

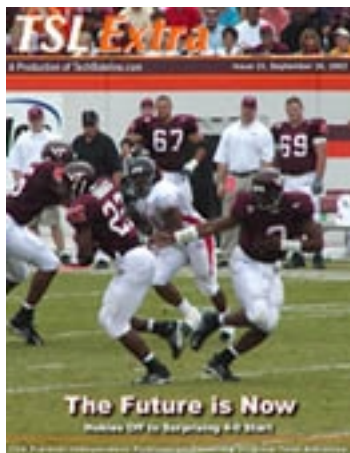
TSL Extra

Issue 23, September 25, 2002

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Dear Readers:

Maybe it's time to stop being surprised.

That's the theme of this month's cover story, which talks about the 4-0 start that the "rebuilding" Hokies have put up, against their best non-conference opposition since their nine-year bowl run began.

Everyone is calling the start "surprising," and I'll have to admit that I underestimated the Hokies, along with everyone else. I didn't make any preseason predictions this year, but if I had, I would have picked Tech to lose at least one of their first four games, maybe two, particularly with the youth on defense this year. So lump me together with the legions who didn't think Tech could do it and go undefeated against the likes of LSU, Marshall, and Texas A&M.

They have done this before. They have exceeded our expectations, and it usually comes the year after a disappointing season. In 1993, the Hokies went bowling, just one year after a miserable 2-8-1 campaign. In 1995, they followed up a disappointing 1994 season (8-4) with a Sugar Bowl victory. In 1998, after bombing to a 7-5 record in 1997, they went 9-3 and were within a handful of plays of going undefeated.

And of course, there was the magical 1999 season, on the heels of that disappointing-in-its-own-way 1998 campaign.

So why does this year surprise us? Beats me. You would think I would have learned by now, and that's what this month's cover story, "The Future is Now," talks about.

We've also got two recruiting pieces by Chris Horne, one about wide receiver Fontel Mines, and an absolute gem about Tripp Carroll. After talking to Tripp about his commitment to Tech, Chris discovered that he could just transcribe Tripp's answers to his questions, and it creates a passionate, strongly-felt narrative in Tripp's own words that you're sure to enjoy.

Rick Abraham, who is writing for the first time for us, pens a piece about his long-delayed return to Blacksburg, and the impressions he came away with after viewing up close the behemoth that Virginia Tech football has become. You may not like everything Rick has to say, but it's a thoughtful, sincere piece of writing.

"Inside TSL" returns, and of course, we have the third installment in our "Inside the Numbers" recruiting rankings. This time, it's the 1992 recruiting class.

Thanks to each and every one of you for subscribing and enjoying the TSL Extra, and be sure to pass on the good word about the TSL Extra to friends, family, and Hokie fans. If they remain obstinate, then force it upon them by giving it to them as a gift!

Enjoy issue #23.



The Future is Now

Maybe we need to change our way of thinking about this football team.

by Will Stewart, TechSideline.com

Way back in TSL Extra #12, almost a year ago, I wrote a long, intensely-researched and mind-numbing article called “The Future.” In that article, I went to great pains to show that 2003 would be the Hokies’ best shot at a national championship run in the coming 3-4 years. I based it on an analysis of depth and experience at each position on the team.

Fast-forward one year, and “The Future” has arrived early. Virginia Tech has come through a tough season-opening four-game stretch with a fully intact 4-0 record, and already Hokie fans are scrambling for their schedules and feverishly calculating Tech’s chances to head into Miami on December 7th undefeated.

If that happens, it’s simple: Beat the Canes, and the Hokies are MNC (Mythical National Championship)-bound.

That’s all fine and good, but I don’t intend this to be another article detailing Tech’s chances to go undefeated this season. There has been plenty of ink about that already, and if the Hokies continue to win, there will be plenty more.

The 4-0 start hasn’t made me start looking forward and calculating odds. No, what it has done is make me look backwards and start wondering if it’s time for a new mindset. Namely, is it time for normally-conservative Hokie fans to expect to be a part of the national championship picture every year?

Those of us who follow Tech football have been conditioned to anticipate a season in a certain fashion. We sit down and analyze the returning talent at every position, and we only feel comfortable thinking about a national championship run if everything is “just so” — if the Hokies have an experienced defense, a deep offensive line, and a rock-em, sock-em quarterback.

We are conditioned this way by the 1995, 1996, and 1999 seasons, and to some extent, the 2000 and 2001 seasons. The 1995 and 1996 Hokies — who were both, by the way, just a few breaks shy of going undefeated themselves — featured great offensive lines and talented defenses, plus rock-solid Jim Druckenmiller at QB.

The 1999 Hokies had everything but a quarterback heading into the season, and lo and behold, they discovered that Michael Vick was “all that” and a sideline scamper, too boot. Like Druckenmiller in 1995, Vick was a pleasant surprise in 1999, and he added the offensive spark to a team that had everything else in spades.

Graduation gutted that great 1999 defense, and the outlook for 2000 was bright but muted. With a young defense, the Hokies scratched and clawed their way to an 8-0 record against a weak schedule before an untimely injury to Vick and the youth of their defense caught up to them in Miami. The Canes put a stop to Tech’s national championship dreams in humiliating fashion.

In 2001, the Hokies brought back almost their entire defense, a championship ingredient, but Vick bolted early, and it cost the Hokies a chance to make another run. All else being equal, new QB Grant Noel wasn’t able to deliver the gritty win-against-all-odds element that Vick brought to the team, and the Hokies stumbled to an 8-4 record.

Then once again, graduation thinned out the defense. Conditioned by similar circumstances in 1997 and 2000, Hokie fans and pundits took a look at the severe losses at defensive tackle and linebacker and just assumed that it would cost the Hokies some losses against a quality 2002 schedule. Even insiders to the program considered a 2-2 or 3-1 start against the likes of LSU, Marshall, and Texas A&M to be a solid start.

Instead, what we got was a youthful, energetic, superfast Hokie team that has steamrolled all four opening opponents by a combined score of 149-39.

Never mind five defensive tackles lost to graduation. Never mind the loss of stalwart linebackers Ben Taylor and Jake Houseright. Never mind a shaky QB situation and a corps of receivers that were known not for what they had caught, but what one of them had dropped. These young Hokies have shrugged all that aside and placed themselves squarely in the national championship hunt.

And it has all set me to thinking: should we start to expect more from the Hokies? Should we, pardon the expression, start to picture them as reloading instead of rebuilding? Should we start treating them as perennial national championship contenders, instead of a team that gels every three or four years?

The defensive tackles have proven themselves to be up to the task of replacing Chad Beasley, David Pugh, and company. They're good, and they'll get better. Vegas Robinson and Mikal Baaqee have replaced Taylor and Houseright, and the defense keeps humming along.

A New Way of Thinking

As this program progresses under Frank Beamer, there have been several instances in which Hokie fans have had to adjust their way of thinking.

The first came in 1993 and 1994, when highly-

regarded recruits like Maurice DeShazo and Cornell Brown combined with diamonds in the rough Jim Pyne and Antonio Freeman to finally win some ball games under Frank Beamer and take the Hokies to consecutive bowls.

The Hokies went to the Gator Bowl in 1994, their biggest bowl game ever at the time, and after being pummeled by Tennessee 45-23, perhaps Tech fans thought they had hit their ceiling.

The second adjustment in thinking came in 1995, when Hokies fans who perceived a Gator Bowl bid as the pinnacle of Tech football achievement discovered that not only could the Hokies make one of the top-tier Alliance Bowls ... they could win one. Tech rebounded from an 0-2 start to ride a solid defense and the steady play of Druckenmiller to a 28-10 Sugar Bowl win, and surely, everyone thought, it couldn't get any better than this.

Wrong again. A third adjustment in thinking came in 1999, as the Hokies did something that was heretofore unthinkable: they played for the national championship. They did it with a defense that was every bit as good as that 1995 defense, probably better, and this time, a once-in-a-lifetime player in Michael Vick nearly propelled them to the top of the college football mountain.

I remember back in 1997 or 1998, talking to a regular practice observer who told me a story about a redshirt freshman offensive lineman (I wish I could remember who it was) telling this practice observer, "I came to Virginia Tech to compete for a national championship." Aww, how cute, I thought. It'll never happen.

Well, in 1999, it did. That was a special Tech team, a great defensive team spurred to new heights by a player the likes of which may never come this way again. I found myself thinking that the Hokies might play for the national championship once every ten years, if they were lucky. Defenses like that and quarterbacks like that don't come along very often.

But since then, the Hokies have been factors in the BCS race in 2000, 2001, and now again, it appears, in 2002.

With all the talk of 2003 and beyond, who saw this coming this year? Certainly not me. Am I slighting the Virginia Tech football program? Should I adjust my thinking a fourth time, and expect them to make a run at going undefeated every year? I'm running out of plateaus, you know. A Florida-State-level of achievement, being a fixture in the Top 10 or even Top 5, isn't too far down the road, at this rate.

What Makes This Bunch So Special

From the time the true freshman players arrived in late August, the buzz out of Blacksburg has been surprisingly positive. The coaches gushed about the athletic ability and focus of the young players they had coming in, saying that there wasn't a single wasted scholarship in the bunch. Usually there's always one or two, "Hmmm, why did we sign this kid?" reactions when the true freshmen arrive, but not this year.

Beyond their athletic ability, the new players were surprisingly focused. They didn't need to be disciplined for goofing off, they listened to the coaches, and they did as they were told. And when the coaches started putting them through their paces in the early workouts, the usual 2-3 players staggering to the sidelines and vomiting didn't occur. These kids kept going, and a notable few, like freshman Mike Imoh, seemed to get stronger as the workouts went on.

It was in this setting that the upperclassmen arrived, and things just took off from there. Before practice started this fall, the VT coaches felt that it would take a year to whip this young team into shape, but to their surprise, it has happened earlier than they thought.

Does this mean they're as good as they're going to get, and they'll never falter? Of course not. They are young, after all, and it's worth noting that among the players on this team, the num-

ber who remember the 1998 Temple game is getting smaller and smaller every year. Only the redshirt seniors, of which there are just eleven, by my count, were around for that game. Coach Beamer remembers that game and its lessons vividly, but very few of the players on this team witnessed it first hand.

One theme in the wake of the Texas A&M win is the theme of togetherness. As he walked off the field after the win, Beamer told ABC sideline reporter Lynn Swann that he didn't worry about what people thought of the Hokies; he worried about whether or not his players and coaches liked each other. "And they like each other," he said.

Every time the "Do you think you'll get respect now?" question has come up in the last few days, the players have all talked about how they believe in each other, and the togetherness that they feel.

It sounds silly, but team chemistry is one of the building blocks of Beamer's program. Everyone talks about defense and special teams, but building chemistry is just as important. Football is like war, and in war, you've got to believe in the guy who's next to you in a foxhole, and you've got to know that when you attack, he's got your back. The Tech players feel that way about each other.

One little-known aspect of Tech recruiting is that after a recruit makes an official visit, the Tech coaches ask the hosting players whether or not the current players on the team liked the recruit. Not, "Do you think he can play?" or "Did you get a chance to run with him and see how fast he is?" The question is, "Did you like him?"

If the answer is no, the Tech coaches will very often cross a player off their recruiting list, even if he's a good player. Chemistry is as important as athletic ability, and even in hard times, Virginia Tech players have rarely pointed the finger at each other or the coaches. It simply doesn't happen, because for the most part, the players

and coaches get along.

This concept of chemistry has been going on for years under Beamer, and it was one of the main reasons the Hokies landed one of the biggest recruits in the history of their program, defensive lineman Cornell Brown. When he committed and signed with Tech in 1993, Brown credited the Tech players with being the major factor behind his decision.

“They treated me like I was already on the team,” Brown said at the time. “They acted like they wanted me bad. That’s the kind of players they have up there.”

Indeed, before Brown’s commitment, when his E.C. Glass basketball team was playing a game in Roanoke, Tech players Maurice DeShazo, P.J. Preston, and Jerome Preston, along with manager Bruce Garnes, drove to Roanoke to see him play. That impressed Brown.

So the chemistry angle is nothing new. QB Jim Druckenmiller’s closeness with his teammates is one of the main reasons he was such a great on-the-field leader for the Hokies.

And like many other successful Virginia Tech teams before them, this one has chemistry.

Expecting More

So maybe it’s time to start thinking of Virginia Tech football in a new way. After watching them fight the 2001 Miami Hurricanes, one of the best college teams of all time, to a standstill last year; after watching them spank SEC-champion LSU this year; and after watching them break Texas A&M’s 29-game home non-conference winning streak, it is becoming clear Virginia Tech can play with anybody in the country — anybody.

Any given team in any given year might have more talent and gel better than the Hokies, but on the average, the Hokies will be as fast and as talented as any team around. Watching them go toe-to-toe with LSU, as physically talented as

any team out there, should be proof enough of that.

Maybe instead of identifying Virginia Tech’s weaknesses before each season and definitively saying, “That will cost them a game here or there,” maybe we should just expect them to be competitive and have a shot at going undefeated *every* year. It’s how the top programs think, and it’s what they aim for.

The downside to that is the dreaded “high expectations,” and the letdown that can occur when those expectations aren’t met. The key is to temper your expectations with the knowledge that special seasons like 1999 are tough to come by, and they require some luck along the way. The Hokies have come very close to going undefeated a number of times — 1995, 1996, 1999, and 2000 — but only in 1999 were they able to pull it off. There is honor and achievement just in competing at the highest level, and you’re not going to win it all every year. Even the best don’t.

So temper your high expectations with patience. But expect more, and stop believing that just because a player graduates here or there, the Hokies will be weakened by it. This 2002 team is proving otherwise.

Sure, 2003 is going to be great. But the future is now.

In His Own Words: Tripp Carroll

Offensive line recruit Tripp Carroll tells our Chris Horne how and why he fell in love with Virginia Tech.

by Tripp Carroll (as told to Chris Horne)

6-4, 300-pound Tripp Carroll is one of the highest rated offensive line prospects in the country. He earned preseason All-America honors from Superprep, Tom Lemming, and Rivals.com. He maintains a 3.9 GPA and scored 1,200 on his first SAT attempt. He is on track to graduate early from high school.

We recently spoke to Tripp about his commitment to Virginia Tech, and here's what he had to say, in his own words.

Making a choice on which school I wanted to go to was the first big choice of my life. I wanted to go somewhere where I would feel at home. Basically, the school I chose would have to be my home away from home.

Whichever school I chose to attend, I knew that there would always be one thing to carry me through all the ups and downs...my Christian belief. Everything, absolutely everything for me revolves around my religion. It has been there for me the entire time, through all of the diversity in my life. It also brings me and my 13 year old sister closer together. The whole thing is phenomenal.

My belief has guided me throughout everything up to this point, and it would help me with this decision as well.

I knew about Virginia Tech because my girlfriend

plays softball there. So, this spring, when I was deciding which schools I wanted to take a look at, I figured it was worth a shot to at least check it out. After all, Virginia Tech would have to be a good school, or else my girlfriend wouldn't have gone there. Besides, what did I have to lose?

So my mom and I decided to take the trip up 77 and 81 to Blacksburg for the spring football game. This was my first visit to Virginia Tech, and I wanted it to be a surprise. I love surprising schools by making unexpected visits to the campus. I like to see the coaching staff's reaction when I introduce myself. Earlier I had spoken with the Virginia Tech coaches about possibly coming to the spring game, but nothing was scheduled.

The drive up 77 and 81 was both long and beautiful. The scenery was amazing. I love the outdoors – land, water, everything. Call me an outdoorsman, because I love to hunt and I love to fish. More than the scenery, though, it was the people on the way to Blacksburg. Everywhere we stopped, people would just say hi. Everyone was very friendly, and they were even nicer the closer we were to Blacksburg.

We arrived on campus, and I was amazed. The people were very nice and extremely welcoming, which was very important to me. Some schools have great coaches, but not necessarily the nicest people. Virginia Tech had nice people...especially the coaches.

As my mom and I walked up towards Jamerson Hall's entrance, I noticed Coach (Danny) Pearman walking out. He was the primary coach recruiting me. Eager to see his reaction, I introduced myself and my mother. Turns out, his reaction was good.

Coach Pearman stopped whatever he was doing at the time, and gave us a complete tour of the campus. He was so welcoming. He introduced us to all of the different coaches, each of whom took at least a minute or two to introduce themselves. The whole experience with Coach was

wonderful.

And then I had a chance to meet with Coach Beamer. Now I know how much responsibility head coaches have, because my father is the head football coach for Andrew Jackson High School in Jacksonville, FL, where I now live. With the spring game and everything else going on, I know Coach Beamer was busy. He took the time to bring me into his office and speak to me for about 15 minutes. It meant a whole lot for Coach Beamer to take the time to meet with me...a whole lot.

The spring game was a great time. It was there that I first met Jake Grove, who has become a very good friend. We talked for virtually the entire game. We have so much in common, and it was awesome meeting someone that you immediately hit it off with. Jake and I e-mail almost everyday now.

Another thing I liked is the fan support. People in Blacksburg love football, as I found out soon enough. Half the place was full for the spring game, and I just thought...Wow! How could you not be impressed? It's all about the fans. I was watching the LSU-VT game on television, and LSU had about three penalties because the crowd was so loud. The fans are just awesome.

After the spring game was over, I got a chance to go into the locker room. Coach Beamer spoke to the team, and for me to be a part of that experience was very special. The whole experience was very special.

The ride home was just as beautiful as the ride up. It was then that I realized I wanted to spend the next four years at Virginia Tech. It was love at first sight.

I kept the recruiting process going for the entire summer. I visited North Carolina about three times. The Carolina coaches did an excellent job recruiting me, an excellent job. Coach Bunting is awesome. But the people weren't the same as in Blacksburg, and that's something

that kept sticking in my mind.

Everywhere else I went, I found myself thinking that the people aren't like they are at Virginia Tech. But it's tough. It's tough telling great coaches like Lou Holtz, "Mr. Holtz, I'm sorry but I don't want to go to your school, even though you are a coaching legend." Plus it's their job. Saying no to these guys was definitely the toughest thing for me.

And I wanted to take my official visits. I really did. I wanted to go to UNLV and Ohio State...I wanted to take them all. But, the more I thought, the more I realized that I didn't want to lead anybody on. I know I would be biased already before taking the officials, because I would compare each school to Virginia Tech.

So it was then that I decided to commit. I knew I would eventually choose Virginia Tech, and, without meaning to sound conceited, I didn't want to get other coaches' hopes up.

With my commitment over and done with, I now want to focus on getting stronger, bigger, and better. Hopefully I can help Andrew Jackson make it to the state championships. I moved to Jacksonville earlier this summer to play for my dad. I thought the transition might be tough, but it wasn't. Florida football is not much different from North Carolina football. The skill position players are a little better, but the linemen are smaller.

I was a little nervous for the first game, but I soon realized that I am just as good as everyone else on the field. We beat Sandlewood, and I finished the game with 16 pancake blocks. It was awesome. Everyone quickly realized that I could play some football. I earned city-wide Offensive Player of the Week for my performance.

Now we are 2-0. My main concern right now is showing everyone else on this team what it takes to become a winner. I give 100% both on and off the field and in the weight room. I never

stop. When I got here, most of the other guys would give about 25% in the weight room. Now, I would say they are up to about 45%. They are getting better by the week. Hopefully I can keep setting the tempo with my work ethic, because actions speak louder than words.

The next few games should be fun, because, on occasion, I might line up at fullback. I may catch a few passes in the flat, but I will be no William Perry I assure you. I am pretty fast at around 5.0 in the 40, so I could do all right, but I just love to block. Playing fullback will help me work on my pulling action, which is crucial from my usual offensive guard position. I need to work on my pulling.

Off the field, I will graduate early from high school. I finished senior English on my birthday (Sept 18), so now I can get started on taking college credit courses. My goal is to enroll at Virginia Tech in January 2003. The coaches say they are working on it for me. I want to get there as soon as possible, so it would be awesome to be there by January.

At Virginia Tech, I want to major in either Medicine or Business. The football trainer is going to head up the Medical Department (opens in 2005), so he could put me on the right track once I get in school.

I took my second visit to Virginia Tech in September, and it was like falling in love all over again. This is the right decision for me...it is my home away from home, and I can't wait to get started.

Fontel Mines: Continuing the Tradition

Hermitage's Fontel Mines is the latest in a long line of talented receivers from the Richmond area.

by Chris Horne

Virginia Tech has Ernest Wilford. Virginia has Billy McMullen. Michigan had David Terrell and North Carolina had Corey Holliday. In what seems like a tradition every few years, the Richmond (VA) area produces a tall, athletic and exceptionally skilled wide receiver prospect.

The results produced from these athletes have been pretty impressive as well. Corey Holliday is the current all-time leading receiver in yards for the Tarheels. David Terrell starred at Michigan for three years before becoming the #1 draft pick of the Chicago Bears in 2001. McMullen, an All-American caliber receiver, has set receiving records at Virginia. Ernest Wilford is the starting split end for Virginia Tech, and if he reaches his potential, could become a very good receiver.

Hoping to continue this tradition is Hermitage High School's main man, wide receiver Fontel Mines. At 6-4, 205 pounds, he certainly has the height. He runs a 4.5 in the 40, which means he absolutely has the athleticism. And according to Hermitage Head Coach Patrick Kane, Mines compares favorably to at least two of the Richmond standouts.

"He is a good mix between the UVa receiver (Billy McMullen) and David Terrell," said Kane. "I haven't seen anyone better except for Terrell, and that was because he ran a 4.2 or 4.3 in the 40. Fontel is an exceptional player."

Mines agreed with the assessment of his head coach...well, almost.

"If coach Kane says I'm like David Terrell, I won't disagree with him," said Mines with a chuckle. "But I feel I compare better with Billy McMullen in terms of size and hands."

Before this summer, getting schools to notice Mines' talent was a little difficult. The Hermitage Panthers were a one-dimensional, run-oriented offense last season. Mines ended his junior campaign with 29 receptions for 612 yards and 10 touchdowns. Those were very impressive stats for a receiver in a run-oriented offense. Unfortunately, they were not the kind of statistics that would impress potential recruiters from across the country.

So, early in the summer of 2002, Mines started making some noise of his own. It was then that, during the University of Virginia's summer football camp, he ran an impressive 4.48 in the 40. This feat caught the eye of Virginia coaches, as they immediately offered Mines a scholarship. Soon after, the Hokies were in the mix, offering a scholarship as well. Mines has also received offers from Wake Forest and Richmond.

Despite the impressive camp numbers, Mines would have to prove himself on the field in hopes of getting even more attention. In the first game of his senior season, Mines had an opportunity to make even more noise for himself. Hermitage faced conference foe Lee-Davis Confederates with a new, more explosive offense. The Confederates, however, gambled that Hermitage would be the same run-oriented squad exhibited last year. They were wrong.

Throughout the game, Lee-Davis played with nine men in the box, daring Hermitage to throw the ball. The chosen defense was exactly what Fontel Mines was looking for, and he took advantage of it. Mines has the playmaker attitude, wanting to score each time he touches the ball. With only one defender guarding him, it

makes it that much easier for him.

"I have so many things running through my mind" before a play, said Mines. "I concentrate to see where the linebackers are, and the safeties, and I think about how I can score a touchdown. If it is man coverage, I don't even think about it.

"I just look right through him (the cornerback) like he's not even there."

He wasn't kidding. He carved up the Lee-Davis secondary to the tune of seven receptions for 151 yards and three touchdowns. The Panthers rolled to victory, trouncing the Confederates 42-7. Mines helped his team get off to a dominating start and, in the process, continue his own momentum. He made a statement...that Fontel Mines is a player.

When asked if the victory served as a breakout game for his high school career, Mines replied "Something like that. I mean, I had some good games last year too, but this is by far my best game" in high school.

Following his impressive early-season success, Mines has indeed become a hot prospect. He is one of the top targets, regardless of position, for both Virginia and Virginia Tech. This month he has received more interest from other schools as well, including telephone calls from Tennessee, Maryland, and North Carolina, among others.

Even with the growing interest from other top programs, Mines feels his collegiate decision may come down to the two in-state programs.

"Things could change depending on who offers me, but probably, yeah," said Mines when asked if he has narrowed his list to UVa and VT. He has scheduled his official visit to Virginia Tech for the November 30th game against Virginia (along with teammate and VT recruiting target, tight end Duane Brown), and he'll visit UVa for the N.C. State game on November 16th.

Mines has stated in recent months that UVa was a slight leader over Virginia Tech for his services. It appears he likes both schools, however, and the official visits may sway his decision one way or the other.

"Nah, I have no leader" at this time, said Mines. "I like Virginia's academics, the recruiting class, and of course the location is great. I had a good time at the South Carolina game. It was a good game, a good atmosphere. I got to stand on the field for the final quarter, which was fun. I also got to talk to Billy McMullen, Darryl Blackstock, and (former Patrick Henry rival) Anthony Martinez.

"But Tech has a good team, a real good team, and I haven't got to see them in a game yet."

For now, Mines wants to continue to get better in high school and hopes to attain his pre-season goals of 1,000 yards and 15 touchdowns. More importantly, he wants to help his team reach the state championship. The Panthers are well on their way to a great season after two victories in their first two games, and Mines has continued his good start as well. In the second game, he finished with four catches for 60 yards, giving him 11 catches for 211 yards and 3 touchdowns for the year.

As for the recruiting race, this appears to be the makings of a classic in-state battle between the Cavs and Hokies. Both schools are itching to get Mines' signature on a letter-of-intent in hopes of landing one of the state's top prospects and, further, seeing whether or not this young man will continue the "tradition" of Richmond receivers.

Big-Time

A thought-provoking, poignant, and humorous look at the sweeping changes overcoming Virginia Tech football.

by Rick Abraham

A couple of weeks ago I went to see my alma mater play football. I discovered that, if I have been too dense to realize it before, my little hometown college has gone big-time.

I grew up in Christiansburg, VA, about 6 miles away from Blacksburg, home of Virginia Tech. When I was growing up, Tech was known as Virginia Polytechnic Institute, or VPI, and had about 6,000 students. In athletics they competed in the Southern Conference, along with peer schools like Richmond, William and Mary, Furman, The Citadel, and traditional rival VMI. The Fighting Gobblers as they were officially known, or the Hokies as they had been tagged in the hokey cheer written in 1895, played in brand-spankin'-new Lane Stadium which seated about 35,000 fans, most of whom usually came disguised as empty seats.

When I first became interested in sports at about the age of eight, my dad began taking me to Tech football and basketball games. Both programs were on the upswing; the football team was coached by Jerry Claiborne, whom I believe is a member of the College Football Hall of Fame, and basketball was led by Howie Shannon, a former NBA Rookie of the Year. The football program was beginning a period of dominance in the conference, reaching its apogee in 1966 and 1968 with appearances in the Liberty Bowl. The 1968 game was a particularly noteworthy match against Ole Miss and their legendary quarterback, Archie Manning. The wily Claiborne opened the game with a trick play, The Swinging Door, scoring a touchdown

on the second play from scrimmage. It was one of few positive plays of the day; Tech went on to lose 34-17. It was the biggest game in Tech history at the time.

As my childhood years went by, I remained a rabid Tech fan. I chose to attend college there, not admitting that I feared leaving my comfort zone to take on the outside world. I graduated in 1978, and then felt ready to go forth and brave the dangers of urban America. Still, despite rarely being able to return for football games over the years, Blacksburg remains "home", and I am loyal Hokie for life.

Recently Tech played LSU, the defending SEC champion and one of the most storied programs in the country. Over 60,000 fans were expected, and tickets were as scarce in Virginia as liberal Democrats. To get mine, for me and my 8 year-old son, I had to resort to Ebay, *for \$250!* Thirty years ago, that small fortune would have bought season tickets for a family of six. But I swallowed hard, sent my money order, and I was off to Hokie-land.

The first thing that struck me as I drove into town was that little VPI is not so little anymore. Virginia Tech is a nationally renowned university of about 22,000 students. It dominates the town of Blacksburg, and to some degree, the neighboring counties. Blacksburg, however, is still a pretty little town – in both senses of the word. More on that later.

(In my childhood years, Blacksburg and Christiansburg were arch-rivals. I remember well when Blacksburg got its first traffic light; Christiansburg was compelled to follow immediately. For several years the towns competed by adding traffic signals one at a time while we kids kept careful count, until that fateful day Blacksburg added three in one fell swoop, permanently establishing their superiority. These days the two towns battle instead by annexing land, to the point that they have swallowed up almost the entire county, and the six miles that once separated them no longer exists.)

My next awakening came when I drove by one of the remote student parking lots. I discovered that it had been taken over by an invading force: the LSU RV Nation, populated by hundreds of Winnebagos and parties on wheels, all bedecked in purple and gold. I came to find out that LSU fans had bought upwards of 7,000 tickets for the game and had encamped around town like an occupying army. I say “upwards of 7,000” because an accurate estimate was problematic; apparently hundreds of LSU fans had purchased Tech season tickets (roughly \$500 for two) just to get seats for this game, planning to auction off all of the others – probably at a substantial profit. Just another way that EBay is changing the way we live today.

Somewhat taken aback, I proceeded into town. Downtown Blacksburg is still an area of only about three square blocks, with roughly 50 business establishments. These are served by, a generous estimate would say, about 100 parking places. My intention was to walk around town and see how things had changed, maybe have a beer, and head home to my brother’s for the evening. So, I strolled around, noting that like most college towns it is dominated by inexpensive restaurants, music stores, bars, and bookstores. I only recognized one remaining business from my college years, an ice cream shop. There were also several cell phone stores and tattoo parlors, both modern innovations.

At the end of my walk around dusk I stepped into the most popular bar in town. There was a small crowd there, mostly students and ex-students, and a few geezers like me. I ordered the one Bass Ale I had allotted myself (for \$2.50!), and about halfway through it, a somewhat familiar face walked by – albeit one that was a little puffier, splotchier, and grayer than I had remembered. It turned out to be Dave, an old friend and fraternity brother I had not seen for over twenty years! We were very excited to see each other again.

I ended up staying there until about midnight. During that time, the scene at the bar went from

sparsely occupied, to somewhat busy, to uncomfortably crowded, to “the Red line-at-rush-hour” jammed. I have seen beehives with a lower population density. Several times I thought I could just pick up my feet, and I would not fall down! Perhaps it was a result of this closeness to my fellow man, or maybe it was just my enhanced consciousness from imbibing several draughts of malt beverage, that I was inspired to make several observations.

First, there are a staggering number of beautiful young women at a large southern university like Tech. Or, maybe there are just a number of staggeringly beautiful young women in general. In either case, the effect is staggering.

Second, they all dress alike. This year it is hip-huggers and skimpy tops, with lots of winking navels, most adorned with jewelry. I thought that the effect was kind of trashy (not that I had a problem with that). In my day, the preppy look was in, and there were lots of skimpy dresses. In either case, they are skimpy.

Third, it is somewhat liberating to be 46 years old, bald, and married. In my day, I would have been depressed if I had not made friends with one of the young ladies in the skimpy attire (which I rarely did). In this era, none of them even glanced in my direction. It is actually a relief to be able to look and not even have to think about anything more.

Last, it must be the second prerequisite of attending college these days to procure a fake ID (just after setting up your PC to download free music). I’m sure that three quarters of the Tech undergraduates can’t possibly have reached the legal drinking age of 21, yet every bar in town was full to overflowing. In my day, we protested about how we could go to war at age 18, but not be allowed to vote; these days kids are allowed vote, but they can’t have a beer! (How in the world can America tell an Army veteran who has risked his life in an overseas war that he can’t come home and have a Budweiser???) Anyway, if I were to

open a business in Blacksburg, it would be laminating small cards.

Finally, with my fountain of observations run dry, I left the bar. To my amazement, there was a line of at least 200 people standing in the rain to get in! I thought that every human in the state between 18 and 25 was already in the bar. Not only was that not true, but the streets were lined with students, many drunk, some disorderly, and all of them revved up by the energy of the weekend. If I had been 21, I would have been excited to join in the revelry; at 46, I was thrilled to flee it. I went home.

I found out the next day that there had been a riot on the streets that had begun about 10 minutes after I left. Apparently, fans from the two schools had gotten into a shouting match that escalated into a nasty little fracas. Over 200 cops had been called in to break it up, every available man and woman from four counties, in full riot regalia. Over 30 people were arrested, for everything from drunkenness to felony assault of a police officer. It even made the national news – the sports news, that is.

All of this got me thinking... what happens when 65,000 fans descend for a weekend of full-bore merrymaking on a town of only 40,000 residents? And not just one time, but for 6-7 games per year? Consider that this is a town with about 8 motels, and maybe 40 restaurants (the best of which is a Red Lobster – my mom swears it's "a good one"). How can they possibly absorb the impact of that many people, with so few places to eat, fewer places to stay, and no place to even park? Heck, they probably don't even have enough places for that many people to go to the bathroom!

It's not hard to see this becoming a rather serious problem. Most football-mad colleges are in cities considerably larger than Blacksburg, and they have a hard enough time dealing with crowds of this size. It may not be too long before the permanent residents of the area are fed up with the stress caused by their beloved

football team. Not that they can do anything about it; the genie is out of the bottle.

Anyway, enough pre-game chat, its time to get on to the main event.

Lane Stadium, which is now known as Worsham Field, just underwent a \$35+ million expansion, raising the capacity to about 65,000 seats. That is a great deal of money in any context, but especially in light of the financial affairs of the state of Virginia. The state is in the midst of a severe budget crunch, with projected shortfalls of several billion dollars; however, by state law, the budget must be balanced. Thus, along with the other drastic cuts in state services across the board that are planned, Governor Warner has asked all of the state universities to cut their budgets by as much as 15%. In other words, over forty million dollars were spent at a time when the university must shrink its budget by one dollar of every seven!

Sure, I know that no state funds were used for the expansion, but still, it's a curious contrast between the academic and athletic sides of the university.

In addition, tuition hikes are planned by as much as 20% for next year. Though Tech and the other Virginia universities are inexpensive relative to most states, students will pay as much as \$1,200 more to go there next year. Finally, the athletic department is seeking another \$40+ million for further stadium improvements!

Nevertheless, the stadium is impressive. There is a million dollar Jumbotron scoreboard, showing live replays after each play; three towering tiers of stands, with as many as 130 rows of seats; and a brand new section of luxury boxes and team facilities. It is truly a big-time facility, and it was filled to standing room with crazed fans, for both teams. The atmosphere was electric! It was the loudest stadium I have ever experienced.

After the usual interminable pre-game ceremonies, the two teams actually commenced playing football. And the game itself was terrific. It was intense, evenly-matched, and fiercely fought. To the delight of the fans, Tech won, playing their unique style of football known as Beamerball, named after Coach Beamer. But the game itself is not the subject here. You can read about it on the sports pages.

During the game I was struck by several thoughts (now there's a surprise...). On one play I looked at Tech's defensive eleven, and all of them were African-Americans. This was at a school where only about 3.5% of the student body, the last time I saw a figure, is African-American. There are many things that could be said about this, and most of them probably already have been by people wiser than me, but I still think it is worthy of note.

Meanwhile the football program generates millions of dollars from their efforts – all of which, if I'm not mistaken, goes to athletic programs, not academics. Again, this is a subject that has been widely debated, and there are good arguments on both sides, but the size of the crowd brought home the magnitude of the issue for me.

My second observation was a bit of a surprise to me. As I looked around at my fellow fans in the stands, I was troubled to see very few smiles. These people did not seem to be having very much fun! It was a tense game, at least in the first half, and the crowd didn't like it one bit. I guess they have become so accustomed to Tech winning, and winning big, that a close game was not what they came for – they wanted a blow-out.

Now in the old days, especially when I was in school there, we went to games to have a good time. Granted, we may have had a cocktail or two before the game – and maybe a few more at the game – but the goal was to enjoy the pomp and pageantry of college football. We won a few, we lost a few more, but we always

had a good time. These folks looked tied up in knots.

Which got me thinking again: this is the first real big-time sports franchise in the history of the state of Virginia! Sure, there's always been stock car racing – and there was an ABA basketball team – and the UVa Cavaliers had had a couple of highly-ranked basketball teams – but there has never been a sustained period in Virginia of a nationally-prominent team until the Hokies and their success of the past decade. I guess that's why these people have gone nuts over their team; folks from all over the state have adopted them. And Virginia is basically still a small-town, rural state.

All of this led me to ponder the big question: what do we Hokie fans get out of all this? One rather obvious answer is the joy of watching an excellent football team. Having played and watched football most of my life, I certainly understand that. It is fun watching them, the Hokies play with great passion and style.

However, I don't think this is the main motivation of the overwhelming majority of Tech fans. I was reminded of a conversation I had this Summer with a fraternity brother who lives in Chicago. He works for a Fortune 50 company in sales, and he was telling me about a big conference he had recently attended. He was making the usual small talk with his compatriots, and the subject turned as it often does to where they had gone to college. When he told them "Virginia Tech," they responded with nods of affirmation, and praise for the football team. He told me how proud he was to be favorably compared to the Michigan's, Notre Dame's, and UCLA's that were also represented there. Of course there was no mention of academics at these schools.

This, I think, is what being a Hokie fan is mostly about. Being from a school with a great football team – or just calling yourself a fan of the school – makes you a More Important Person. Everyone knows where you went to college, and they

somehow equate the football success with the quality of your education, and indirectly to your status in the world. When in fact the opposite is more likely true: the larger the institution the more likely the team is good, but the quality of instruction is bad: larger classes, more junior instructors, more standardized tests, fewer research projects. But the alumni don't talk about having classes in auditoriums with lecturers on closed circuit TV, they just want to brag about last year's Sugar Bowl.

So, my lasting impression from this pilgrimage to my alma mater was this: the Hokies have definitely gone Big-Time. They are a Big-Time team, with a Big-Time stadium, and a Big-Time media machine. But with this also comes Big-Time budgets, Big-Time crowds, Big-Time hassles, and in some cases, Big-Time ugliness. All for the Big-Time ego gratification of the alumni and other Tech athletic supporters.

I can't say it made me long for the good old days – I love seeing Tech in the top ten, too! – but it did make me fonder of my old memories when the games were not quite so serious. Mostly, it made me feel more remote from the game I had enjoyed: the players seem more like semi-pros than college students, the stadium is huge and slick, even the fans have changed from happy-go-lucky kids to intense alums.

I guess all of this brands me as a prematurely grumpy old man: I'm already talking about the good old days.

Inside the Numbers: Rating the 1992 Recruiting Class

Short on highlights, but strong where it counts.

by Will Stewart, TechSideline.com

This is the third in a series of articles rating Virginia Tech recruiting classes from 1990 to the present. In the last two issues, we have rated the 1990 and 1991 recruiting classes, and this issue, it's time for the 1992 recruiting class.

The 1992 class was short on the offensive skillplayers who get big press, but long on offensive linemen and defensive backs. Most of the players in this class aren't headliners like what we saw in the previous two classes — Maurice DeShazo, Antonio Freeman, Jim Druckenmiller, and Dwayne Thomas, to name a few — but what they accomplished on the field set a new standard for Virginia Tech football.

This class was the first class to play in two BCS bowls, which were called Alliance Bowls back then: the 1995 Sugar Bowl and the 1996 Orange Bowl. Most of the players in this class were redshirted in the fall of 1992, so those that stayed around and contributed were redshirt juniors and redshirt seniors in 1995 and 1996. Those that didn't redshirt, like Bryan Still, were true seniors for the 1995 team.

Team Accomplishments Kick In

As you recall, our system of rating recruiting classes gives the class points as a whole for team accomplishments. Those accomplish-

ments include winning Big East games, winning Big East championships, and playing in and winning bowl games. Points are awarded for the four seasons in which the class would have been redshirt freshmen to redshirt seniors.

For this 1992 class, that means they get points for the 1993-1996 seasons. They're the first class to have the full benefit of round-robin play in the Big East Conference for all four years, so their opportunities to accumulate points for things like conference wins and BE championships are greater than they were for the 1990 and 1991 recruiting classes.

This class is also the first class to benefit from the nine-year VT bowl run for four years, and they're the first class to not have the miserable 2-8-1 season of 1992 as a black mark on their record.

As you can imagine, this 1992 recruiting class, with its four bowls, two Big East championships, and two BCS bowls, trounced the 1990 and 1991 classes in terms of team accomplishments. This makes up for their lack of impact skill players; Bryan Still was the only big-time offensive skill player present in this class.

So this class is short on individual accomplishments/points and long on team accomplishments and points. We'll get to the detailed numbers in a minute, but first, a reminder of the scoring system.

Here is a list of how many points are awarded for what accomplishments, both individual and team:

Individual accomplishments: letter earned (1 point); season starter (2 points); VT season stat leader (2); VT game (5), season (7) or career (10) record held; All-American (10); First-team AA (15); Consensus AA (20), Unanimous AA (25); national award (20); Heisman finalist (30); All-Big East 2nd (3) or 1st (5) Team; BE Player of the Year (10); BE season stats leader (5); BE game (6), season (8), or career (11) record held;

BE academic honor roll (2); drafted by the NFL (3-10 points).

Class achievements: Wins (2 points per win); conference win (2); win over Virginia (5) or Miami (5); BE Champions (25); Top 25 (10) or Top 10 (15) finish; play in (15) or win (10) minor bowl; play in (25) or win (25) BCS bowl; play in championship game (50).

Note that the reasons for this ranking system, and its strengths and shortcomings, were talked about in detail in issue #21.

Example From the 1990 Recruiting Class

As we do every month, here's a walk-through with Tyronne Drakeford, a key member of the 1990 recruiting class. Here are his accomplishments:

- Lettered, 1990-93 (4 points, 1 for each letter)
- Started, 1991-93 (6 points, 2 for each season)
- Led VT in interceptions, 1991-93 (12 points, 4 points for each season)
- All-Big East 2nd team, 1991 (3 points)
- All-Big East 1st team, 1992-93 (10 points, 5 for each season)
- Led Big East in interceptions, 1992 (5 points)
- Drafted in the second round, 1994 (9 points)

Total points for Tyronne Drakeford: 49

Individual Points Scored by Members of the 1992 Recruiting Class

Here's the entire 1992 recruiting class, and how many points each player scored in the TSL Extra system:

Player	Pos	Points
Conaty, Bill	C	45
Gray, Torrian	DB	38
Banks, Antonio	DB	33

Still, Bryan	WR	30
Hagood, Jay	OL	16
Jackson, Waverly	DL	10
Washington, TJ	OL	8
White, Cornelius	WR	6
Miles, Shaine	LB	4
Wade, Tim	OL	3
Breheny, Chris	DL	2
Edwards, Tommy	RB	2
Morrell, Matt	DE	2
Smith, Okesa	DB	2
Mays, Eugene	DL	1
Bailey, Ken	DB	0
Dunbar, Danny	DB	0
Grubbs, Chris	DE	0
Thomas, Lenarick	S	0
Thomas, Marco	DL	0
Tolan, Dave	QB	0

The Top Five and Their Accomplishments

Bill Conaty (C, 45 points): Lettered four years; started four years; named first-team All-America in 1996 by The Sporting News; All-Big East 2nd team center in 1995; All-Big East 1st team OL in 1996.

Torrian Gray (DB, 38 points): Lettered four years; started three years; led VT in interceptions in 1993 (tie with Antonio Banks) and 1994; All-Big East 2nd team in 1995 and 1996; All-Big East 1st team in 1994; 2nd-round draft choice (49th overall) of the Minnesota Vikings in 1997.

Antonio Banks (DB, 33 points): Lettered four years; started four years; led VT in interceptions in 1993 (tie with Torrian Gray) and 1996; All-Big East 2nd team in 1994 and 1996; 4th-round draft choice (117th overall) of the Minnesota Vikings in 1997.

Bryan Still (WR, 30 points): Lettered four years; started two years; led VT in receiving in 1995 and kickoff returns in 1994; led the Big East in kickoff returns in 1994; 2nd-round draft choice (41st overall) of the San Diego Chargers in 1996.

Jay Hagood (OL, 16 points): Lettered four years; started three years; All-Big East 2nd team in 1995 and 1996.

Team Points Scored

In terms of team accomplishments, the 1992 recruiting class wins points for what the team accomplished in the 1993-1996 seasons. These accomplishments are:

Category	Stat	Points
Games Won	37	74
Conference Wins	21	42
Wins over Virginia	3	15
Wins over Miami	2 (95, 96)	10
BE Championships	2 (95, 96)	50
Top 25 finishes	4 (93-96)	40
Top 10 finishes	1 (1995)	15
Minor Bowls	2 (93, 94)	30
Minor Bowl Wins	1 (1993)	10
BCS Bowl invitations	2 (95, 96)	50
BCS Bowl wins	1 (1995)	25
Total Points:		361

**TOTAL 1992 RECRUITING CLASS RATING:
563 Points**

**POINTS PER PLAYER (21 PLAYERS):
26.81**

The 563 total points posted by this recruiting class and 26.81 per-player average are the best so far among the three recruiting classes reviewed (1990-92). The following paragraphs accumulate the data we've got so far

Comparison With Previous Classes Rated

So far, with three classes in the books, here's how they stack up against each other:

	1990	1991	1992
Number of Players:	24	23	21
Individual Points:	415	218	202
Team Points:	133	265	361
Overall Rating Points:	548	483	563
Points Per Player:	22.8	21.0	26.8

As a team, the 1992 class outscored the 1990 and 1991 classes, as talked about in the opening. So far, team points have increased with each class, but that should hold steady from here on out. Each of the next three recruiting classes (1993-1995) will have two BCS bowls to their credit (the 1993 and 1994 classes will get points for the 95 Sugar and 96 Orange; the 1995 class gets credit for the 1996 Orange and 1999 Sugar).

Due to the lack of skill players, the 1992 class had fewer individual points than the 1991 and 1992 classes. But it's interesting to note how well the 1992 class complimented the 1991 class, and that's why the Hokies went to two BCS bowls in 1995 and 1996. Take a look:

1991 class: QB Jim Druckenmiller, TB Dwayne Thomas, OL Chris Malone, LB George DelRicco, DT Jeff Holland, DT J.C. Price, DE Lawrence Lewis, and DE Hank Coleman.

1992 class: WR Bryan Still, WR Cornelius White, OL Billy Conaty, OL Jay Hagood, OL TJ Washington, DT Waverly Jackson, DB Antonio Banks, DB Torrian Gray.

You can see that in 1991 and 1992, the Hokies recruited two classes that meshed perfectly into championship teams in 1995 and 1996. They got their QB, TB, defensive line, and a great linebacker in 1991; and they got good wide receivers, an offensive line, and two great defensive backs in 1992.

If you look at it that way, VT's teams of 1995 and 1996 didn't "come out of nowhere" at all — they were built methodically in a masterstroke of two-year recruiting.

Top Ten Players So Far

Three classes into our rankings, here is our top ten list.

Top Ten Players So Far (Classes Ranked: 1990-92)

Year	Player	Points
1990	Jim Pyne	93
1990	Maurice DeShazo	90
1990	Antonio Freeman	89
1991	Jim Druckenmiller	57
1990	Tyronne Drakeford	49
1992	Bill Conaty	45
1992	Torrian Gray	38
1991	Dwayne Thomas	37
1991	J.C. Price	33
1992	Antonio Banks	33

The 1990 class still has a stranglehold on four of the top five spots.

See you next month, when we rate a 1993 recruiting class that was pretty much a big flop, except for one guy. But he was a whopper. His name was Cornell Brown.

The Data

To download the data in HTML (web page) format, go here:

<http://www.techsideline.com/tslextra/issue023/1992RecruitingClass.htm>

To download an MS Excel 97 spreadsheet containing all of the data and formulas that I have used here, go here:

<http://www.techsideline.com/tslextra/issue023/1992RecruitingClass.xls>

Inside TSL: Hits, Misses, and a Box Full of Huddlers

A hit statistic update, an article I wish I could take back, and a box full of memories.

by Will Stewart, TechSideline.com

Hokies are winning.

Page View Statistics (per-day avg.)

Month	2001	2002	% incr.
January	177,900	232,500	+ 31%
February	131,900	198,300	+ 50%
March	72,000	86,500	+ 20%
April	80,900	121,600	+ 50%
May	83,400	100,000	+ 20%
June	92,900	98,300	+ 6%
July	113,000	126,000	+ 12%
August	143,200	190,135	+ 33%
September	154,500	245,700*	+ 59%
October	167,000	??	??
November	162,600	??	??
December	171,100	??	??

* Through September 23rd

Traffic Update

Several of you have emailed me asking for a hit statistics update. Here's what's been happening lately.

First of all, as a reminder, I like to talk about "page views," not "hits." Hits are counted every time an image gets served up, or a script is run, or a page is delivered. For every article read once on the TSL web site by one person, up to dozens of "hits" are generated, which totally inflates the traffic figures, I think.

On the other hand, if a person reads an article, or a message board post, or calls up the home page, it generates one "page view." This is similar to reading one article of a magazine, or looking at a one-page advertisement.

So, for example, if a game preview I write generates 10,000 page views, then it has been pulled up on a computer 10,000 times. It could be anywhere from 10,000 different people reading it once to one person clicking "Refresh" 10,000 times on the same article.

What are the trends these days? As you can imagine, traffic is up. After all, the Hokies are 4-0, and people love to hit the site when the

When I look at the traffic statistics for fall of 2001, I realize what a double-whammy we were hit with. Traffic built nicely in August, and when coupled with a "TSL Extra Month" promotion that we ran, it created strong sales in TechLocker.com for August, for both merchandise and the TSL Extra.

Then came September 11th, and the bottom fell out. Traffic during the month was fair, but we were hit pretty hard in terms of sales. We had a miserable September 2001. With the national mood in the wake of the terrorist attacks, it was understandable that a lot of people took a step back from luxury and entertainment items like Hokie sports, TSL merchandise, and the TSL Extra.

September turned into October, and things were starting to get back to normal, as much as possible. Then in late October and early November, the Hokies suffered back-to-back losses to Syracuse and Pittsburgh, and things got ugly. Traffic stayed flat, and sales were mediocre.

The spirit of Hokie fans — along with our traffic and sales — was restored by the December 1 classic between the Hokies and Canes, the Gator Bowl matchup with Florida State, and football recruiting. In early February of 2002, we

recorded the three craziest days in TSL history, when we went over 500,000 page views three days in a row, peaking at 606,691 page views on February 5th.

This football season has been good 'n' busy. We've been hitting 300,000+ page views with regularity, and the strong 2002 out of conference schedule, with the Hokies winning the first four games, has been good all the way around, in terms of national respect, Virginia Tech's ranking, and TSL's page views and sales.

It was three years ago, in early August of 1999, that I took the leap and decided to do this web site full time. Since then, I've had some rough days where I wondered if I made the right decision, and last September and October were two of my worst months ever, filled with the most self-doubt since I made that jump.

But I think we're going to be all right. I no longer wonder if this thing is "going to fly." We've still got a ways to go, and there are a lot of improvements we can make in many areas, but with your continued support, I think TechSideline.com is going to be around for a loooong time ... much to the dismay of those who don't care for its existence.

The key, though, is continued growth, not just in traffic, but in the areas of sales, subscriptions, and sponsor support. So keep visiting the web site. If you've never shopped at TechLocker.com, other than to purchase your TSL Extra subscription, then give it a try and be amazed. After all, you get 10% off your purchase. If you've got friends who are thinking of subscribing to the TSLX but are sitting on the fence, push them off and make them sign up. Keep yourself familiar with TSL's sponsors, and if you need their services, give them a shot at getting your business.

If all that continues to happen, then when Frank Beamer retires at the age of 76 in the year 2022, and Bud Foster takes over as head coach, you'll hear about it first here at

TechSideline.com.

The Column Heard Round the Virginias

Randy King really stuck his foot in it with his September 13th column, "Herd can't run with these Hokies," that ran in the Roanoke Times. King wrote the column the night of the VT/ Marshall game, and it ran the next day. It was his commentary on the game (Aaron McFarling did the actual game recap), and he dragged out some West Virginia stereotypes that got him in trouble.

"The hillbillies of Huntington rolled in here hoping to have their own Hokie hoedown," he wrote. "Little did they know they would take a head-first dive into Lane Stadium's bone-dry cement pond."

Later on: "This thing was over before Granny could get the vittles fixed. The hog jewels [sic] were still cooking, the possum livers still a tad on the short side."

That was it for the duration of the column. King went on to talk football after that.

The outcry was immediate from Herd fans, Hokie fans, and West Virginia journalists. The Roanoke Times got letters of complaint, and on September 16th, Charleston (WV) Gazette writer Doug Smock fired back. "Um, anything you say, Randy. Reading 'possum' barbs from that neck of Virginia is kind of like hearing Roseanne Barr call you a fat slob."

Smock later added, "You'll need a print copy to read King's entire masterpiece. Mysteriously, the link on Roanoke.com has been disabled."

On September 20th, King, in his online VT Insider column, apologized. After apologizing, he talked about how it had been the longest week of his 30-year career, and he said, "As of Wednesday night, I had replied to approximately 100 e-mails I had received about my column (70 percent were critical of my effort) that have

arrived in my Roanoke Times mailbox.”

He added at the end that the Roanoke Times had pulled the plug on his short-lived column-writing career (King started doing columns this season and had written only four). He’s still working at the RT, but he won’t be doing any columns for a while.

Two days later, on Sunday the 22nd, Managing Editor Rich Martin of the Roanoke Times addressed the column in his own piece, called “Many call flag on column about game.” Martin rehashed the whole thing and then issued a company apology, saying, “The newspaper’s job is to break down stereotypes, though, not perpetuate them. We apologize for our offense.”

What a mess. I know Randy King, and Randy’s not a bad guy. He even took a shot at me in his VT Insider column once, but we talked about it later, and, I think, came to an understanding. I think we’re different people, and we’ll never be golfing and drinking buddies (I drink, but I don’t golf, that’s for sure). But we get along okay, as far as I can tell.

The whole episode got me to thinking if there was ever a piece that I really regretted writing. I’ve stuck my neck out on columns a couple of times; it’s rare, but I do it occasionally. And I have received emails of complaint, but never a firestorm, not one that bothered me to the point of making an apology. If I stick my neck out, it’s usually over something I feel very strongly about and can back up with facts.

But that doesn’t mean I haven’t written stuff I wished I could take back.

One piece that I would like to take back is the one I wrote about Ahmad Brooks in last February’s TSL Extra, issue #16. Brooks, of course, was the superstar high school line-backer who chose UVa over the Hokies and Tennessee.

In the TSL Extra article, I relayed some stories

that my sources, some very good ones, had told me about Brooks’ recruiting. I talked about how sources told me that Brooks was telling his friend D.J. Walton, a VT cornerback, that he was coming to Tech, and that he later told Frank Beamer that it was down to VT and Tennessee (with UVa being eliminated).

I passed some other stuff along and then relayed a Brooks quote from the Washington Post the day he committed to UVa, in which he said, “I kind of made my decision [to attend UVa] a couple months ago, I just didn’t tell anybody. Everybody asked me where I was going to go, and I just basically told them a different school. I had to take all my visits to know that was really where I wanted to go.”

I painted the picture of Brooks as a manipulator who misled people, and then I went after him. I wrote:

I will leave it to you to decide what you think of a young man who strings out his friends and recruiting coaches in that fashion. It’s one thing to have your fun with the 15 million dot-commers that cover recruiting, but to lead on one of your best friends, making him look like a fool to everyone he talked to? “D.J. was very hurt,” a source told me.

The odd thing is, if Brooks doesn’t qualify (he currently doesn’t have the SAT score he needs) and winds up at a prep school, it appears that the Tech coaches will recruit him again. “We’ll make that call,” one VT coach said at the Recruiting Rally at Boomer’s on February 9th, indicating that the coaches will contact Brooks and see if he wants Virginia Tech to recruit him.

Fine, coach, just don’t believe anything he tells you.

I’ve thought about that piece many times since then, and in the weeks following it, after watching some TSL message board posters repeatedly carve Brooks up on the TSL boards, I thought about the monster I had created. And I

worried, mainly, that my piece had been inaccurate. After all, I wasn't there when Brooks supposedly said the things he said. I had never interviewed the guy myself. But based on what sources had told me, I painted a pretty unflattering picture of him.

I wondered, if I had it to write over again, would I?

But what's done is done, and fortunately, the piece was pay material that was read by about 1300 TSL Extra subscribers (our readership at the time), so it was somewhat insulated and not publicly available. Not like King's column.

Time went on, and then I interviewed Alan Wheeling last summer. Alan, of course, is the Pulaski County defensive back featured in TSL Extra #11, who desperately wanted to go to Tech but was never offered a scholarship and is now at William and Mary, playing football for the Tribe.

Alan played in the VHSCA All-Star game last summer, on the same West team that Brooks played on, so he got to meet Ahmad and spend time with him. And the image he relayed of Brooks was that of a nice, quiet kid who didn't buy into the whole star-football-player image and, if anything, might be a little unsure about what to do.

"He seems like one of those spontaneous guys, he just goes with the flow and he'll make the decision when he has to," Wheeling said.

Wheeling talked openly with me about many of the highly-ranked players who played in the game, some UVa recruits and some VT recruits, who weren't very nice to the more lightly-regarded players like Wheeling. They cut in front of Wheeling in line at meals and generally made asses of themselves, whooping it up and acting up, like they were king of the world.

But Brooks was different. "I think Ahmad was by far one of the best people down there, not only

as an athlete, but as a person," Wheeling said sincerely. "Really a lot of people were showing a lot of attitude, but that was one thing Ahmad didn't do. He sat on the bus with me a lot, and we'd talk. He's a cool guy, and he'll talk with anybody. He didn't have anything against anybody. He didn't cut in line, and he didn't really act up."

On reports that Brooks might have misled people during his recruitment, Wheeling said, "I can see that about Ahmad. I don't know if he was really doing it on purpose. That's just his way of doing things. He changes his mind really easy. Maybe he's really vulnerable in that way. He seemed like that kind of guy, to do whatever comes to him."

Wheeling is a good kid, a kid I like and trust to be a good judge of character. He spent time with Ahmad, while I never did. And he drew a favorable conclusion about him. So maybe I was wrong, and if I could take back the things I wrote about Ahmad Brooks, I would.

Fortunately for me, my piece appeared to about 1300 people who were sympathetic not just to Virginia Tech, but to me personally. Not like Randy King's piece, which appeared in tens of thousands of copies of the paper, plus online (until they pulled it). So I didn't catch much heat about it. And really only one person let me know how much they disliked it.

The more cynical among you, the conspiracy-theorist types, might be thinking to yourselves, "Ah-ha! VT is recruiting Brooks, now that he's at Hargrave, and Will's taking back what he said, so he won't hurt VT's chances with Brooks!"

Uh, no. That's not it. As I said, I just watched the whole King debacle, and it set me to thinking if there was anything I wrote that I regretted. And the answer is: yes, that one piece. I'd take it back if I could.

A Box Full of Huddlers

Sometimes, being the TSL webmaster is a really cool job. How would you like to get this email?

Will, I haven't been in contact with you for over 4 years now, so I'm not sure if you even remember me. When you first started gearing up back in the mid to late 90s I helped out on a couple of tailgates, and brought you a bunch of old souvenir VT game drink cups, which were extras I had in storage. Now I have another freebie to offer if you're interested. Your degree of interest would depend on just when you graduated from VT and started saving Hokie Huddlers, I suppose.

When the Hokie Huddlers were first advertised in the mid 80s I subscribed right away. It came out at the end of the school year and Volume I only had one issue (large picture of Bruce Smith). After I got my copy, I liked it so well I decided to give my Dad a subscription also. He never got Vol I, Number 1, but rather started at Vol II, number 1.

My mother was like me in that she never threw anything away. After he passed away in August 1994 I cancelled his subscription. Since my Mom passed away in Feb 2000, I have been going through massive amounts of junk they managed to accumulate over the years. If I recall correctly, the box of Huddlers in the basement there are complete from 1985 through 1994, or 10 full years (does not include the only issue of Vol I).

Since we have been trying to get things in order, a lot of stuff has been donated to the church yard sales, given to the library or taken to the land fill. My wife asked what in the world I needed with a backup set of Hokie Huddlers, and to avoid just throwing them out I have been telling her I might offer them to you. Time has about run out for holding onto that box of Huddlers. Are you interested in them for reference material? My guess is that you were in high school about the time they came out, so you actually might not have copies of the ones in the 80s.

Wow, a complete run of Hokie Huddlers, from 1985 to 1994! I jumped all over it, arranged to meet my benefactor, and picked up the run of Huddlers from him. They are now neatly arranged, packed, and filed for reference underneath my desk.

They nicely complemented my own set of Hokie Huddlers, which run complete from 1996 through present day. I also have a number of issues from 1995, and sporadic, here-and-there issues from 1985, when I was in school, through present day. I went to Tech from 1983-87, and I kept about 15 "important" issues from the time the Huddler came out when I was in school until I started saving every issue in 1996.

I received the email and the gift of Hokie Huddlers back in April, and one night, I sat down with a vodka and orange juice and started to go through my new collection of Huddlers. I only got about one or two years into them before I quit, and I haven't "gone through them" since then.

I discovered that sometimes, your past shouldn't be relieved in perfect box-score detail. We often view our past in sepia tones, with the glow of nostalgia, and well, maybe it should be left that way.

It was a bit overwhelming to thumb through issue after issue that detailed the football and basketball seasons of my youth in excruciating detail. And it took some of the romance away. People always talk, for example, about how Cassell Coliseum rocked with capacity crowds back in the mid-80's but I discovered, just to pick an instance, that only 3,269 fans showed up for Tech's basketball game against Tennessee State back in 1986.

That takes a little bit of the glow off the memories, but then again, the basketball team *did* beat North Carolina A&T in 1985 in front of 9,723 fans. Yowza. So there's a lot of truth to that Cassell mythology of huge crowds.

I did enjoy a couple of things about flipping through those early issues. Number one, I enjoyed seeing pictures of and reading about my old friend Phil Williams, who played basketball for Tech from 1983-87. My overall impression of Phil's Tech career is that it was a little disappointing for me, because I expected big things of him, and he never starred for the Hokies. He was a bit player from 1983-86 and then finally started as a senior in the 1986-87 season.

In reviewing old issues of the Huddler, I think I was a little too demanding in my criteria for what constituted a successful career for Phil at Tech. In flipping through Huddlers, I found that during his senior year, he had a double-double in points and rebounds quite a few times. He wound up averaging 8.4 points and 8.0 rebounds his senior year, which wasn't a bad year. He nearly outscored Bimbo Coles (9.7 points per game) that year.

As an underclassman, Phil once scored 7 points and grabbed 7 rebounds in 15 minutes against WVU, and he once iced a road win at South Carolina by making four free throws in the final two minutes of a game. As a freshman, I saw him score the last five points of regulation against Tulane's John "Hot Rod" Williams to send a game into overtime. And in our junior year, he held UVa's Olden Polynice scoreless for almost an entire half in a Tech victory, by, as Phil once told me, "standing on his foot when he set up in the post."

My new collection of Huddlers also contains my favorite picture of Phil in action. It's from Volume 3, Number 17 (Dec. 24, 1985), and on the cover, there's a picture of Phil and Bobby Beecher double-teaming a WVU player who's going in for a layup. Never known as a leaper, Phil is pretty high in the air, coiled like a snake and ready to block the shot. His head is nearly grazing the bottom of the backboard. That's some pretty good hops for a guy who only had one dunk in his entire Tech career.

The second thing I found interesting about those old Huddlers is how much they talked about football and basketball players that the Hokies were recruiting. As an official college sports newspaper, the Huddler — which these days goes by the awkward name "hokiesports the newspaper" — is not allowed to talk about recruits until they have signed their letters of intent.

But the early Huddlers talked about unsigned recruits all the time. Some time around 1989, after openly discussing recruits for years on end, the Huddler suddenly stopped doing it.

I asked former Huddler editor Chris Colston last spring, at the Tech spring game, about how they got away with it for so long. Chris smiled broadly and shrugged. "We, uh, didn't know," he said. "Finally, after a long time, somebody came down from Sports Information and said, 'You know, you're not supposed to do that.' So we quit."

He kept grinning. I think Chris sold a lot of Huddlers with that recruiting info.

A sidebar: one basketball recruit those early Huddlers talked about was a Top-50 guard by the name of Delino DeShields. The Hokies eventually lost the recruiting battle for DeShields to Villanova University ... where DeShields played baseball. He was drafted by the major leagues in 1987 and has been playing in the majors since 1990, with a career batting average of .268.

My new Huddlers are an awesome reference. They contain gobs of long-forgotten recruiting and player information, as well as more tidbits than I could ever hope to use in ten years of TSL Extra's.

But as a trip down memory lane ... well, they're a little too black-and-white for me. I'll stick to the sepia-toned recollections of my own memory. Everything's bigger and better that way.

See you next month.

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