on Dec. 14th), after I went there. I got to talk to all the coaches, I got to see the environment I'm going to be in, the type of kids that go there. I was pretty sure that was the type of school and type of football program that I wanted to be in.

You said several times that UNC and Tech were 50/50 with you. Was UNC ever really even with VT, or was that just a statement for public consumption?

UNC was — I really liked UNC. I liked everything about the school. It came down to, I wanted to go to a school where football was the big concern. I just figured at a school like UNC, I know they're having a down year this year in basketball, but it will always be a basketball school. I know they're trying to change that, but it's been that way for years, and I'm pretty sure that's the way it's going to be for years to come.

Another thing that I started realizing more and more, as I got into the recruiting process, was I think I really wanted to stay in-state. I found that a lot of people thought that was real important thing to do, and when I thought about it, I agreed.

Were there ever any other serious players (meaning teams) in your recruitment, other than UNC and Tech?

N.C. State and Marshall I was thinking pretty highly of. And towards the end of it, JMU almost got an edge over UNC. UNC (pauses) ... the more I realized the quarterback situation they were in, and the way the coaching staff ran some of the different things that they did that I noticed, I started to think maybe UNC wasn't the school that I thought it was at first. It's a beautiful campus, and there's a lot of good things about the school academically, but you can't base your decision around just facilities and that kind of stuff.

What did you see in the way that Tech dealt with their quarterbacks versus the way that UNC dealt with their quarterbacks that you thought was a differentiator?

Honestly, when I watched UNC's practice, and I watched Tech's practice, they were a lot different. The one day I was at Tech, they were in the indoor facility (Rector Field House), and I know it was kind of more of a casual day, but the intensity at a Virginia Tech practice was what caught my interest. I was watching the quarterbacks go through some drills, the cones and everything, and it was unbelievable how hard they all worked. That's something that rubs off on you when you're coming in as a freshman. When you see those older guys working that hard, you say to yourself, "Okay, I'm in, I've got to work hard. I've got to step this up a couple of notches."

At UNC, it seem a little more casual, a little more laid back. It could have been the style of the practice I was at on that particular day, but when recruits are there, that's what you're basing your decision on, what you see that day.

Did Marshall and N.C. State offer you scholarships?

They did, but I didn't really consider them, because I didn't want to go that far from home. As things went on, those schools dropped off, because the farther away they were, like Marshall, the more Coach Smith and I were thinking, "You might not want to get too interested in them, because your chances might not be that good."

You went to several Tech games this year, correct? Which ones?

Miami and Syracuse.

You said in an earlier interview with us, "I had not become a Tech fan before this year." Would you say that during the course of the year, you became a Tech football fan?

Absolutely.

Had you ever been to any Tech games before this year?

Never. I didn't even know where Tech was. I had no knowledge of Virginia Tech before this year. My dad, he didn't know what Tech was, where Tech was. It's a joke around our family now, because no one in my family, except for my mom, knew anything about the school.

It's not like we were Virginia fans, because we weren't, we didn't have a team out of the two.

It sounds like none of your family is from this side of the state, or none of them went to Tech. What was the story with your mom? Did she go to college?

My mom went to Radford. So she visited Tech a lot on the weekends and stuff. She grew up in Glen Allen, Virginia. She actually was born in the house I'm living in right now.

Where's your dad from?

My dad's from Kensington, Maryland.

Describe yourself as a player: Are you a thrower, a runner, a finesse guy, a thinker, an old-school tough guy, or what?

I'd say I'm probably more of an old-school tough guy, like a lot of Virginia Tech guys seem to be. I've never run out of bounds in my life. I don't know if the Virginia Tech coaching staff will have a problem with that or not, but if they do, I guess they'll tell me about it. I don't know how to slide, I don't know how to avoid tackles, I don't know how to do any of that, because I never practiced it.

I'm one of those guys that are constantly trying to make stuff happen, and I'm not easy to bring down, being 6-3, 215. Being relatively strong for a quarterback, I think it makes me a little hard to bring down.

I'm not a dual-threat quarterback. I'm not a guy who runs as much as he passes, but I'm definitely not just a drop-back quarterback, either. I'd say out of 30 pass plays, I'll probably run the ball about 8 to 10 times and throw it the other 20.

Do you mean scramble?

Yes, right.

It's almost like you're a contradiction in terms, because you're a private school kid, yet what you describe is kind of a blue-collar attitude.

I love running the ball and having a guy right there, and going shoulder to shoulder with him. The majority of the time, I do okay in those situations.

Tell us about the mentality of the quarterback position. What does it take to play the position and play it well?

Definitely mental toughness. That's one thing that I think I've always been pretty good at. If you throw an interception or make a bad read, you have to come back the next play and literally forget about it, because if you don't, that kind of stuff will eat at you and make you play a lot worse. If you can just have that mental toughness where things go wrong but you stick with it and constantly be a leader for everybody else out on the field, that will win big games for you.

Have you always been like that, or was that something you had to develop?

It's funny, because I know other guys who are pretty good athletes, but I don't think they have the mental toughness that I have, so I think it's something that must be part of me. I think it's gotten stronger and stronger as I've gotten older and older.

You go through some difficult times at quarterback. There's a lot of fun times. Like Grant Noel, if your team is doing well, you're going to get all the praise, but when your team is not doing well or you're losing, they're going to blame the quarterback. That's something that when you enter that position, you've got to know it and be able to deal with it.

My dad has always tried to instill toughness in me since I was a kid. "Suck it up, be tough," that kind of thing. It rubs off.

Did Benedictine run the option with you? Are you comfortable running it?

We ran the option, but (laughs), I didn't option it very often! We ran it, it varied from game to game. Sometimes it would be twelve times a game, sometimes just six or seven times a game. But it was pretty much a quarterback keeper around the end (laughs again).

Did Benedictine have a fairly complex passing offense? Did you utilize the running backs and tight ends in the passing game?

Yes. My tight end had 62 catches this year, and Patrick Estes (a current UVa player who graduated from Benedictine after Dosh's junior season), when he was here for three years, he caught a ton of passes. We had a lot of different formations; trips, we run spread, that kind of stuff. So I'd say it was fairly complex.

Coach Smith told me you run some shotgun. Are you comfortable in the shotgun?

Absolutely. I prefer the shotgun, but going under center, it doesn't make that much of a difference. But in shotgun, it's a lot easier to see things, like blitzes.

How comfortable are you taking a snap from center, backpedaling, and setting up? Is that something you think you need to work on, or are you pretty good at that?

As far as getting depth on my drop, I think that's something I can work on a little bit. I think that sometimes I'm a little too close to the line when I take my drop, but with a lot of repetition in practice, that's something I can correct. My first three years, I did that an awful lot, because we didn't put the shotgun in until last year. So for my first three years, I was taking three-, five-, and occasionally seven-step drops. Then this year, we became even more of a passing team, and we put shotgun in. But as far as play-action goes, we did a lot of that, too, so I've pretty much done it all in four years.

Having seen Tech play this season, what's your take on their style of offense? Do you think they run too much, or are you okay with the run/pass distribution?

When I was at the Syracuse game, I was a little bit surprised with the way their offense was. I figured they would try to work the ball down the field a little bit more. But when you have running

backs like what they've got ... you can tell the coaches are going to do what's best for the team, and that was obvious.

Of course, if you've got Michael Vick or someone like that, you're going to have the ball in his hands a lot and let him do what he does best.

But I noticed in the bowl game with Coach Stinespring calling the plays how much more they seemed to go downfield. And I think Grant Noel was in shotgun a lot more, I'd have to say, than he was in previous games.

I'd say, the more and more the season went on, they said, "We're going to have to open it up a little more." But I'm prepared to do whatever they want to do.

What about the types of pass plays that are run by the Hokies? There has been a lot of criticism that they run too many screens, too many curls, and not enough slants and posts that put the receivers in position to make a play.

I know Andre Davis is a great receiver, and he'll definitely be playing on Sundays next year. You've got to do whatever you can to get the ball in your playmaker's hands. Then again, when you have a running back like Kevin Jones and a fullback like Jarrett Ferguson, it makes it tough to get away from using guys like that as much as you can, when you've got guys as good as they have back there.

As far as throwing the ball downfield, it seems like Virginia Tech is the type of team that relies in its defense. They seem to get momentum from their defense, and that's the way it's been for a while. So I don't think they have to do that much (with the offense), they just have to cut down on the turnovers and mistakes. And I think if you do that, you're going to do okay.

Let's change topics. How tight were you and Patrick Estes back when he was at Benedictine?

Very good friends. We hung out a lot on the weekends. When I was a junior, he would go on recruiting trips to UVa, and I would go with him, because when we were both being recruited by UVa, we would go to UVa-Duke and UVa-Maryland games. He was one of my very good friends.

Were you surprised when he went to UVa?

Not at all. I knew from day one that was where he wanted to go. His dad went to school there. He was pretty much set on it. I didn't think there was anything anyone could do to get him away from that school. When Coach Welsh decided to retire, I thought he might start considering Texas or another school, but he didn't.

Did he try to get you to look at UVa?

Yes. Whenever he went up there, he was always like, "Hey man, you want to go up there? You want to come with me?" and that kind of thing.

But once I was up there at UVa, and I saw the campus and the environment — I don't want to get

into it too much — but when I saw all that stuff, I pretty much decided that's not the type of kid I am.

Didn't you cause a little controversy among Wahoo fans with some comments about UVA that were attributed to you in the press? What's the story there? What did you say, and what were the repercussions?

(Laughs) Well, that might have something to do with why they quit recruiting me. When I went to their camp for an evening, I realized that the campus, the way it was ... it seems real spread out and everything. The tradition that UVA fans have when they stand there and they sing and hold hands after scoring a touchdown ... I mean, you'd never see Virginia Tech fans doing that. Never. It's just the disposition that they have. They're just different.

My dad and I were at the Virginia Tech - Virginia game this past season, and it's 31-0 at some point, and UVA scores, and they stand up, and they're singing and joking around, and I'm saying, "My god, you're still down 24 points and you're singing and holding hands?" I don't know, that was like the nail in the coffin when I saw that.

So apparently, you said some things last summer, and the feedback got back to the UVA coaches, and that was the end of that.

I actually went up there to watch Patrick Estes practice one day, during last summer. Coach Smith and I went up there. After practice, Coach Mike Groh, Al Groh's son, he came up to me and he said, "So, I hear you don't like our school anymore."

That put me a little bit on the spot. I felt a little uncomfortable, but I said, "Well, you know, it's not bad ..." I just said something, I don't know what. He said "Well, all right," and from that point on, the whole recruiting thing with me and them kind of dropped off.

There's a story making the rounds on the Internet that during one of the Tech games you attended this year, a Tech fan was criticizing Kevin Jones, and you gave the fan a hard time about it. What's the story there?

It was at the Syracuse game. That was the one where Kevin Jones dropped the pitch and Syracuse recovered the fumble. That happened right in front of us, because we were on the 15-yard line.

They pitch the ball to Kevin Jones and he bobbles it, and Syracuse gets it. Well, this guy about ten rows behind me stands up and goes, "Oh, you think you're some superstar, you're not any good, blah, blah, blah, hold on to the ball, get him out of there!"

I didn't say anything, but I turned around so I could see him. Some people around him were saying, you know, "Be quiet, get off his back, he's a freshman."

He used the word "superstar." He said, "Superstar? You're no superstar!"

Later on in the game, Kevin Jones broke like a 60-yard run, and he got tackled around the twenty-yard line. I stood up and turned around and said to the guy, "See? He *is* a superstar!" It wasn't a real big deal, but at the same time, I think everyone around me was cheering me on (laughs).

It's the type of situation where you're going to be going to a school, and you don't want fans yelling — the kid's 18, 19 years old, that kind of stuff's going to happen. So I think I put myself in Kevin Jones' shoes a little bit, and I felt like I should stick up for him.

So even though you witnessed that, you didn't make any blanket assumptions about Tech fans, it didn't turn you against the school ...

Absolutely not. The reason was because I wasn't the only person who was getting on that guy's case. There were people all around me that were telling him to be quiet. So no, absolutely not.

Lastly, what about getting knocked three rows back in the stands at the Tech/Miami game when the punt was blocked? Is that for real?

Yeah, that was an unbelievable experience. I was standing there with my dad, and I had one of those massive turkey leg things in my hand, and when they blocked that punt, the crowd just went nuts. All the recruits were jumping up and down, and the next thing I know, my dad got knocked, like three rows back. He was completely airborne from people jumping around all over the place.

I remember I was jumping up and down on the bench (seat), and I got knocked back too, and I ended up laying down on top of him on the bench three rows back. That was a fun experience.

What if you wind up playing for the Hokies and come under the type of criticism that Grant Noel endured this season? Are you prepared for that, and how would you handle it?

I commend Grant. When I was on my official visit, it was a week or two after the Miami game, and he talked a lot about it. He talked about how tough it was on him. I just commend him so much for the way he's handling himself throughout it. It's tough when it's the last game, and you have to wait another month to play.

He was positive. He was saying, "I can't wait to get out there and practice again. I can't wait to get on with things." He said he had had to live with it for two weeks, and that's tough.

But I think as a quarterback, if you're not prepared to deal with a situation like that, you might as well not play a position like quarterback in college. It's such a demanding position, and you have to do so many things throughout the course of a game, that if bad things are going on, and you have to say, "All right, I've got to forget about this and go on to another one ..."

If you've thrown five or six interceptions, even, you've got to say, "As long as I'm in here, I've got to keep going and keep doing the best I can do." You've got to have confidence in yourself. Not cockiness, but confidence. That's something that I'm positive Grant has, after talking to him.

When you sign a letter of intent to Tech, you will be competing for a job that was held, in just the last decade, by two Hokie football legends: Jim Druckenmiller and Michael Vick. How will you personally handle the pressure and the spotlight of playing the same position as two players who are revered for their accomplishments on the football field? Are you looking forward to the challenge of trying to live up to that?

I can't wait. I can't wait to get to practice and start practicing during the summer and lifting weights.

I can't wait until people can start being able to watch me and see what they think. When my opportunity comes ... I relish the opportunity to get into the spotlight, I guess you could say, in front of those Tech crazies, and show what I can do.

I'm not trying to live up to Michael Vick or Jim Druckenmiller, but I'm going to try to do what I can to help Virginia Tech win as many football games as possible.

What about the fact that Tech is recruiting two of the most highly-rated quarterbacks in the country in James Banks and Marcus Vick?

I can't wait to get out there and play against James Banks, or Marcus Vick, or whoever it is. By me verbally committing before either one of those two guys, I don't know how much more I can do to show I'm not scared. I'm not waiting on these guys. They can do whatever they want. If they decide to go to Virginia Tech, okay — I'll see them there in the middle of June, or whatever. Let the best man win. That's the way I've always gone about things. I've had to deal with competition my whole life. It's just another level up.

I can't wait to get to a school like Virginia Tech and look around at my teammates and say to myself, "All of these guys can play." Once I get the timing down with the wide receivers, it's just going to make me that much better of a player. I've had to play with a bunch of young guys this year, and guys who are playing football for the first time, and you know, they're not going to run the same routes every time. They haven't learned yet. I can't wait to just get to work with guys who run consistent routes and know how to play.

What about people who say that you racked up your statistics (8,648 passing yards and 74 touchdowns) against weak private school competition?

Against Charlotte Country Day this year, a team that won the state championship in North Carolina, I threw for 357 yards against them. They're a private school, but they're great. They would beat any public school in the city of Richmond. They're a powerhouse. We played a team — South Point — that's a very strong public school in the state of North Carolina, and I threw for 315 yards.

I can say that when the competition was good, I rose to the occasion. When I was a freshman, I threw for 257 yards against Fork Union. I was 14 years old playing against 18- and 19-year olds. I remember going up against their defensive line, and it was 330, 340, all the way across.

Last year, Tech recruited three quarterbacks — Will Hunt, Chris Clifton, and Bryan Randall — and it looks as if one or more of them might be moved to a new position. At your size and speed (6-3, 215, 4.6 forty), if the Tech coaching staff asked you to move from quarterback to a different position, would you consider it, or would you say to yourself, "I want to play quarterback, and I'm going to transfer"?

(Pauses) I'm not trying to be conceited in any way, but it's one of those things where it's the only position I've played my whole life, and I don't see any way how I can play any other position. I wouldn't feel comfortable doing it.

People might say, well, that's not being a team player. But it's just one of those things, when you've done something for so long, and all of a sudden, you go to play another position, not having any

experience at it whatsoever, it makes it very tough to do. It's just something I wouldn't be comfortable with.

I like having the ball in my hands. I like being one of those guys that has to make something happen. I don't think I'd be too willing to hand that over to anyone else (laughs).

Will you be enrolling early at Tech?

I'm about 90 percent sure that I'm going to enroll in second summer session, just to get some classes under my belt and get in the environment. It's a big change, having to go from living at home to being in the college environment.

I need to get up there, too, to start throwing with some of the receivers. When you're around here and you're searching for guys that can run 4.4 or 4.5 forties, there's not too many of them around here. I think it will just put me a little bit ahead come time for practice to start.

Is early enrollment something the Tech coaching staff suggested, or was it your idea?

A little of both. I wanted to do it because I wanted to get up there and get used to things. The coaching staff wanted me to do it, but I also wanted to do it.

Lastly, some personal stuff: tell us about your family. How many brothers and sisters do you have?

I have two little brothers, 14 and 11. The fourteen-year-old plays quarterback for his little league team, and he plays all three sports year-round. The eleven-year-old plays basketball and baseball. We're all very different.

Your dad is a hall of famer at JMU.

Yes, he started in basketball there for four years. He was actually a first-team McDonald's All-American in high school for basketball. He played in that real tough high school league with St. John's, DeMatha, Gonzaga, Good Counsel, all those guys.

And he wound up going to JMU?

He was 6-4, couldn't jump, couldn't dunk. He's the second all-time leading rebounder in the history of JMU, and third or fourth in scoring. He's one of those guys who was just an overachiever.

He got looked at by a lot of the bigger schools, but he said, you know what, I want to play. And he decided to go to James Madison. He graduated in 1978, I think.

What does your mom do?

We have a hundred-acre farm, and she boards horses. She has thirteen horses that she boards, and that, plus running three sons in and out everywhere, keeps her pretty busy.

What does your dad do for a living?

He's a national sales manager for M&M/Mars candy company. Right now, he's the head of the military operations. He has to make sure that all the candy gets to all the military bases around the world.

So you guys probably always got a lot of candy bars when you were kids.

Ah, so much. Too much.

What do you do in your spare time for your enjoyment?

Uh, lift weights (laughs). I hang out with my friends, I watch sports. That's pretty much my life. Literally my whole life revolves around football, and lifting weights, and watching film and throwing. (laughs again).

So you're not a guy who has any hobbies to speak of?

Not really. I hardly ever have time for them. My little brother has about fifty things he likes to do, but I'm not like that.

Thanks for the interview, Patrick. We appreciate it.

Okay, you're welcome.

The 2001 Season in Review

For the 2001 Hokie football team, it was a season of wrong turns and missteps.

by Will Stewart, TechSideline.com

It's time to fess up. I think this was a pretty disappointing football season for the Hokies and I'll tell you why. But first, a warning for you sunshine Hokies. This article is going to get pretty critical at times, so if you can't handle a little harsh truth, you might want to skip ahead to the next feature.

This isn't so much a review of the season as it is a commentary on the season and why it turned out the way it did. So, I'm not going to go over each game, because that would be boring. Besides, TSL has nicely

archived game recaps and analysis, if reviewing the season is what you're interested in.

A Look Back

First, let's put up all the scores, just to refresh your memory of how the season went:

VT 52, UConn 10
 VT 31, Western Michigan 0
 VT 50, Rutgers 0
 VT 46, Central Florida 14
 VT 35, WVU 0
 VT 34, BC 20
 Syracuse 22, VT 14
 Pitt 38, VT 7
 VT 35, Temple 0
 VT 31, UVa 17
 Miami 26, VT 24
 FSU 30, VT 17

Put your Hokie fan sensibilities aside and take a look at those last six games. The simple fact is that Tech went 2-4 over their last six games, which, no matter how you dress it up, is not good.

"Tech lost to Syracuse, but they had been set up by that crummy opening schedule and got beat on special teams." Yeah, but they lost.

"Well, the team just wasn't ready to play against Pitt. They were down from the week before. And Pitt always plays great against Tech." Yeah, and they lost.

"They played #1 Miami to a near standstill, and that punt block was the greatest thing I had ever seen in Lane Stadium!" Yeah, but they lost.

"Florida State is a lot better than their record this year. That team is always loaded, and Tech played them tough." Yeah ... *and they lost.*

Do you get the point? Sure, with the exception of the Pittsburgh game, Tech was “in it” in every one of their losses, but the point remains, they lost. A lot. In their last six games, the Hokies lost *twice* as many games as they had lost in the previous *two* seasons *combined*.

Tech was a pretty good team this year, but it all added up to an 8-4 record, which tied for their second-worst record since the Beamer Bowl era started in 1993. The only worse year was 1997 (7-5), and 2001 tied 1994 at 8-4. Other than that, the Hokies have had better teams, record-wise, for nearly ten years now.

Finding a Way to Lose

More troubling than the numbers was the way this team found a way to lose against every quality opponent they faced, with the exception of Boston College.

At one point this season, with 6:04 to go in the third quarter of the Boston College game, the Hokies were 6-0 and were leading the Eagles 34-0. They looked like a juggernaut. They had outscored their opponents at that point in the season 248-24, an incredible statistic.

From then on, though, the Hokies would get outscored 153-128, and they would very often look like an ordinary team as they limped their way to the finish line.

The problem is, much like the way Hokie teams of the past two years found a way to win, this team found a way to lose. It's harsh, but it's true. Throwing out the Pittsburgh game, which was a butt-whipping of the highest order in which Tech never had a chance, let's take a look at the Hokies' other three losses:

1.) Syracuse 22, VT 14: Tech gives up a special teams TD to start off the game; Kevin Jones fumbles deep in Tech territory, leading to another TD; Vinnie Burns drops a snap deep in Tech territory, leading to a field goal; Ronyell Whitaker commits a very questionable but critical interference penalty, keeping a Syracuse drive and resulting in a made field goal; Grant Noel takes a sack in the end zone for a safety.

2.) Miami 26, VT 24: Tech quarterback Grant Noel has his worst game of the year, throwing four interceptions and completing just four passes, negating a great effort by Kevin Jones, the Tech defense, and the Tech special teams. Ernest Wilford drops an easy 2-point conversion that would have tied the game with six minutes to go.

3.) Florida State 30, VT 17: Tech fails to convert three great first-quarter chances into more than 3 points; the Hokies have a TD pass called back on a holding call and follow that by fumbling; Tech gives up a punt block on their own 1-yard line; cornerback Ronyell Whitaker has his worst game of the year, giving up three long pass plays, including two TD's.

Painful, isn't it? It reads like a comedy of errors, the Syracuse game in particular. Not to take anything away from the Orangemen, but *every single point* they scored came off a Tech mistake or a failed play on Tech's part.

Virginia Tech very easily could have been 10-1 in the regular season, instead of the much less-palatable 8-3 record that they eventually put up. I don't think there was any way the Hokies would

have beaten Pitt on that day, even had they won against Syracuse. Had they been 10-1 with a win over Miami, Tech probably would have gone to the BCS, and it's hard to say what would have happened there.

In the last two seasons, players stepped up for the Hokies and won close, crucial games. Michael Vick and Shayne Graham stepped up and won the 1999 WVU game, and Dave Meyer and Carter Warley came through in the clutch against Pitt in 2000.

But this season, Tech players did the opposite. They made critical mistakes in crunch time that lost games. And the gaffes and errors were spread all over the team, from the run defense to the pass defense to the special teams to the offense to the coaching. It was a group effort.

Old Reliables — Defense and the Running Game — Break Down

Never mind where you stand on the Grant Noel debate (is he a decent QB? Or is he Tech's worst QB since the Mark Cox/Todd Greenwood era?). The Hokies sucked up some painful losses because some normally reliable units on their team — namely, the defense, the running game, and special teams — failed them at critical times.

1. Defense. Defensively, Tech had the #1 defense in the country for much of the season, and it eventually finished #2 in total yards given up, a close second to only Texas (236.2 ypg versus 237.9). They finished #2 in scoring defense as well (13.4 ppg). They finished tied for 7th in the country with a commendable 19 interceptions, and they had the #2 rushing defense in the country at 71.6 yards per game.

But the defense, including the run defense, failed the Hokies at key junctures. Down 17-7 to Syracuse late in the third quarter, the Hokies gave up *four straight* third-down conversions to the Orangemen, surrendering a field goal that made the Orangemen's lead an insurmountable (as it turned out) 20-7. That drive was 15 plays and took 7:11 off the clock at a time when Tech needed to get the Orange offense off the field quickly. It was also in that drive that Ronyell Whitaker was whistled for the extremely questionable pass interference penalty on third and 20.

Against Miami, with the Canes holding a narrow 26-24 lead with just 4:18 remaining, the Canes went to the running game, handing off seven straight times to Clinton Portis. Portis ripped off runs of 5, 9, 15, and 5 yards (4 rushes, 34 yards) before a penalty killed the drive. But the drive, short as it was, ate up 3:58 of the remaining 4:18, at a critical time when a three-and-out would have given the Hokies another shot at scoring.

A similar thing happened against FSU in the Gator Bowl. The 'Noles were holding a 23-17 lead and were backed up on their own 22-yard line with 5:22 to go. They went to their running game and sliced easily through the Hokie defense, with tailback Greg Jones ripping off runs of 23 and 22 yards into the teeth of the Hokie defense. FSU picked up 9 yards on three more carries, and then on fourth and 1, FSU quarterback Chris Rix picked up the first down on a keeper (on a very questionable spot).

The Seminoles scored on the next play, a pass to Javon Walker. At a time when Tech needed a critical defensive stand, they instead gave up a 7-play, 78-yard drive that took just 3:08.

Statistically, this Tech defense was superior to the 1999 Tech defense in a few ways. They gave up 4 fewer rushing yards per game and 10 fewer total yards per game. But they surrendered more points per game (13.4 as compared to 10.5 in 1999), and more importantly, they couldn't make the big play when needed.

The 1999 defense made plays when they needed them. The 2001 defense didn't. Not once did they come through in the clutch when needed.

2. The Running Game. The rushing offense failed the Hokies, as well. Perhaps it could have survived the loss of four offensive line starters to graduation, or perhaps it could have survived the loss of Lee Suggs to injury, but not both. When Suggs went down to injury, Hokie fans cheerfully proclaimed their depth at tailback, saying that Keith Burnell and Kevin Jones would pick up the slack.

Wrong. Burnell is a decent back, but he lacks Suggs' power, vision, and acceleration. Burnell couldn't find the holes (not that they were plentiful), he spent too much time spinning to get away from defenders, and he committed the cardinal sin of running out of bounds with no contact.

Jones, meanwhile, was a true freshman who played like it. He came on strong at the end of the year, but he still lacks the vision to hit the hole quickly. He'll learn, but he's just too young right now. The upside is, he gained nearly 1,000 yards, and he hasn't nearly reached his potential. That's frightening for Tech's opponents. And on another upside, Jones' blocking improved drastically as the season wore on. He did an excellent job picking up blitzes against Virginia and Florida State.

Tech's ground attack disappeared at critical times. Against Syracuse, they gained minus-3 yards in the first half (if you can call that "gaining" yards) and just 90 for the game, and they were held to just 43 yards in the Gator Bowl. Against Miami, they fared better with 167 yards, but the truth remains: better rushing attacks against Syracuse and Florida State could have meant the difference between winning and losing.

3. Special Teams. We have documented the special teams failures already, most notably the punt return for a TD that Syracuse had, and the blocked punt that Florida State had in the Gator Bowl. These were breakdowns from the normally-reliable Tech special teams that led directly to defeat, particularly when combined with the other shortcomings the Hokies had in those games.

The Lack of a Running QB

After registering a Big East-record 2,793 yards rushing in 1999 and then topping it with 2,975 in the year 2000, the Hokies' run production dropped off drastically in 2001, falling to 2,142 yards. Most of the difference can be traced directly to the quarterback position, where Michael Vick netted 585 yards in 1999 and 617 in 2000, scoring 16 rushing TD's along the way. Grant Noel, on the other hand, netted minus-14 yards rushing this season and had just 2 rushing touchdowns.

Never mind Noel's passing, which ran hot (Connecticut and FSU) and cold (Miami) this year. It was his inability to make something out of nothing that hurt. In 1999, Michael Vick made a fantastic sideline run against West Virginia that was the difference between victory and defeat. In 2000, he made a 55-yard run against Syracuse with 1:34 to go in the fourth quarter that sealed a narrow 22-14 win. Also in 2000, he rolled up 210 yards rushing against Boston College, including a game-

clinching 82-yard run in the fourth quarter. Tech won 48-34.

Noel is incapable of making those plays. If he were, it might have meant the difference between losing and winning against Syracuse, Miami, and Florida State. Those were all close losses in which one great play by a running quarterback — be it an 82-yarder or just an 8-yard scramble on a key third and 7 — could have changed the outcome.

Summing It Up

It's very simple. The difference between the 11-1 seasons in 1999 and 2000, versus the 8-4 season in 2001, can be traced down to five factors, in my opinion:

- Lack of key plays by the defense at critical times (Syracuse and Florida State)
- Special teams breakdowns (Syracuse and Florida State)
- Critical mistakes and turnovers at critical times (Syracuse, Miami, and Florida State)
- Lack of a dominating running game (Syracuse and Florida State)
- Lack of a running quarterback (Syracuse, Miami, and Florida State)

But it gets even simpler than that. This team just didn't make plays when it needed to. While the list of mistakes and breakdowns made over the course of the season is seemingly endless, the list of clutch plays is oh-so-short. Only one, the punt block against Miami, comes readily to mind. After that, you have to think hard.

This team had a great defense and a box full of cupcakes on its schedule, plus it had critical conference games at home against BC, Syracuse, and Miami. It failed to take advantage of every opportunity presented to it, with the exception of the Boston College game.

So was it a disappointing season? Yes, it was. Karma swung back in the other direction this year, and Tech paid for all the good fortune and great play they had in 1999 and 2000. (Speaking of which, in terms of good luck, bad luck, good plays, and bad plays, 1998-2001 balances out nicely, doesn't it?)

But you can't dwell on it; it's not as if the program is going down the tubes. They simply didn't have the game-breaking talent they needed at quarterback, and they didn't get the clutch plays they needed from anyone on the team. That changes from year to year, and the program is on the right track. Don't like the results from this season? Hang around for a few more seasons; it'll change. Good fortune in football is like the Blacksburg weather. It changes rapidly.

Next season doesn't promise to be better, record-wise. The schedule is very tough, with home games against SEC-champion LSU, MAC-champion Marshall (with QB Byron Leftwich), and road games against BC, Miami, Syracuse, and Texas A&M. All seven of those teams won their bowl games.

But next year, despite whatever the record turns out to be, will be deemed a success if it harkens the return of some of the key components of winning Hokie football: the rushing game, special teams play, clutch plays at key moments, and improved quarterback play. Throw in some improved offensive play-calling like what was witnessed in the Gator Bowl, and Hokie fans will be excited about the future of Hokie football again, no matter how 2002 turns out.

Inside the Numbers: Players in the Pros

The rundown on what college teams put the most players in the pros, and at what positions.

by Will Stewart, TechSideline.com

Sometimes story ideas come from the strangest places. You would never think, for example, that the inspiration and background information for an “Inside the Numbers” story would come from a cigar shop, would you? But that’s exactly what happened the night before the Gator Bowl, when I wandered into a cigar shop in the Jacksonville Landing.

I don’t smoke cigars, but I was with a couple of friends who do, and they were looking for a smoke to top off the evening. Since I

wasn’t interested in the wares covering the walls and gracing the display cases, I was looking for something to do while I waited for my friends.

My eye was drawn to a small magazine rack that included a copy of the January 2002 issue of *Cigar Aficionado*. There was a picture of actor Kevin Spacey on the cover, and since Spacey stars in one of my favorite movies, *American Beauty*, I decided to check and see what the issue had to say.

I located the table of contents, and lo and behold there was a picture of some Florida State Seminoles gang-tackling a University of Miami running back. The picture accompanied an article called “The NCAA: The NFL’s Farm System,” and being that I’m much more interested in college football than I am cigars, or *American Beauty*, I took a look, flipping back to page 68.

Jackpot. The text of the article wasn’t that interesting, but there on page 70 was a table titled “Colleges Sending the Most Players to the Pros.” Each college received an overall ranking (total number of players sent to the pros), and each position was broken out separately (most quarterbacks, most running backs, etc.).

“This,” I thought to myself, “is definitely material for ‘Inside the Numbers.’”

First, a nod to the author of the original article, Kenneth Shouler. Shouler wrote *The Major League Baseball Book of Fabulous Facts and Awesome Trivia*, published by Harper Collins, and his article subsequently appeared in the February 2002 issue of *Cigar Aficionado*. You can visit their web site at <http://www.cigaraficionado.com>, where, by the way, the article is not posted.

The Data

The data presented in the article (and used here) is pretty extensive, but there is no mention of what date it applies to. In the text of the article, the author mentions the number of players on NFL rosters on opening day 2001 and the number of active players on October 8th, 2001, but he never explicitly says, “The numbers in the table represent the players on NFL rosters as of (Date X).”

Of course, what do you expect from *Cigar Aficionado*? It’s not like they’re a technical journal.

There is also no effort made to name the individual players, just the number of players from various

college teams who were on NFL rosters.

In this article, we'll just list the top teams — plus Virginia Tech — in all the major categories. But *all* the teams for *all* the categories are included in the linked web page and linked Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, if you're reading the on-line version.

College teams are ranked according to the number of players they place in the pros for the following categories: overall players, quarterbacks, running backs, tight ends, wide receivers, offensive linemen, defensive linemen, linebackers, and defensive backs.

Overall Rankings of Players in the Pros

The overall rankings list the top 50 teams, but it winds up being 51 because of a 6-way tie for 46th.

The team that has the most players in the pros is ... drum-roll please ... Florida State. Big surprise, eh?

Okay, maybe not, but the fact that Notre Dame is tied with FSU for first is a surprise, at least for me. Both teams had 41 players on NFL rosters, according to *Cigar Aficionado's* figures. Here are the top 10 teams, plus Virginia Tech, their Big East brethren, and Virginia (again, all 51 teams are listed in the linked web page and Excel spreadsheet). In the following table, the notation "(T)" denotes a tie:

Total Players in the NFL		
Rank	Team	Players
1(T)	Florida State	41
1(T)	Notre Dame	41
3(T)	Miami (FL)	37
3(T)	Michigan	37
5	Texas A&M	34
6	Nebraska	33
7	Ohio State	32
8(T)	Florida	31
8(T)	Penn State	31
10	Tennessee	29
14(T)	Virginia	25
24	Syracuse	21
28(T)	Boston College	18
28(T)	WVU	18
28(T)	Pittsburgh	18
40(T)	Virginia Tech	13

Are you surprised to see the Hokies that far down the list? I am, but if you think about it, it makes sense. Offensively, Antonio Freeman and (possibly) Andre Davis aside, the Hokies generally don't produce NFL-caliber wideouts. The same is true for fullbacks, tight ends, and even tailbacks, though I think Lee Suggs and perhaps Kevin Jones are going to change that.

Defensively, Tech's emphasis on smaller and faster defensive linemen means that they don't place

many DL in the pros as defensive linemen, if at all. John Engelberger plays defensive line in the NFL, but former Hokie DE's Cornell Brown and Corey Moore were both converted to linebacker upon arrival in the NFL. Other Hokie DL's don't go to the NFL at all.

The Whip linebacker in Tech's system is usually manned (optimally) by a player who has the size but probably doesn't have the speed to play safety in the NFL. For some reason, Tech hasn't produced NFL-quality players at the other linebacker spots since Mike Johnson in the mid-80's; even Jamel Smith and Michael Hawkes knocked around the league a bit but did not catch on.

The Hokies have, however, produced a number of NFL-quality defensive backs, whether they stuck in the NFL or not. Tyronne Drakeford, Antonio Banks, Torrian Gray, William Yarborough, Keion Carpenter, Anthony Midget, Ike Charlton, Cory Bird and even Nick Sorensen are all recent Hokie defensive backs who have made NFL rosters, with many of them still in the league.

Important Note: I should point out that as of January 21st, CBSSportsline.com listed 22 Hokies as being on NFL rosters, as of the end of the regular season, so a lot of Hokies jumped on board a lot of teams after the season started.

Sure, that makes you wonder how accurate the data in the rest of this report is, but if you think about it, data taken at any point in time is just a "snapshot" that you have to go with. The way rosters mix and change throughout the season means that the snapshot will be different depending upon when you take it. So let's forge ahead.

Breakdown of Players by Conference

What about if you sort things out by conference? Here's a table showing the results:

BCS Teams in Top 51 in NFL Players			
Conf.	Players	Teams (% of tms in conf.)	Players/Team
ACC	150	7 (78%)	21.4
B10	192	8 (73%)	24.0
B12	149	7 (58%)	21.3
BE	125	6 (75%)	20.8
SEC	197	9 (75%)	21.9
P10	185	9 (90%)	20.5
Totals	998	46 (out of 62) (74%)	21.7

The PAC 10 is impressive, placing 9 of its 10 teams (90%) in the Top 51. All other BCS conferences are in the 73%-78% range, which is average, except for the Big 12, which has just over 50% of its teams (7/12) in the Top 51. The Big 12 is strong at the top, but it sure is weak at the bottom.

The sixteen BCS-conference teams not ranked in the Top 51 are:

- ACC: Duke, Georgia Tech
- Big Ten: Indiana, Minnesota, Northwestern
- Big 12: Baylor, Iowa State, Kansas, Missouri, Texas Tech
- Big East: Rutgers, Temple
- PAC 10: Oregon State
- SEC: Arkansas, Kentucky, Vanderbilt.

Without a doubt, the biggest surprise on that list is Georgia Tech, and perhaps Arkansas. The other programs listed are historically not strong football programs, and that's reflected in the lack of players they place in the NFL.

Breakdown by Position

A breakdown of players in the pros by position shows where the Hokies really clean up when it comes to putting players in the NFL. Read on. A lot of tables follow, but if you take the time to scan them, it's interesting.

In the interest of saving space, we'll list just the top few teams for placing QB's, RB's, TE's, etc. in the NFL, plus VT, Virginia, and Big East teams. Take a gander. I'll present each table with very little comment.

Quarterbacks		
Rank	Team	Players
1	Washington	6
2 (T)	Florida, Michigan	4
4	Ohio State	3
5(T)	13 teams, including Pittsburgh, BC, Rutgers	2

Washington being #1 is kind of odd, but Florida and Michigan being highly ranked is no surprise.

Running Backs		
Rank	Team	Players
1(T)	Tennessee, Auburn	6
3(T)	Miami (FL), Georgia, Virginia, Nebraska	5

Virginia proves their reputation as a good school for running backs with their high placement on this list.

Tight Ends		
Rank	Team	Players
1	Michigan	5
2(T)	Washington, Wake Forest	4
4	Alabama	3
5	18 teams, including Miami, Virginia, Syracuse, BC	2

Tight end seems to be a crapshoot. Wake Forest, with four tight ends in the NFL? The fact that 18 teams have 2 tight ends in the pros tells you that tight end development is all over the map.

Wide Receivers

Rank	Team	Players
1(T)	Michigan, Ohio State, Florida	7
4	Southern California	6
5(T)	12 teams, including Miami (FL), Virginia, Syracuse, Florida State	4

Big Ten teams Michigan and Ohio State have nearly as many receivers (14) in the NFL than all three Florida schools (Florida, FSU, and Miami — 15 total) combined.

Offensive Linemen

Rank	Team	Players
1(T)	Wisconsin, Nebraska	8
3(T)	Michigan, PSU, Notre Dame, Auburn	7
7(T)	7 teams, incl. Virginia Tech and BC	6

This is the only position ranking in which the Hokies appear — *the only one*. And nearly half of the Hokie pros (6 out of 13) come at this position. That's a testament to the Hokies' dedication to the run and their development of offensive linemen. It's also worth noting that one Hokie "offensive lineman" in the pros, Waverly Jackson, actually played defensive tackle while at Tech.

Defensive Linemen

Rank	Team	Players
1(T)	Notre Dame, Florida State	8
3(T)	Nebraska, UNC	7
5(T)	Florida, Tex. A&M, Georgia	6
8(T)	10 teams, including Miami (FL) and Pittsburgh	5

Pittsburgh with five defensive linemen in the NFL? That's interesting. Otherwise, no surprises on this list.

Linebackers

Rank	Team	Players
1	Florida State	8
2(T)	UNC, Miami (FL), Colorado	7
5	Arizona	6
6(T)	6 teams	5

Penn State — "Linebacker U" — is one of the six teams tied for 6th with 5 linebackers in the NFL. Vanderbilt, one of the worst BCS-conference programs year in and year out, has also placed 5 linebackers in the NFL. Go figure.

Defensive Backs		
Rank	Team	Players
1(T)	Florida State, Notre Dame, Nebraska	9
4(T)	Miami (FL), Texas A&M	8
6	Southern Cal.	7
7(T)	5 teams	6

Memphis, a pretty stout defensive team over the years, is tied for 7th with 6 DB's in the NFL.

Some General Comments

Despite their proclivity for offense, it's interesting to note that Florida State doesn't rank at the top at any of the offensive position rankings, but is at least tied for first at all defensive positions. Of the 41 Seminoles in the pros, 25 of them are defensive players, and just 16 are offensive players.

Texas A&M placing 5th overall with 34 players in the pros is surprising. They're a solid program with great tradition, but they haven't been consistently outstanding over the last 10-15 years. More importantly, you rarely hear about any of their players excelling at the college level. Texas A&M gets zero hype from the national media, so maybe they play better football than most of us Easterners (I'm talking about myself here) are aware of. Of the 34 players they have in the NFL, 19 of them are on the defensive side of the ball and 15 on the offensive side.

Schools from non-BCS conferences and small schools do not appear on the list with much frequency. The highest-ranked non-BCS school is San Diego State, tied for 36th overall with 15 players in the pros. Marshall and Southern Miss. are tied at 40th with Tech (13 players), and Fresno State is tied for 46th overall with 12 players. Other than those four schools, the other 47 teams in the top 51 are comprised of Notre Dame and schools from the six BCS conferences.

Continuing on the subject of small schools, Middle Tennessee State is ranked in quarterbacks with 2, and Jackson State is ranked in receivers with 4.

One program that I thought was notable by its absence in the overall rankings is Brigham Young. Regardless of what you think about BYU, they are a strong program year in and year out, but they did not place in the Top 51 programs for putting players in the NFL. In position rankings, they show up only once, with 2 tight ends.

The Data

As I said before, the data included in the spreadsheet and web page linked below are all-inclusive, representing the complete data set as presented in the *Cigar Aficionado* article.

You can download the data and view it, either as a web page, or as a Microsoft Excel 97 spreadsheet.

To view the data in web page format, go here:

<http://www.techsideline.com/tslextra/issue015/playersinthepros.htm>

To download the data in Microsoft Excel 97 spreadsheet format, head to this link:

<http://www.techsideline.com/tslextra/issue015/playersinthepros.xls>

(Right-click the link and do a "Save Link As" or "Save Target As" to save the Excel file to disk.)

Inside TSL 1: Calling All Recruits

What it's like to interview the high school players
the Hokies are courting.

by Will Stewart, TechSideline.com

If you're paying attention (and most of you who subscribe to this fine publication are), you've been able to tell that we're stepping up our coverage of recruiting at TechSideline.com. We're doing the things we have always done in the past, such as providing a recruiting message board and a database, but this year, we're trying to provide more information.

There are some things I'm doing behind the scenes that you can't see, such as combing

the other recruiting services (Rivals.com and SuperPrep, mainly) for information, emailing some contacts and talking to some others on the phone. I'm trying to keep more up-to-date on recruiting than I have done in the past, and getting in touch with those who are well-connected is always a first step.

I've been able to develop some sources this year that I didn't have before, something that's allowed me to be pretty accurate about what players are and aren't on Tech's recruiting list, when they're visiting, etc. Recruiting lists and visit lists are half the battle, because it allows site visitors to figure out whom Tech is serious about and whom they're not serious about (some recruits, for instance, keep mentioning VT in their updates long after the Tech coaches have cooled and aren't interested).

But what people really want are two things: (1) quotes from the recruits, and (2) information about how good Tech's chances are with a given recruit.

This article is about item (1), but I'll address item (2) for a moment. One thing I'm leery of, given that all my sources are Tech sources, is believing everything I hear about how well Tech is doing with a certain recruit. You've got to figure that most of the stuff I hear is run through a pro-Tech "filter."

Mike Ingalls of TheSabre.com, for instance, has his sources too, and they pass him information through a pro-UVa filter. As you can imagine, Mike and I will talk about recruits, and I'll discover that his sources have told him contradictory information to what my sources have told me. My sources might say, "Jonathan Lewis is a lock for Tech," and Mike's sources will say, "UVa's got a great shot at him." Those two statements aren't exactly mutually exclusive, but you can tell they're slanted to Tech in one case and UVa in the other.

And no matter how good a source is, you never know whether they're right or not in any given instance. For example, one of my better sources, who is dead-on most of the time, told me several times 6-8 weeks ago that defensive end Darryl Tapp was on the verge of committing and would probably do so within 1-2 days. Well, as of January 19th, as I write this, Tapp still hasn't committed.

(I made passing mention of this in a recent TSLMail as a way to poke some fun at my source.)

So you never know, and I'm the kind who will err on the side of caution and not shoot my mouth off ... or in this case, my keyboard. And there's always that line you have to walk with your sources,

being careful not to give up too much of what they tell you, or they might stop telling it to you. Many times, sources will tell you things that are not intended for public consumption and are only intended to keep you well-informed. Give too much away, and you might give the source away, which is a no-no.

With recruiting, it's such a high-stakes game that you have to be careful. Saying the wrong thing here or there could drive a kid off, and that kid might wind up being a prospect years later that could have won an important game for the Hokies. Not only does it hurt Tech — the school I cover as a writer — it runs the risk of angering the Virginia Tech coaches, who will never forget a guy who costs them a recruit.

One situation that clearly illustrated to me the importance of when and how to release recruiting information occurred about two years ago. It was January of 2000, and I called Garden City (Kansas) Community College to talk to their coach about a couple of defensive linemen that Tech was recruiting named John Culp and Ervin Holloman, with Holloman being the more highly desired of the two.

I spoke with the coach for a few minutes about Culp and Holloman, and we arranged for me to call back the next day and interview the two players in the coach's office.

Well, the next day, when I called back, Holloman was neutral, but Culp had a surprise for me: he was committing to Tech.

Awesome. We broke the news on HokieCentral.com (as we were known back then) and considered it to be a real feather in our cap.

Well, maybe not. Word got back to us that publicly blaring out Culp's commitment was a mistake. It was giving the Hokie coaches trouble recruiting another defensive lineman that they badly wanted. A Tech coach who was paying an on-campus visit to this certain defensive lineman suddenly found himself in the position of having to explain who John Culp was and how he wasn't a threat to the kid he was talking to.

Although it was never directly explained to me, I think the defensive lineman who was concerned about Culp's "commitment" was a certain Jim Davis out of Fork Union Military Academy. You've heard of him, right? And you haven't heard of John Culp, right? Nuff said.

I believe that Culp was considered a package deal with Holloman, and the only way the Hokie coaches were willing to take Culp was if Holloman committed with him (again, this was never explicitly said to me, but that's my understanding of things based on how they unfolded). So by trumpeting the news of just Culp's commitment, without Holloman saying the same thing, I was getting ahead of myself.

The point is, had I had good sources at the time, I would have known that, and I would have kept my mouth shut about Culp and his "commitment." Rivals.com got caught in this trap a few weeks ago when they announced a commitment from a previously-unknown player named David Reese. They had quotes from Reese's coach and Reese himself about how he was going to Tech. But I knew the kid was not on Tech's recruiting list, so I kept my mouth shut ... as did Doug Doughty, and Mike Harris.

I don't know the whole story. Don't want to. All I know is, Reese wasn't on Tech's recruiting list, so I didn't say anything. Reese is now a Temple verbal commitment, according to Rivals.

But, I digress. Let's talk about item (2); what it's like to call recruits, tying to get quotes from them.

How Do You Get the Phone Numbers?

Ah, question number one. How do those of us who call recruits get the phone numbers?

When I first started calling recruits a couple of months ago, I went about it the slow way. I called their coaches, interviewed the coaches, and then tried to get the coaches to put me in touch with the kids.

That was touch-and-go. The coaches were very good about talking to me. They love to promote their kids, and they say great things about them and often make outlandish statements (James Banks' coach, Dick Dullaghan, told me, "He changes his clothes in a phone booth." In case you're having trouble figuring that one out — it happens — it's a Superman reference).

But they were not good about getting the kid's phone number to me or getting the kid in their office to do a phone interview. The coaches who were attentive and successful at putting me in touch with their kids were Brandon Gore's coach, Patrick Dosh's coach, Jonathan Lewis's coach, Noland Burchette's coach, and Alan Wheeling's coach (Wheeling's coach, Joel Hicks at Pulaski County, is actually an acquaintance from years ago whom I had dealt with before, both personally and in interviewing Jeff King).

Burchette's coach, Scott Burton, actually deserves special mention. After Noland committed to Tech, Burton, whom I had never heard of before, emailed me out of the blue and offered to do an interview about Noland — and to put me in touch with Noland. To this day, Burton remains the only coach to do that. Burchette turned out to be a hell of a story and was the cover story for TSLX #11. I wish they were all that easy!

Getting Jonathan Lewis's phone number was a feat. I interviewed his coach, Gary Chilcoat, and Chilcoat told me that in order to get Jonathan's phone number, he would have to pass my information on to Jonathan, who would then discuss with his family if it were okay. TechSideline.com apparently passed muster with the Lewis family, because a day or two later, Coach Chilcoat gave me Jonathan's phone number.

I wailed away at this for a while, then got an idea and emailed a friend of mine who runs a site in the Insiders.com network of college sites — they're similar to Rivals.com, and they cover recruiting as well. I sent him my list of recruits and politely asked if he could get any of the phone numbers for me. I figured he probably wouldn't, but what the heck, it was worth a try.

Two days later, I got a reply that included phone numbers for about 80% of the recruits on the list I had sent to him. I was in business.

I haven't called every recruit that I have a phone number for, but at last count, I have interviewed about a dozen recruits, and it has been interesting, to say the least.

What They're Like

So what are the recruits like? Here's the lowdown on the kids I have talked to:

Noland Burchette (VT commitment): very quiet and shy, without much to say. But he's very open about his coach, saying of Scott Burton, "He's like a father to me." If you're a new subscriber who hasn't read Burchette's profile in issue #11, go read it. His story is a great one. By the way, I hear the Tech coaches are pumped about Burchette and think he is going to be a great one.

Cary Wade (VT commitment): intelligent kid, good interview.

Patrick Dosh (VT commitment): probably my favorite interview. I have talked to Dosh at least a half a dozen times, and I have found him to be articulate, engaging, and forthcoming. He won't be 18 until April, but for such a young man, he is very mature. And he's a competitor. An in-depth interview with him appears elsewhere in this issue.

Lorne Sam (FSU commitment): another of my favorites. I talked to him almost as many times as I talked to Dosh, and Sam, while young (he is only 16, and yes, he's a senior), is very thoughtful and serious. Florida State got a quality kid from a quality family when Lorne Sam committed.

Mike Imoh: another great kid. Very articulate and open, a good interview.

Santonio Holmes: I've talked to Santonio Holmes twice, and the first time went very well. The second time, I got the impression he *really* didn't want to talk. Whoops, sorry, Santonio.

Laenar Nixon (Oklahoma commitment): similar to Lorne Sam and Mike Imoh, Nixon is a pleasant kid to talk to. Very open and forthcoming, he actually used the word "swell" in one interview, when describing his visit to Tech. He gets bonus points just for that. Nixon really liked Tech, but the Hokies cooled on him after his official visit to VT, feeling that he had a long way to go before he could play tight end for VT (he only weighs 205, and it's a lanky 205). When I interviewed Nixon after his Oklahoma commitment, he sounded very happy, and I found myself feeling happy for him. Good kid, and all's well that ends well.

Brandon Gore (VT commitment): it has been a long time since I interviewed Gore (TSL Extra issue #10), but I remember him as being a pretty good interview. Very laid back. Gore is a kid that takes everything in stride, including hard work.

Jonathan Lewis: One of Tech's key recruits, Lewis is a man of few words. He is nice enough, but he answers questions as succinctly as possible, without offering any extra information. To find out the things you really want to know, you have to press for details, which I'm not good at doing at this stage. My one in-depth interview with Lewis appears in Issue #13, so you be the judge.

Brian Mattes: very friendly and open. Talking to Brian Mattes is almost like talking to Patrick Dosh.

Demetrius Hodges: very quiet, another man of few words. When listening to tape of my interviews with him, I have to turn up the volume all the way to make out what he's saying.

Montavis Pitts: another quiet kid, similar to Hodges. It has been a long time since I interviewed Pitts (TSLX Issue #9), so I don't remember much about it.

LaMarr Watkins: I have only talked to Watkins once, and I could tell he really didn't want to speak to reporters. Watkins committed to Wisconsin last summer but has been talking to VT, even going so far as to visit Tech's campus. Sources tell me that until recently, the Tech coaches didn't even know that Watkins was committed to Wisconsin. They found out when someone emailed them comments Watkins had given to Rivals.com's recruiting specialists. I imagine that led to an interesting conversation between Watkins and the VT coaches, and perhaps that's the reason why Watkins is leery of talking to reporters now. Given all that, he was still polite to me. He just didn't say much when answering my questions.

The Biggest Surprise

Without a doubt, the biggest surprise in interviewing recruits has been finding out how busy they are. Yeah, I know — "Duh!" — but let me explain what I mean.

Take the case of Demetrius Hodges. The first time I called Hodges, it was about nine o'clock at night, and a very nice lady answered. She told me, "I don't know where he is. He was supposed to be back by now from football practice. I told him not to go to that basketball game, but I think that's where he is."

Football practice? In January? Yep. Hodges is on an area all-star team, plus he plays basketball for Cardinal Newman, his high school. And on that particular day, he had all-star football practice from 4:30-6:30, and then a road basketball game that started at 7:30. So he went from football practice to the basketball game, and to make a long story short, I talked to him at eleven o'clock, just after he got home from his basketball game.

Eleven o'clock? When does this kid get his schoolwork done?

A lot of these kids play basketball. They're all great athletes, and great athletes play sports year-round in high school. Dosh plays basketball, Imoh plays basketball, Hodges plays basketball, and probably a million others I don't know about. They often have 2-3 games a week, and when they are home, recruiting writers and specialists, not to mention coaches, are ringing the phone off the hook. I don't see how any of these kids get anything done.

A Nice Bunch of Kids

Next year, I'll get involved earlier and get to know a lot of the kids earlier in the process, so as things heat up in December through February, we'll be familiar with each other and more comfortable.

At the risk of blowing sunshine up your posterior and sounding like a total homer, I will tell you in all honesty that the kids I have talked to are a great bunch of kids. With a few exceptions, they're smart, they're articulate, and their sense of self is very well-developed for teenagers. I was a lot more clueless at the age of 16, 17, or 18 than most of the kids I talk to these days. Lorne Sam in particular is remarkably humble and thoughtful for a 16-year-old.

Sometimes, calling these kids is tough. I don't want to intrude, I don't want to take up more of their precious time, and sometimes, I don't want to do it for personal reasons. Sometimes, I'd rather spend time with my wife or just relax and take it easy for once.

But on balance, it has been worth it. Talking to the kids adds a human element to the whole experience. I'll always root for Lorne Sam, for example, despite the fact that he'll play for a team that I don't particularly care for (FSU) and that has dealt the Hokies a couple of painful losses in the last three years.

Brian Mattes is another one. Even if Mattes attends Penn State or Notre Dame or Virginia, I'll find it a little difficult to root against him. I've talked to him a number of times, and he has been very forthcoming and has made my work easier.

And, as you can imagine, anything that makes my work easier makes the site better. And that's okay in my book.

Inside TSL 2: Life in the Press Box

All jokes about food aside, it's hard work up there in the press box.

by Will Stewart, TechSideline.com

This football season, I was able to do something that I had never done before: work in the press box for Virginia Tech football games. As a matter of fact, I worked three Tech games. All three were on the road of course, since the Virginia Tech Athletic Department does not grant press credentials to TechSideline.com.

Tech only plays five road games a year plus a bowl game, so there are only a few

opportunities to attend a game as "working press." We also have a very limited travel budget, so flying to games is out of the question. In odd-numbered years such as this past season, the road schedule provides a handful of games within relatively easy driving distance: West Virginia, Pittsburgh, Temple, and Virginia.

TechSideline.com put in media credential requests for all of the listed games, plus the Gator Bowl (we skipped the Rutgers road game because of driving distance from Southwest Virginia). The Pittsburgh request was flatly refused with a "we don't credential web sites" response, and the Temple game request was also refused.

(I heard through the grape vine that the Temple Sports Information Director, or SID, took a look at the message board in the weeks following the Syracuse and Pitt losses, groused that it was an "awfully negative" message board, and used that as a reason for refusing access. Of course, this leads me to wonder if a credential would have been issued had they looked at the board a couple weeks earlier).

West Virginia, however, granted access with no questions asked, as did the Gator Bowl. As for Virginia, they refused access for TSL but reminded us in their written refusal that TheSabre.com had a press box pass and a field pass for each game (for those of you who don't know, TheSabre.com and TechSideline.com are owned by the same parent company). So for the Virginia game, I worked the press box with the job of recapping the game for TSL and The Sabre, and Mike Ingalls of The Sabre took photos on the field for both web sites.

As for working games in the press box for the first time goes, it was an educational season. I got to see how things work, what resources are available to the working press, and how those who have been doing it for years approach the job. And I thought it might make a good "Inside TSL" article.

The Good News Is, I Wasn't Attacked

With the ripping that many newspaper beat writers and columnists take on the TSL message boards (comments like "Lipper's an idiot!" and "Randy King hasn't written an original thought in his life" come to mind), I'm sure your first question is how the beat writers reacted to my presence in the press box.

As near as I can tell, they didn't mind. Most of them were very accepting of me and treated me nicely, even Randy King, TSL's favorite whipping boy. King has always been cordial to me and has

told me to my face (well, okay, via email) that he has no problem with me personally. Randy's not entirely comfortable with "web media" getting press box and press conference access, but that's okay — he has told me why, and I understand where he's coming from.

Beat writers (for Tech and UVa) Doug Doughty, Bob Lipper, Mike Harris, Jeff White, Bucky Dent, Norm Wood and others were friendly to me. Does that mean they all think it was a great thing that I was finally in the press box? Well, I can't answer that, because I didn't ask them. But I was surprised how many times I was introduced this season to a member of the media that I had never met before, and they said within the first fifteen seconds, "You do a hell of a job with that web site," or some such variation.

Journalists know how important access is to their craft. They feel it is nearly impossible to write about a topic or cover a team without being able to access informational resources and interview the people who are being written about. And I think that most of them probably respect what I'm able to do, given that I'm not allowed to talk to anyone at Virginia Tech.

Plus, the beat writers aren't dumb. They're able to separate out me as an individual from what gets said on the TSL message boards. I don't comment about beat writers or take shots at them in print, so they generally have no reason to dislike me, at least not for anything I personally have done to them or said about them. Perhaps I could delete the "Writer X is an idiot!" comments from the board more than I do, but journalists, at least the ones I've met, are big boys and girls who can take the heat. That doesn't mean I'll allow open season on them on the TSL boards, but they're a tough lot. Do they like the shots they take on the boards? No, but they get over it.

So, from what I can tell, there's no hostility towards me from the beat writers, at least as a group. I imagine that if there is, the people who feel it are just avoiding me or hiding it.

How it Works

Two types of media access passes are handed out: a press box pass and a field pass. There are also "full access" passes that enable an individual to go anywhere they want, but I don't know if those are issued by the SID to working media, or by the athletic department to employees, etc. — or some combination thereof.

Press box passes get you access to the press box, of course. Within the press box, there's a directory of where everyone is supposed to sit tacked to the wall. The seats are numbered, and you find your organization on the chart, read the number, and go to that seat. The individual seats are also labeled, so it's not as if it's first-come, first-served. There's a place for everyone, and everyone in their place.

During the game, at the end of each quarter, the SID staff of the home team prints out statistics and play-by-play and hands them out, so by the end of the game, you have up-to-date quarterly statistics. This allows you to get an idea of the ebb and flow of the game in statistical terms, and some writers, me included, will actually write a recap of the game as it's in progress, using the quarterly printouts as a guide.

As the game nears its conclusion, most places will escort you out of the press box and down onto the sidelines, where you can watch the last few minutes of the game and then follow the team into

the tunnel. Typically, each team will have a few moments behind closed doors where the coach will address the team, and upon completion of that meeting, the coach will come out and address the press in the media room.

The comments that the coaches make in these sessions are usually copied down, printed out, and made available by the SID staff. This means that if a writer sits in on Beamer's post-game comments, he or she can still find out what the opposing coach said by getting a copy of that coach's post-game comments from the SID later. This is why you see so many quotes re-used in so many different papers.

There are separate media rooms for home and visiting teams, so it is pretty much impossible for one person to cover both teams. After the coach makes his comments and answers a couple of questions, players will come out of the locker room for interviews, and so will assistant coaches.

Contrary to popular belief, the press rarely goes into the locker room, and at the games I worked, they didn't go in at all. Typically, the press requests the SID to bring a player out of the locker room for interviews, and if the player agrees, he'll come out. One notable exception this year where a player did not make himself available for interviews was when Ernest Wilford refused to come out after the Miami game. I didn't work that game, but most articles mentioned the next day that Wilford refused to answer questions.

When the players and coaches start to come out of the locker rooms, that's when the fun starts. Rule #1: the quarterback gets mobbed. Rule #2: anybody who screwed up or who did something great also gets mobbed. Rule #3: be patient and wait your turn. Not that reporters don't ask questions on top of each other, but if you want a little face time with a player, you're going to have to wait until the mob clears out.

What's the Advantage of Sitting in the Box?

If you've ever seen one of the stats packages that Virginia Tech (and many schools) put on their official web sites for games now, you know that incredibly detailed statistics for a game and even detailed play-by-play drive charts are now readily available to the general public. Anyone with the time and inclination could sit down and write a pretty good game recap, so what is the advantage of being in the press box?

I can answer that by saying that it's not so much the press box during the game that benefits a reporter, as it is the chance to interview players and coaches after the game.

During the actual game, though, being in the press box does have its advantages. You're in there with professionals who watch and break down games for a living, so it's nice to have your fellow writers as a resource. Most or all of them are more observant than I and can answer the "Who made that tackle?" and "What down and distance was that?" questions that I always have, not to mention point out important trends in the game as it unfolds.

Bucky Dent of the Bristol Herald Courier is one the best writers to sit next to. I sat next to Bucky at the Gator Bowl. Bucky works a lot of high school sports, where stats packages and drive charts are not, as you can imagine, provided. So Bucky has developed a somewhat elaborate system of keeping his own running stats and play-by-play charts. I don't know what Bucky's system is, but I do

know that he's got one and that it works. Bucky can tell you at any point in the game what any player's stats are, and every time I had a detail question for him, he knew the answer.

But, as I said, the biggest advantage is being able to ask the coaches and players after the game about things that happened. At the Gator Bowl, for instance, I never saw a decent replay of the first two long passes that Ronyell Whitaker gave up, so I got to ask him face to face what happened (he described it in detail for me). I was able to ask Andre Davis if those slants, or crossing routes, or whatever you want to call them, had been in the playbook, or if they were new ("They've been in the playbook for a while, we just were playing a defense today that gave them to us"). I got to ask Bud Foster why Greg Jones of FSU was able to gain 23 and 22 yards on consecutive carries with the game on the line (he ran right through Mike Daniels on one play, and a linebacker over-pursued on the other).

One other instance that sticks out in my mind was when I asked defensive line coach Charley Wiles after the West Virginia game what he thought of defensive end Jim Davis' interception return for a touchdown. "He did just what we told him to do," Wiles said, "He was getting cut-block, and we tell 'em if that happens, get your hands down, shed the guy, and then get your hands back up in the air (because a pass is coming your way). He did that, and the ball hit him in his big ol' hands and just stuck there."

Surely you've watched a game and thought to yourself at some point, "What happened there?" or "What was he thinking on that play?" Well, imagine if you could jot down a note and then ask the player or coach your question right after the game was over. It's pretty cool ... if you can fight through the mob to ask your question.

I Might As Well Be Invisible

But without a doubt, the biggest impression I'm left with, after covering three games as working press, is this: it doesn't matter if I'm there or not.

What do I mean by that? Well, it does matter to my analysis of a game, as I pointed out above. I can get clarification from the coaches on why things happened, and that enhances the articles I write and therefore enhances your enjoyment of the site.

So in what way does it *not* matter that I'm present? It doesn't matter in the sense that there are dozens and dozens of people involved in the press box and post-game, and to have one more person present, just doing their job, doesn't make one bit of difference.

I think a part of me thought that letting a TechSideline.com writer, from — egads! — a web site of all things, into the press box would have some sort of impact. But it didn't. I showed up, I worked, I interviewed players and coaches, I wrote my piece, and I went home, just like everyone else. It didn't change the game, it didn't change the operation, and the large majority of the people involved didn't even know I was there. And among the ones who did notice, I don't think a single one of them cared.

I was just another tiny piece of the game-day puzzle. There are way too many people there with way too much work to do for it to have made one whit of difference to them if some guy from a web site was in attendance. WVU's got that figured out, and so do UVa and even the Gator Bowl.

I stayed out of the way and did my work. The coaches and players answered my questions without batting an eyelash, and were very accommodating, as a matter of fact. Not once did anyone ask who I was. I was just another guy with a notebook and a voice recorder. I'm pretty sure Coach Wiles knows who I am, and I think maybe Coach Beamer does (I've met him twice, and if he's got a good memory for names and faces, he knows), but I doubt Coach Foster knows who I am, and I'm sure none of the players do.

It was refreshing to find out that I could go in, do some work, and get some valuable content out of it without it causing a stir. I guess it's self-important to think that it would have gone any different.

In any event, I learned a lot, and I hope you enjoyed this little look inside the press box and game-day media operations. Any questions? Send me an email and ask me, and I'll answer them next month in "Inside TSL."

No Contest This Month

A couple of issues ago, I promised you a contest every month, and I have failed to arrange one for the last two issues. It seems that I always run up on my deadline (for example, it's 1:30 a.m. as I write this, and this issue has to be released tomorrow), and the last two months, I haven't had time to come up with a decent contest.

I apologize for that, and I'll try to put something together next month.

Speaking of next month ... see you then.

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