

TSL Extra

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On the Cover
Photo of Noland Burchette courtesy of the Richmond Times-Dispatch. Photography by Mark Gormus. Photo copyright 2001 Richmond Times-Dispatch.

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TSL EXTRA

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Dear Readers:

This issue is a little late, arriving on the 19th of the month. I usually prefer to have the TSL Extra out on the 16th or 17th of the month, sometimes the 18th.

But the fact that it got out when it did is nothing short of amazing. For a long time after the World Trade Centers were destroyed and the Pentagon was wrecked on September 11, I didn't want to work. It's hard to care about football when thousands of people are dying, and your country is facing a protracted, nasty war against terrorism.

After the attacks, as I sat in the solitude of my basement office and contemplated working on the TSL Extra, it was hard to get moving. What finally got me going was a long phone call I had during lunch on Thursday the 13th of September with Highland Springs football coach Scott Burton. We talked for 45 minutes about one of his star players, Noland Burchette, a recent VT verbal. And afterwards, I got the chance to talk to Noland for a few minutes.

The story they relayed to me is one of the more interesting recruiting stories I've ever heard. I've encountered high school football coaches who are mentors to their players and help shape their lives, but the relationship between Burton and Burchette is something truly special. Each of them owes the other quite a bit.

Noland Burchette's story is a story of human triumph, of an aimless young man who made something of himself, with the help of his coach. In the midst of all the despair and suffering associated with the terrorist attacks, it was the opportunity to put Noland Burchette's story into words that got me working again. I hope that as you read his tale (which is admittedly long) that you, too, derive a sense of hope and purpose again, if you're still struggling with what's going on in the world around us.

In other articles, we profile Keith Burnell, who must now play the role of lead tailback for the Hokies, in the wake of Lee Suggs' season-ending knee injury. We also dedicate not one but two articles to the sad story of Camm Jackson, a 1997 football recruit whose story is not one of triumph, but of a promising life gone awry. Fortunately for Camm, there's still time to get things turned around.

Lastly, we've got a profile of Pulaski County High School football player Alan Wheeling, who is not a VT football recruit, and probably won't be ... but would dearly love to be. And in "Inside the Numbers," we pit the 1995 Hokie defense against the 1999 Hokie defense and see who comes out on top. Comparing statistics is not as fun as watching Cornell Brown and Corey Moore duke it out in a dark alley would be, but it's fun, nonetheless.

Carry on, Hokies, and always keep those who suffered great losses in the terrorist attacks in your minds, hearts, and prayers.

Enjoy issue #11.



Highland Spring's Noland Burchette

Under the watchful eye of a mentoring coach, Virginia Tech recruit Noland Burchette has transformed his life.

by Will Stewart, TechSideline.com

Highland Springs (Richmond, Virginia) Coach Scott Burton sounds like nothing less than a man on a mission. Since taking the job as the Springers head coach in early 1999, Burton, just 28 years old, has sought nothing less than a rebirth of the once-proud Highland Springs football program ... and along the way, a total revamp of a young man named Noland Burchette.

In early August of 2001, Burchette, a 6-3, 225-pound defensive end/tight end, gave a verbal commitment to play football at Virginia Tech. The commitment didn't make big news. Burchette was

not ranked on Doug Doughty's list of the Top 25 Juniors at the end of last season, and he was nowhere to be found among the pages of SuperPrep, PrepStar, or Alliance Sports (Rivals.com).

But Burchette's commitment, and the fact that Virginia Tech offered him a scholarship in the first place, represents the end of a long road that Burchette and Burton have traveled together. Their journey began in the summer of 1999 and involves the remaking of a football program on one level, and of a young man on another level.

Both Noland Burchette and his coach have come a long way on their respective journeys, and both have a long way to go. But you can forgive them if just for a moment, they take a chance to pause and reflect on what they have achieved. For Burchette, whose future was once indistinct and cloudy, the scholarship offer from Virginia Tech represents a whole new life, and a vastly expanding future.

"Negative Attitudes"

Shortly after starting his job as Highland Springs' new head coach in February of 1999, Burton called a meeting in the weight room of all players who were planning on being on the team the next year. Burton outlined a summer weightlifting program and other requirements for the football players.

To say that his programs were not well-received is understating it. "That was the first real time there was a formal weight program (at Highland Springs HS), ever installed here," Burton notes. "It was slow to be received, because any time you tell kids 'You've got to do this,' and it's hard, they're not going to want to do it. The people who were there (that summer) were definitely in the minority. We only had four or five kids there every day, when I first started."

Burton quickly figured out that what he needed were leaders, kids he could count on to set the tone among his football players and show them the way. "One of the things that we had to really battle when I got here was that the leadership from the peers, the peer role-modeling, was so negative," he says. "It wasn't cool to do what coach says, it wasn't cool to be on the honor role. It was cool to kind of say, 'I'm going to do things my way, not the coach's way.'"

Burton cast his eye among the lot of available players, and among others, settled his gaze on

Noland Burchette, a tall, wiry kid who had just finished his freshman year on the junior varsity squad.

“The first time I saw him, he was a freshman, going into his sophomore year. He had come — one of his friends had dragged him — to the weight room. And I saw him, and I immediately wanted to know who he was. He was a tall, rangy kid, and you could tell there was going to be a good frame there.

“I talked to him, and he was what I call a fence-sitter. Just in general. He wasn’t overly concerned with academics. He wanted to play football, but he only wanted to play on Friday. He didn’t understand that it was a 12-month deal.”

So Burton set himself to the task of challenging Noland Burchette, to see what he was made of.

Burchette, a soft-spoken, polite kid, remembers the first time he ever saw Burton. “When I first met Coach Burton, when he first got hired for the job, he came in there in the weight room and was talking to everybody, and he was talking about what we had to do ... and it was a big change at Highland Springs. Everybody was looking at him, like, ‘We ain’t *been* doing this, why we gotta do it *now?*’

“I mean, we’d go to the weight room, but it wasn’t as thorough as it is now. So when I first met him, I thought, oh, he’s going to be a hard one.”

Like most of his teammates, Burchette didn’t respond to Burton right away. It took him a while to warm up to his new coach. And like most of his teammates, he stayed away from the weight room during the summer of 1999, the summer before his sophomore year.

When Burchette missed the first day of practice in August and showed up late for the second day, Burton decided to push him, just to see if he would push back.

Burchette remembers that day. “The first day of practice I missed because I had to work. And then the other players came home and told me how hard it was. In a way it turned me off, but I was like, ‘No, I’m going to go do what I gotta do.’ And the first day of practice, I said something, and he came over and called me a dodo. I said, ‘Coach, I’m not a dodo.’ He was like, ‘You are a dodo in my eyes.’ I said something back, and he said, ‘I’m your father on this field.’

“That kind of separated me from him at first.”

“Noland didn’t have the physical, didn’t have the forms, all that stuff,” Burton recalls. “He was actually still working at King’s Dominion, and he told me, ‘Coach, I can’t be here full-time for another week.’

“And I said to him, right then — even though I didn’t want to, because I was scared what his answer might be, but I realize that if the program wanted to realize its expectations, we couldn’t have the work schedules of the kids interfere with football. So I told him, ‘Look, if you want to play football for me, you’ll be here at 6:30 tomorrow morning.’ And I walked out of the room, and I didn’t know if I would ever see him again.

"I pulled up the next morning at 6:00, or 5:30, whatever time it was, just hoping he would come, and sure enough, he was there. Two weeks later, he started for us in our opener."

Potential on the Field

Burchette had responded, but that didn't mean he was completely sold on Burton's methods. That would take time.

"The whole summer, I was looking at him like, 'Uh-oh,' " Burchette says of his coach. "I used to play linebacker, and he moved me to defensive end. When he made that change, I went to him one-on-one and said, 'Coach, I don't know about this defensive end stuff. Those guys'll be 300 pounds on the line. I'm kind of small compared to them.'"

"He said, 'We'll get you in the weight room, and you'll get bigger, faster, and stronger. Your quickness will beat them off the ball.' Him telling me this, it never clicked in my head that it would work.

"After the first game, I came to him and said, 'Coach, I told you I couldn't do it.' He said, 'Just give it time.' And the second game came, and I started getting sacks and stuff. And I realized, it was working. And the whole season, I kept getting better and better. By the end of the season, I thought, well, he knows what he's talking about."

Burton knew from the very beginning that Burchette, much like his football team, was a long-term project. "He was so weak, because of his lack of weight room effort, that he could not get in a left-handed stance. He could do it, but not effectively. His sophomore year, he ended up having four or five sacks, and that's basically because he could run. He didn't know what he was doing, but he had a good motor, and he could run."

"A Hundred Colleges"

Just a few games into Burchette's sophomore season, Burton liked what he saw on the field, and he knew it was time for Burchette to step it up.

"I pulled him into my office one day, and I shut the door," Burton says, "and I literally said to him, 'What in the hell are you doing with your life? What are you doing? What do you want to be four years from now?'"

"And typically of many kids, he said, 'I don't know.'"

"I said to him, 'Well, let me tell you what you could be.' I told him, 'You know, there will be a hundred colleges that will be willing to pay for you to go to their school.' I don't think anybody had ever told him that, and I think that blew him away, what he was being told.

"And when I explained that to him, his ears perked up, and he got a little excited about the possibilities."

It was at that point that Noland Burchette's life started to turn around. Previously aimless, he started to take on a new focus. And much like Burton wanted, Burchette started to spread the word and serve as a role model for his teammates.

“By the end of the season, that’s when I figured out he was trying to put us on the right track, no matter how hard it was,” Burchette says. “He was being so hard because he’s the type of person who wants everything to be perfect. I noticed what he was talking about, so I started to listen to him.

“And I started telling other people, who were trying to stay away from him, he knows what he’s talking about. I told them, ‘He’s telling you the right things, look what he did to me.’ I made second team all-district that year.”

As the summer of 2000 arrived and summer workouts began, Burchette applied himself like never before. “He was a weight room warrior,” says Burton. “He was one of the guys who set the tone. He did not miss a day. We talked about nutrition, and he improved his nutrition. We talked about his running form, and he fixed that. We worked on foot quickness, with a lot of agility drills, and jumping rope, things like that. His strength level just shot through the roof, because he was so weak to begin with. He did absolutely everything I told him to.”

The Springers had finished 5-5 in 1999, and they would do so again in 2000, but underneath the identical records, the program — and Noland Burchette — were changing.

Burton didn’t hesitate to pile even more responsibility on his team leader and personal project. Although he was just beginning to be a good defensive lineman, Burton wanted more of him.

Burton went to Burchette and told him, “We need to put our best athletes on the field, and we want to put you at tight end.”

Burchette’s response was by now a familiar one. “I was like, ‘Uh-oh.’”

But of course, he agreed, and like most things Burton asked of him, it wasn’t easy. “First time, in the first game, I was fatigued and tired,” Burchette remembers.

But — and here’s the difference in Noland Burchette as a sophomore and Noland Burchette as a junior — he didn’t tell the coach he “couldn’t do it.” Instead, he just worked harder. “After that (first game), I would stay after practice and run, and I told myself I had to get in shape so I could play both ways. I just like being on the field, so whatever he told me to do, I’d do.”

Burchette responded to the new role of tight end in his junior season with 32 catches, which led the team, and he averaged 13 yards per catch and scored 3 TD’s. “We could easily open him up,” says Burton, who installed a no-huddle offense before last season and has moved Burchette around in it, “and now you’ve got a 6-2, 210 pound receiver who can easily outrun most of the guys on defense. So we got some mismatches with him. We put him in the slot and matched him up on some guys that can’t run that well and got some mismatches. We’ll take those matchups any day of the week.”

And another thing: he punted last year, too, averaging 37 yards a kick.

“He’s got good hands,” Burton explains, “and I wanted a punter who could catch it and get it away. He was a little inexperienced last year, because he had never punted in his whole life, and here he is in varsity football. In our second game, it was kind of a low snap, and he picks it up and looks, and it looks like the rush is coming. So he tucks it and goes 70 yards for a touchdown. And this was

not a called fake punt. He did it on his own. There was no blocking. Once he had broken four or five tackles, the guys came back and started to block, but he pretty much did it on his own.

“He did that again in our fifth or sixth game of the year. He bobbled the snap, looked up, freaked out, and went for 45 yards. It wasn’t a touchdown, but still, it was 45 yards.”

From his defensive end spot, Burchette had 11 sacks and nine other tackles behind the line. He also forced five fumbles and recovered five fumbles. As a player, he was turning into everything Burton wanted him to be.

But as you can guess by now, Burton wanted more ... this time, *off* the field.

Academics and Community

“I didn’t get to know him well until after his sophomore season,” Burton admits. “So therefore, any influence I could have had on his academics was null and void, because I didn’t really get to know him. He finished his freshman year with a 1.6. His intelligence is not the issue, it’s just one of those deals where he was not disciplined. The type of no-show, fence-sitting attitude that he had about football was translating to the academic side of things.

“When we had that meeting early in his sophomore year, I got on him about academics, too. I said, ‘You’ve got to understand, the first thing that a coach is going to ask is, ‘Is he a good kid?’ And I’ll say yes. The next thing he’s going to say is, ‘What kind of student is he?’ And I’ll be honest with them. And then there won’t be a third question. Because when I answer that second question, that’ll be it. You’ll be just another guy that’ll be 35 years old, saying how good you were in high school, but you’ll be working at 7-11 or pumping gas, or whatever. And I said to him, ‘Is that what you want?’

“He was respectful and receptive to that. I don’t want to say it was an overnight change, because he didn’t know how to change. He had to learn what that means. He had to learn, and he’s still learning, what it takes to be a good student.”

Burton encourage Burchette to take Honors Algebra II his junior year to help bring up his sagging GPA. “I think he made either a C or a B. And the grade gets bumped up a level for an Honors class, so a C or a B becomes a B or an A.”

Going into his senior year, Burchette’s GPA is still low, particularly in his core classes, where Burton says he has a 2.2. With an 830 on the SAT in his first try, he hasn’t qualified academically, but he is on the right track. “If he continues academically at the pace he has for the last two years, he will qualify. He’ll be okay,” Burton says confidently.

“At first,” Burchette admits, “before I thought about what I could be, academics didn’t play an important role. But now, I hit the books as hard as I can. My grades are moving up. I’m looking forward to going to college.”

This year, as a senior, Burchette is taking AP Psychology, a move that Burton encouraged him to take. He felt that Burchette would be better served in a small AP class of 9 academically-minded students, instead of taking the regular course with nearly 30 other kids with varying degrees of interest in the subject matter. Burchette agreed and accepted the challenge, making him somewhat

of an oddity: a non-qualified football player (for the time being, anyway) with Honors and AP classes on his transcript.

Beyond the changes he has made on the field and in the classroom, Burton has encouraged Burchette to understand something else: his role as a role model, both in school and in the community.

“I told him time and time again,” says Burton, ““You have no idea that his is true, but when you walk by, there’s always five or ten sets of eyes that follow you. You don’t see that, but I do. Therefore, everything that you do is being watched. So if you don’t turn your homework in, you give these younger kids a green light to not do their homework. So when you’re tired and don’t feel like doing your homework, then you’ve got to think of your greater responsibility.’

“I told him, ‘You don’t have to embrace this, but you have to accept this.’ He has done a good job of it. We go into the community, and it’s amazing, everybody knows who he is. I’m talking about fifty year old men and women, and six year old girls. They know who he is.

“One of the reasons for that is that he is so likable. He is not a hey-look-at-me type of kid. As a matter of fact, when we were up at Tech (for Tech’s summer football camp, where Burchette received his scholarship offer), it was pretty big for him to get an offer from them, an in-state school that is a top-5 program. We had twenty other players at Tech’s camp along with Noland, and not one of those twenty other players even knew it (that he had gotten an offer). He’s not one of those kids to go back to the room, and say, ‘Hey, look at me.’”

The Bond

Somewhere among all the pushing, striving, achieving, and change, something else has happened: Burton and Burchette have grown very close.

“I look at Coach Burton as a second father to me,” Burchette says. “If I need help, like help in school, I’ll go to his house, and he can help me. What he tells me to do, on the field and off the field, I know it’s going to benefit me in every way, so I listen to him.”

Burton agrees. “He and I really started to bond and develop a very strong relationship. That’s a really, really special feeling that people who are not involved in this business don’t understand. But people who have been in this business, and if it has ever happened to them, they know exactly what I’m talking about. There’s nothing to describe the feeling that you get when you have that one kid that is just everything to you.

“When I see a kid, and he does everything I tell him to without qualms, then I reciprocate that. I’ve had several kids at my house, to spend the night and to help with academic projects, to help with research projects, things like that. My wife embraces them, feeds them dinner — we try to take them to activities outside of school, cultural activities, to expand their perspectives and open them up to some new things. So we’ve done that before.

“I may coach 30 years and never have another Noland. I absolutely love everything about this kid.”

“He’s my role model to look up to,” Burchette says of the man who has helped him change his life.

For all the hard work that Burchette has put in, Burton has reciprocated. From day one, he put together a film of Burchette, and he showed it to any college coach who would take five minutes out of his day to take a look. Burchette estimates that he sent out 50 to 60 tapes of Burchette to colleges around the country, and he did some in-person promotion of his star player, as well.

“Everywhere that I went,” Burton says, “to all the clinics and things like that, I always took the tape with me. Here I am, at a clinic trying to learn things, like every other coach in America does, but I’m bringing tapes along with me. The college coaches that are presenting, I’m saying, ‘Hey, you got a second to take a look at this?’ And that’s when they really started to stand up and take notice.”

Ultimately, Burton’s efforts, which included sending letters and making phone calls, paid off. Burchette received offers from Richmond, JMU, N.C. State, Maryland, Ohio, Marshall, and Virginia Tech. The Hokies’ offer came during their summer 2001 football camp in mid-July, and Burchette accepted it after two weeks of thinking about it.

Fighting Perception

So how did a kid who is so multi-talented escape the notice of so many college recruiters? When answering that question, Burton picks his words carefully. He notes that Highland Springs has had very few Division 1-A recruits lately, and those who have been D-1A recruits, such as current Tech defensive end Jim Davis (who didn’t play under Burton), have had to go to prep school.

So the problem at Highland Springs hasn’t been one of talent. It has been one of perception among college coaches and recruiters. Burton is trying to change that, and for that reason, Burchette’s offer to Tech is important not just to the coach and the player, but to the Highland Springs program as a whole.

“I think the perception was, you don’t know what you’re going to get when you go into Highland Springs,” Burton says. “So it was real important to me to get — for our program, for selfish reasons — to get that first kid to go, you know? For public awareness for our program, and for the spotlight to be on our program, it was important.

“It was important to me that we get one guy as soon as possible that could change that perception, and certainly, Noland has done that for us. I think that some people — I don’t want to say that they intentionally stayed away, but if you’ve got a choice between another school and Highland Springs, perception may have led you into that other school.

“I will say this: everybody who came in my first year as a courtesy call — ‘Hey, I’m Joe Smith from X University’ — I showed every one of them tape of Noland as a sophomore. And every one of them said, ‘Yeah, he’s going to be a player. I’ll be back.’”

Among those who saw tape of Burchette as a sophomore was Tech assistant Jim Cavanaugh, who recruits Richmond-area high schools for the Hokies.

“Coach Cavanaugh and my athletic director, Rudy Ward, are lifelong friends,” Burton notes. “They’ve been friends for 30 years. And so Coach Cav made it a point to come in, because of his connection with Rudy, when I got hired here. As soon as he showed up, I said, ‘Here, I’ve got to

show you something.’ And he was interested right then, because Noland can run. At that point in time, his attitude was, okay, let’s see what he does academically, and let’s see if he gets any bigger.”

The improvement in Burchette in just the last year was enough to convince the Hokie coaches to take a chance on him, and after seeing him in the Tech football camp in July, they offered him a scholarship. In this day and age, Virginia Tech doesn’t have to gamble on players who haven’t qualified, so their offer is a vote of confidence in both Noland Burchette and Scott Burton to finish the job they have started and get Noland fully qualified academically.

Burchette’s verbal commitment to Tech has been a source of pride among the students, faculty, and staff at Highland Springs, who are looking for success stories among their student body. Burchette, who has labored hard to improve himself both athletically and academically, still has much ground to cover, but he is well on his way.

And his commitment to Tech is solid. Burton counseled him not to commit unless he was “five thousand percent sure,” citing Burchette’s responsibility to set a good example for others and not back out of a commitment.

“It’s stone,” Noland Burchette says of his verbal to Tech. “It can’t move. There’s no reason for me to even bother to visit (anywhere else), because I’m not going to go there.”

Besides, he is already on a journey, one that is going pretty well.

Wrong Turns and Bad Decisions: The Fate of Camm Jackson

Four years ago, David Pugh and Camm Jackson traveled the same road from Amherst High School to Virginia Tech. Since then, they have gone in opposite directions.

by Neal Williams

In the mid-1990's, Camm Jackson and David Pugh were stars at Amherst County High School. Pugh was a lineman, and Jackson was a running back and linebacker, and as juniors in 1995, they had helped Amherst win the state Group AA championship. They had big plans for the collegiate level, and in the fall of 1997, both headed to Virginia Tech, not far from their Madison Heights homes.

Pugh, Amherst coach Mickey Crouch said, "was a real hard worker, blessed with good strength and speed."

Jackson, Crouch said, "had more natural ability than anybody I've ever coached, and I've been coaching 31 years."

They were two future stars.

Except one went the wrong way.

Pugh's vision, as you know, was realized. He's a senior defensive tackle and one of the Hokies' best players. If injuries don't derail him, he is looking at a professional career.

But Camm Jackson never played for Virginia Tech. In the years following his signing with Virginia Tech, poor choices were his frequent companion, and he quickly produced a long criminal file. He hopes the worst is over. He's back home now, working and raising a family, and sometimes, he admits, wondering what might have been.

"I miss it so bad," Jackson said. "I'm sitting there watching David, he's doing great things now. I should be there right beside him. That's run through my mind a lot.

"I've come to terms with it. I can't change any of it. I have to learn from it."

Different Directions

David Pugh's progress at Tech is easy to track. You simply grab a Hokies media guide and marvel at the details:

*He was an All-Big East selection after the 2000 season.

*He tied for the team lead in sacks with five and tackles for losses with 12.

*He had 10 career sacks coming into the season.

*Lindy's magazine ranks Pugh the fourth-best defensive tackle in the country. He's No. 6 per The Sporting News.

Finding out Camm Jackson's history takes a little more work, because you won't find him in any Tech media guides. He never actually played for the Hokies. To find out about his activities around Virginia Tech, you must make several stops.

The first such stop is the clerk's office of the Montgomery County Circuit Court in Christiansburg. You request file No. CR99-15888 and get a thick packet of information in return. You next go the General District Court clerk's office in Blacksburg and type in Cameron Darnell Jackson on the system computer. While you're out, stop at the Virginia Tech Police Department.

Here's some of what you'll learn:

In early 1999, Jackson stole a checkbook belonging to Richard J. Oldland, a Tech student from Chesapeake. Over the course of two months in early 1999, he signed Oldland's name to six checks:

- *\$27.27 to Wal-Mart.
- *\$33.33 to Wal-Mart
- *\$22.68 to Wal-Mart.
- *\$34.54 to Wal-Mart
- *\$100 to cash
- *\$75 to cash.

That's six counts of forge and utter. Jackson was arrested on May 14, 1999, and eventually, he was convicted and sentenced to five years in jail, all suspended. He had to pay court costs of \$4,645.69 and make restitution, and he was also placed on supervised probation.

Unfortunately, that's not the end of his troubles. On Sept. 15, 2000, probation officer Chadwick T. Phillips filed a letter noting that Jackson's probation conditions were violated. Chadwick requested a hearing, and the next month, six months of Jackson's suspended sentence were revoked. Jackson went off to the Montgomery County Jail.

There were also rumors that Jackson was involved in drugs. Although no charges of that nature were ever filed against him in Montgomery County, a letter in his file written by Jackson to Judge Ray W. Grubbs, asking for consideration for early release, answers the question. In it, Jackson admits to two failed drug screenings while on probation.

"The last conversation I had with him was during that spring practice (spring of 1998) his first year," Crouch said. "You could tell something was going on. He wasn't the same kid he was in high school."

Looking for Clues

So what happened to Cameron Darnell Jackson? How did he go from potential football star to inmate? Could something have been done?

Easy answers don't exist. Jackson, to his credit, blames no one. He made poor choices, he admits, and he paid the price.

He went to Tech excited. This was a kid who always wanted to be a Hokie, particularly after teammate Pugh made his choice.

"I followed them ever since I was six years old," Jackson said in his recruiting profile in the March 31, 1997 edition of the Hokie Huddler. "I had planned to go there to get an education anyway. I hadn't even planned on football. As I came up through middle school, I realized I might get a scholarship, so I worked hard to get it. I've always wanted to go there."

Said Crouch in the same edition, "Ever since we started talking for the first time about playing college football, all he's ever talked about is Virginia Tech."

Jackson reported in August of 1997, about to burst with excitement. But his second day there, he suffered a serious knee injury and was sent home to rehabilitate. He reported back to Tech in January of 1998, the idea being that with a delayed January enrollment, it would keep alive the option for a redshirt season the following year (the 1998 season) if his knee was slow to recover.

The injury, many people say, is what started Jackson's slide. Here's a guy who, in Pugh's words, "was always the best baseball player, always the best football player." Now he was hurt, and he couldn't play.

He handled it poorly. He didn't keep up with his rehabilitation. And he started hanging out with the wrong people.

"I kind of got discouraged," Jackson said. "I had never had that happen to me and it was all new. I didn't know what to do. I just wasn't hitting on anything. I'd already fallen behind other players. It just wasn't going well.

"It was a heartbreaker. I went up there excited and eager. Once that happened, it just takes it all from you."

Said Tech offensive coordinator Rickey Bustle, who recruited Pugh and Jackson from Amherst, "When he came back, he wasn't in very good shape. It was just a struggle for him. I don't think he liked the classroom right off the bat. He just never made a great effort to succeed."

Crouch agrees.

"He did not get back into it and do what he was supposed to do academically or athletically," Crouch said. "I don't think he prepared himself the way he should have. He would come by our practice (at Amherst) after his surgery, he'd jog or go to the weight room. It went on for a couple of months, but then he stopped doing the rehabilitation, stopped lifting. He sort of faded out of the picture. He should have been here every day. I remember telling him he had a chance to get a free education, he had a great opportunity in football. Probably the next week, he was back to doing the same thing he was before.

"Maybe if he hadn't been injured and had been there with the influences of other players and coaches, it would have been different."

But it wasn't. That Jackson never played for the Hokies is a shame, considering everyone who

talked about him raved about his ability. His freshman profile listed him as a 5-11, 215-pounder. He was a top-notch runner and determined tackler. He was Group AA defensive player of the year as a junior. Most likely, he would have ended up as an outside linebacker or rover at Tech.

"If he'd have gone to Tech and did what he was supposed to do, he'd have been playing in the NFL right now," Crouch said. "I have no doubt in the world about that. He was that good. He started for us his freshman year, and we went to the state championship two of his four years."

Said Bustle, "I thought Camm was a heck of a player, a very athletic guy who could run. I've thought about him a few times in the past few years. I really think he could have helped this football team. I don't know what he was doing on his own, what kind of desire left him. Somewhere, something changed – the desire or whatever that made him as good as he was at the time."

Forgetting the Past

Jackson is back home in Madison Heights now, convinced his troubled days are over.

He's working at Lynchburg Steel and says he's going to a technical college next year to learn the computer business. He says his personal turnaround started with the birth of his daughter, Alexis Nichole Jackson, 14 months ago, though he was sent to jail after her birth. He's living with his girlfriend, Tiffany Sales, the mother of his daughter.

"I'm just working and spending time with my family," Jackson said. "I've done a lot of growing up. If I had another shot at it, it would be good. A lot of things have changed, and if I knew then what I know now, it would have been a lot different."

He says he tries to talk to kids he comes in contact with back home, warning them to pick their friends wisely — something he didn't do when he was younger.

"They should learn from my mistakes, do what they have to do, and stay away from people that are doing wrong," Jackson said. "They can hold you back.

"Sure, people had told me that. But I didn't listen. The ones who will keep you from doing the right things, they're the ones you need to stay away from."

At Virginia Tech, now seemingly worlds away from Camm Jackson, David Pugh said he still thinks about his old teammate.

"Camm had the opportunity to be a hell of a ballplayer up here," Pugh said. "I wish he'd taken that opportunity and made the best of it.

"A lot of people do get into trouble. Others are ready to take responsibility. They understand what's at stake. You are on your own, you have to learn to fend for yourself. You have to grow up in a hurry."

Pugh did grow up in a hurry. His next stop may be the NFL.

Jackson didn't.

Crouch said he wonders to this day if he could have done something, seen something, said something that would have helped. A coach gets that way with his players. Out of a hundred kids, if there's one who isn't a success, the other ninety-nine success stories aren't as sweet.

"They're my kids," Crouch said of his players. "When they play for me, we sort of bond. When we have a kid like that, one we KNOW is going to make it big and have a good life, and it goes wrong, yeah, it bothers me. I don't know what to do to help those kids. There probably isn't anything.

"I just wish it had turned out better for him. His life isn't over. He still has a chance to have a good life, and to correct some things he's done. I hope he does that."

Sweet Feet Steps Up

Keith Burnell used to think he knew it all. But he had a lot to learn.

by Art Stevens

Close your eyes. Prepare for a journey in a mental time machine. We're going back, way back. Back, back, back ...

Picture yourself at your high school graduation. Cap and gown worn with pride, diploma in hand. You've got it made. You're educated, you're ready, you know what you need to know.

Now hit the fast-forward button. Move ahead four years or so, or however long it took you

to graduate from college. By this time, you're smart enough to know you still don't know it all and, by gosh, you knew so much less when you graduated from high school.

That college degree makes you confident but, unlike your prep diploma, it doesn't make you cocky. It's called maturity, something all of us think we have early and know we don't really have several years later.

The Keith Burnell you see today in a Virginia Tech football uniform doesn't have a college degree yet. He's working toward one in residential property management. But he has reached a level of maturity he didn't have – didn't come close to having – when he left Western Branch High School.

"A year ago," Tech associate head coach Billy Hite said, "I wouldn't have even considered starting Keith. There's no question a year ago we wouldn't be sitting here talking about Keith Burnell.

"Ever since spring practice, he's just been outstanding. I don't think I've ever had a back improve as much as Keith."

Without some very bad luck for the Hokies and standout tailback Lee Suggs, we might not be having this conversation, either. As all Tech fans are well aware by now, the 2001 season got off to an excellent start in the victory column (two in the first two games) but a terrible start in the injury column.

Suggs, the man who had 1,207 yards and 28 touchdowns (one on a reception) last season, was lost for the season just 37 minutes into the opener against Connecticut. He blew out his left knee and needed reconstructive surgery on his anterior cruciate ligament. He's expected back for 2002. The 2001 season will carry on without him.

Suddenly, Hite's spring proclamation that "you can never have enough good backs" was all too true. Hite, the running backs coach, used the line when talking about how Burnell would fit in after an outstanding spring session and outstanding spring game. Suggs was coming back and a bunch of good recruits (Kevin Jones, Cedric Humes, and Justin Hamilton) were coming in the door.

Where would Burnell fit?

How about at No. 1?

“He’s made me feel very comfortable with him out there,” Hite said.

So who is this guy?

Well, the simple answer is he’s an exceptionally polite young man from Chesapeake who, for a time, was about as scatterbrained as he was talented. His nickname was “Sweet Feet,” but he started his career at Tech as if he were auditioning for the lead in a movie called “The Absent-Minded Running Back.”

At Western Branch High School, Burnell earned the big time accolades. All-America teams, recruiting watch lists, the works. As a senior in 1997, even slowed by a bum ankle, he rushed for 1,224 yards and 25 touchdowns (ironically, very Suggs-like numbers). He had 1,228 yards and 20 touchdowns a year earlier.

Lew Johnston, the Western Branch coach, said Burnell and Dre Bly (North Carolina) were the most heavily recruited athletes he’s ever had.

“It was very much an entire east coast type of thing,” Johnston said. “About the only ones who weren’t interested were the Florida schools. I guess they don’t have to recruit much out of state.

“He was a slasher, a cutter. He’d hit the holes and make his cuts. That’s why he got his nickname. He was difficult to bring down and, if he needed to, he’d lower his shoulder. He was exciting. If he hadn’t gotten that ankle banged up his senior year, I have no idea how far we would have gone. He would have had an incredible year.”

Tech won the recruiting war in the year it also landed another running back from Roanoke named Lee Suggs. Burnell went off to Tech with some serious expectations.

“I had big plans on playing,” Burnell said. “I thought I was going to play my freshman year. But things changed. The blitzes, the different pass routes ... I wasn’t used to all that. With the ball in my hands, I was just as good as anybody.

“Without the ball, I wasn’t. I was one of the worst.”

He sure didn’t get off to a good start.

“The second meeting, he forgot his notebook,” Hite said. “He went to get it. By the time he got back, he was late for my meeting and he’d also missed treatment. That one thing caused three problems.

“That’s where it all started. I told him, ‘To play for me, you have to do things right both on and off the field.’”

Said Johnston, “He was a kid who went off to school with not necessarily inflated ideas but big ideas of what he was going to do. He possibly needed a little more self-discipline. He got into the doghouse early. He didn’t seem to understand that if he was performing well, did these things matter?”

They did, and it took a while for Burnell to register that. In the meantime, he fell behind. He got into two games as a redshirt freshman, with seven carries for 14 yards. Last season, he had 17 carries in nine games. He gained 111 yards. He had the Hokies' longest run of the season – a 59-yarder against Rutgers.

It wasn't a particularly happy two years and he thought often about relocating.

"I wasn't playing and when you're not playing, you want to go somewhere else and play," Burnell said.

Johnston listened, to a point. Then he got serious with Burnell.

"We starting talking after his freshman year," Johnston said. "Basically I just listened after the first year. The second year got a lot more serious. He said, 'I'm out of here if things don't work out in the spring.' We started exploring the options. He still wanted to play major-college football. He felt he was a major-college running back.

"It was the same thing last year when he came home for Christmas. I finally told him, 'Your white daddy is going to tell you what you need to hear, and you listen if you want, or do what you want.' I was tired of it. My first thought was that he was too far along in his education (to transfer). He was making good grades and he liked his major. That got his attention.

"The second thing I told him is that he never did exactly what they told him to do. I told him, 'You just follow Lee Suggs around and you'll be fine.' All this was just accumulation. The classic light bulb went on. Keith thought he was doing a good job in the weight room. You put him against Lee and you could tell he wasn't doing the same job as Lee."

Johnston said Burnell promised him he'd see a new man. "And I have," Johnston said. "What I saw in the spring for the first time was a totally focused Keith Burnell."

Just in time, too, because Hite was about out of patience.

"Coach (Frank) Beamer has always told me, don't ever give up on talent," Hite said. "It was just being tired of all the other things. The biggest thing was just being prepared."

Consider spring ball the first sign of the rededicated Burnell. He didn't let up through the summer and into preseason. He had accepted his role as Suggs' primary backup, not a bad place to be, considering Tech makes good use of at least two tailbacks.

Then one third-quarter run against Connecticut changed everything, and Burnell was the Hokies' top tailback.

"I'll tell you I'm good," said Burnell, who will certainly do just that. "I also know I can be better. I'm willing to do that. Whatever it takes to be the best, I'm willing to work to get that extra."

Burnell and Suggs aren't that much alike and yet, at the same time, aren't that different. They're both 6-0. Suggs is listed two pounds heavier at 204.

Suggs is fast, but is more of a power runner. His incredible strength sometimes overrides his speed.

Burnell is fast, but more of a dancer.

Suggs is quiet. You have to pull it out of him. Burnell eats up batteries on a tape recorder.

“Keith is an outstanding back,” Hite said. “He can run with power. He can run with speed. I don’t know that I’ve seen a back as good as Lee at breaking tackles, at finding that little seam and being able to get through the hole. Keith has a little more ‘juke’ than Lee has.”

Johnston is delighted to see the new Burnell. A veteran coach, he’s had a ton of good players come through his program. Two others (Emmett Johnson, Marvin Urquhart) are on the Tech roster. Johnston’s family is a Tech family. Daughter Mandy is a freshman there. Son Bryan, a former Western Branch player, works in the school’s Sports Information office. One of his jobs is to line up player interviews.

Burnell, Lew Johnston said, is a part of his family, too.

“He’s real special,” Johnston said. “I don’t mind telling you I’m a born-again Christian and I feel like the Lord put Keith in my life and my heart a long time ago. He just became part of the family. Mandy thinks of him as her brother. He’s real special to all of us.

“He has a little ‘street’ in him, a little ‘cockiness,’ but Keith is a warm, people-loving person with a lot of charisma.”

Not to mention a big responsibility, one he’s finally ready to handle.

“I have the opportunity and I plan to run with it,” Burnell said. “I don’t plan on looking back.”

A Game of Inches

Just a few inches is all that separates Alan Wheeling from his dream of playing football for Virginia Tech.

by Will Stewart, TechSideline.com

As you know by now, one of the key focuses of the TSL Extra is profiles of Virginia Tech football recruits. Usually, the profiles are of players who have committed to Tech or signed with Tech. But there are another class of recruits who are just as interesting: the kids who want to go to Tech but probably won't get a scholarship offer from the Hokies. This article is about one such player, Alan Wheeling of Pulaski County.

On the very last day of the year 2000, the following email hit my Inbox:

Will,

My name is Alan Wheeling. I play corner/quarterback for Pulaski County. I don't understand some stuff — talk to me, I didn't make the top 25 junior list. First and foremost, I am ranked 14th in my class with a 3.89 GPA, and a great citizen. I led my team with 8 INTS this year, and about 80 or so tackles. I made 1st team RVD, 1st team NW REGION, 1st team ALL TIMESLAND, and 2nd team ALL STATE. I run a 4.48 forty-yard dash.

I am not trying to send you all of these great stats or anything, but I am concerned about my future ... my name isn't getting thrown around at all here. Write back if you can ... and it is highly appreciated.

Alan Wheeling #18
— 12/31/00

That was the first I had ever heard of Alan Wheeling. Over the next nine months, up until right before this issue of the TSL Extra went to press, we would exchange roughly thirty emails and would talk on the phone a couple of times, and I discovered that the stats he gave me were not inflated.

As a junior at cornerback last year, Wheeling had 84 tackles and 8 interceptions, impressive statistics in a ten-game high school season. He bench presses 300 pounds and squats 370, very good numbers for a high school defensive back.

But amongst all the great stats, there is one statistic that will likely determine Alan Wheeling's future more than any else: five-nine-and-a-half.

That's how tall Alan Wheeling is. Or, depending upon your perspective, how short he is.

As I read Alan's original email to me, I mentally scratched my chin and very carefully composed a reply. I don't consider myself to be any sort of recruiting guru at all, and the last thing I wanted to do was offer bad advice to a kid who was at a crossroads.

But at the same time, I did want to say *something* to him. I figured he had about eight months to start getting the attention of college programs, and for Alan, time was of the essence.

Fortunately, I know a little bit about the Pulaski County High School program. Actually, without knowing a *whole* lot, I know everything you need to know: the name Joel Hicks.

Hicks is the head coach at Pulaski County and has been for years, ever since he left his position as an assistant coach at West Virginia University in the late 70's and decided that high school coaching was his true calling. He settled into Southwest Virginia and has built a powerhouse program, one that has won numerous district titles and even a state championship in 1992, Shayne Graham's freshman year (the Cougars should have won it in 1993 too, but Pulaski supporters will tell you that the Cougars got complacent and suffered a playoff loss they shouldn't have).

Point being, Hicks knows what he's doing. So I gave Alan Wheeling a lot of advice in my reply, but the theme running through my advice was this: let the coach be your guide. I advised him to get Hicks' help with making and distributing a video, and to follow the coach's guidance on what schools to send the tape to. If there were any schools outside of the group suggested by Hicks that Wheeling wanted to send his tape to, then I told him that he might want to take it upon himself to send the tape to those schools.

He thanked me for the advice, and I didn't hear from him again for a while.

Dreams of Tech

If Wheeling had his way, the choice would be clear: he would be a Hokie. If Virginia Tech offered him a scholarship, he would immediately accept it. His father is a Tech grad, and Wheeling has always loved the Hokies.

If you threw a rock into one of the typically large crowds at Pulaski County's Kenneth Dobson Stadium on a Friday night, you would, of course, hit a Cougar fan, but there's also a very high percentage chance that that Cougar fan would also be a Hokie fan. The love of maroon and orange runs deep among the Cougar faithful, and in Alan Wheeling's family, it is no different.

"I'm so familiar with Tech," he said recently in an interview with the TSL Extra, "and I'm so close to it, that I compare every school to Tech. Even on the D-1 level, they have so strong of a foundation. Every little detail they do, it's so amazing. Seeing Tech how they used to be, and how they are now ... I would give anything to play for them."

So he went to work with Coach Hicks, and they put together a highlight film.

"He (Coach Hicks) left it up to me what I thought was good and what I wanted to put on the tape. He was aiming towards some 1-AA schools like William and Mary, Richmond, James Madison. He was recruiting me on the 1-AA level, and sending tapes on to them, and everything else, like all the Division 1 schools, was left up to me.

"We decided to start small and work our way up. He said he would have Tech come down and look at me, and a couple of other schools. Once we started sending the film out, and we started getting

some phone calls from different coaches, then he started sending my tape out to a few 1-A schools. He sent it to Virginia, Virginia Tech, NC State, Marshall, and Michigan.”

Things started to pick up, and in March, Alan sent me another email:

Mr. Stewart — it’s been awhile ... just keeping in touch and letting you know things are going great. I am now receiving letters from NC STATE, UNC, UVa, MICHIGAN, and William and Mary. I also sent my highlight tape to easternrecruiting.com, so maybe that will help some.

Thanks for everything, Alan Wheeling, 3/22/01.

Before school ended, Tech assistant coach Billy Hite stopped by Pulaski County to see Alan, and the two of them talked for a few minutes.

“He told me things looked good. He thought my grades were outstanding. He asked me about my SAT scores. It was a 970 at the time. He told me they’d be in touch with me, and asked if I was planning on attending their camp this summer. We talked about life and stuff. We didn’t talk that much about football.”

Apparently, Tech’s Spring Game, which was held on April 21st, was a little bit too much for Wheeling to take. He sent me the following email a few days afterward, and although the recruiting process was going well, his desire to attend Tech, and how much it hurt him to sit in the stands at the Spring Game while other recruits roamed the sidelines, was clear.

Hey Will, it’s Alan again.

The recruiting process for me is going good, I have talked a lot with NC STATE, I have talked a lot to MARSHALL, and I am getting some bulk mail from MICHIGAN and UNC.

Excuse my French, but what in the hell do I gotta do to get Tech to look at me!?!?! I am going to camp there this summer, but I feel that could be too late. Other coaches seem to like my highlight tape very well, they have requested more film, and they love what they see. But I can’t catch a glimpse from Tech. If they even know who I am, they haven’t said a word.

What do I do?! It killed me going to the spring game, and not being on the sidelines with the other recruits.

Alan Wheeling, 4/24/01

As Wheeling’s junior year came to a close, he faced a critical summer of football camps. Highlight film aside, nothing gets the attention of a college coach like a kid who shines at his summer camp.

Wheeling made preparations to attend three camps in the summer of 2001: N.C. State, William and Mary, and Virginia Tech.

First came the Wolfpack’s camp, in mid June.

"I had a great camp. I worked at defensive back the whole camp. I ran a 4.5 flat down there. We got to run on the track with our spikes.

"In the defensive backs, there was a group of about 15 to 20 of us at the high school level. You start doing a couple of drills, footwork, speed, and you can tell who you've got athletically after that. If they want to take a close look at you, the assistant coach will pull the head coach over. At NC State, I had (defensive backs) Coach Demarest get the head coach (Chuck Amato) to come over and watch me go through a couple of drills.

"In my personal opinion, there were only one or two guys (DB's) who were my level, maybe a little higher. I really don't think they were that much better than me. They just had a few inches and a few pounds. They think I had a really good camp, but they can't decide yet if I'm 1-A material, mostly because of the size thing. They said they'll scout me during my senior year and kind of take it from there."

Next came William and Mary's camp, and the experience there was vastly different.

"I was only down there one day, but they treated me like a king," Wheeling said, his smile coming through the phone line. "You know, showing me around the whole campus, eating dinner with me, just treating me real nice. I haven't been offered yet, but I hear I'm going to get one.

"I think it's a great school. It's prestigious. If you get a degree from there, you're going to have a great job getting out. Campus is nice, I love the town, the coaching staff is awesome. The level of football ... that's a tough conference. I wouldn't mind playing in that one." (Note: W&M plays in the 11-team Atlantic 10, and in the latest 1-AA top 25 poll, 6 Atlantic-10 teams were in the top 25, with 3 others receiving votes.)

And in mid-July came the big one: Virginia Tech's camp.

A Sea of Football Players

N.C. State's camp had about 400 players, and William and Mary's had about a hundred, Wheeling said.

Virginia Tech's 2001 football camp, which spanned several days, had over eight hundred kids.

For Wheeling, a first-time attendee, it was a critical time. He knew that if a treasured scholarship offer from Virginia Tech was going to come, it would be because of a strong effort at camp.

"I didn't really know what to expect there, but immediately, before we even started doing anything, I got approached by coaches saying they knew who I was, because I told them I was coming."

After the players broke up into groups by position and started going through drills, Wheeling went all out. "Doing ball drills, the coaches were thrilled with me. We have a pretty good defensive backs coach at Pulaski, and I'm kind of always a step ahead in fundamentals. I got compliments from (VT defensive backs) Coach (Lorenzo) Ward. He complimented me, saying, 'Wheeling's trying to earn a scholarship!'

"I was hoping for an offer from Tech. And especially when Coach Ward made that statement about me working hard to get a scholarship. That really got me pumped, and I was working real hard."

On the next to last day of camp, the last day of drills, Wheeling knew something was up when Billy Hite pulled him aside and introduced him to Frank Beamer. "We just talked about how things were going at Pulaski, with Coach Hicks and everything," Wheeling remembers, "but I could see Beamer sizing me up."

And Wheeling wasn't the only one they were "sizing up."

"There was another defensive back there named Cary Wade. He's a senior at Robinson High School (Fairfax) this year. He was decent. He has pretty decent footwork. He wasn't as quick as me, and he's about the same size as me (editor's note: Wade was listed in an 8/30/01 SuperPrep update as 5-11, 180 pounds, with a 4.5 forty).

"I mentioned that I was talking to Coach Beamer when Coach Hite pulled me over ... well, immediately after that, they called Cary Wade over to introduce him to Coach Beamer, and they were sizing him up, as well.

"The next morning, our practice was over, and we were done with camp. They were giving us final comments, and Coach Ward made an announcement. He said, 'For one special young man, this \$300 investment in this camp was the best investment he's ever made in life, because this morning, Virginia Tech has decided to offer him a full scholarship.' And he was talking about Cary Wade.

"So I figured it was between me and him, considering that Beamer looked at both of us."

As an aside, Wheeling notes that there was one defensive back at the camp who stood out above the others: Brian McPherson from Amherst, who received an offer at Tech's camp and committed to the Hokies.

"That Amherst DB that got offered, McPherson," Wheeling says, "I don't blame them at all for offering him. He's a stud. He was only there for a day. He's got real good feet, his transition is unreal, he's got real quick hips, and he's got the size and strength. I don't blame them for offering him."

Moving On

With the Virginia Tech camp over, and his best shot to secure a scholarship offer passed, Wheeling must now concentrate on his senior season and on his other prospects. He has come to the realization that an offer from Tech is probably not in the cards, but the camp wasn't a total bust. Torrian Gray, who is the secondary coach at the University of Maine, was at Tech's camp and was impressed enough with Wheeling that Maine has offered. So has Western Carolina, who saw him at VT's camp, and Wofford.

And you never know what's going to happen. Just the other night, UVa called for the first time. Wheeling was out, and they only spoke to his parents, and under NCAA rules, they can't call again for another week. So he'll have to wait to see what they wanted to say.

And just last week, Doug Doughty named him to his preseason top 40 players in the state of Virginia, at the number 40 slot. "I was pretty excited," Wheeling beams. "I got a lot of people around here congratulating me and wishing me luck."

It now appears that his best shot with the Hokies might be as a recruited walk-on, although he hasn't discussed it with the Hokie coaches. If that opportunity does come, Wheeling will have to balance his heart, which leans toward Virginia Tech, and his head.

"I don't know," he answers, when asked whether he would attend Tech as a walk-on or accept a scholarship offer from a Division 1-AA school. "I'm trying to face reality here. I've had friends that have walked on to Tech, and have made it, and have eventually earned a scholarship, so I know it's possible, and I know it can happen. I love Tech so much. I grew up around it, and I'm a big Hokie fan. That would be such a dream come true.

"But realistically, helping my parents out financially, I think I might go with the scholarship."

Pulaski County Coach Joel Hicks answers that question bluntly and directly.

"I'll give him advice to go to William and Mary," Hicks says when discussing the hypothetical situation of Wheeling having a scholarship offer from W&M but not one from Tech. "I think William and Mary is a wonderful school. I think in recruiting, part of the deal is a school wanting you. I mean wanting you bad, enough to offer you a scholarship.

"I think when you walk on ... it's a hard road. It's a hard road. They would have offered you at the beginning if they thought you could play. So you have to prove yourself two or three times over. You don't get to come in in the fall in your first year, you walk on in the spring ... I think if you go to a William and Mary, or a Richmond, or a JMU, that wants you from day one, they've got a plan for you.

"Alan Wheeling will not be happy sitting on the bench. He thinks he might, and maybe he'll dream about it. But an athlete needs to go where he's going to be happy. He's got to be playing. I told him that, I told his mom that, and I told his dad that, and I think they agree."

Wherever Wheeling decides to go, Hicks thinks they'll be getting a heck of a player and person. He thinks so much of Wheeling that in addition to starting him in the defensive backfield, Hicks starts him at quarterback and even has him return punts. Wheeling rarely leaves the field, and that's saying something at a school like Pulaski County, where plenty of kids turn out for the team.

"I think he's just a wonderful kid," Hicks says of Wheeling, the affection apparent in his voice. "I'd take him home with me. He's polite, he's a gentleman, a leader. He's a fine player."

But football is a game of inches, and in Wheeling's case, a mere two and a half inches or so is all that separates him from a football scholarship to Virginia Tech. If he were 6-0 instead of five-nine-and-a-half, this story would probably be different.

Hicks believes that ten years ago, the Hokies would have offered Alan Wheeling a scholarship in a heartbeat. All five-foot-nine-and-a-half of him. "Yes, without a doubt, maybe even just 6 or 7 years ago," he says.

"I try not to think about that," Wheeling says when informed of his coach's comment. You can still hear the smile in his voice, but it's a bit more wistful this time. "I try not to think about that."

Inside the Numbers: The 1995 Defense Versus the 1999 Defense

A statistical battle for the ages: Cornell Brown's 1995 Virginia Tech defense versus Corey Moore's 1999 defense.

by Will Stewart, TechSideline.com

That's right folks. It's time to compare the two most storied defenses in Virginia Tech history: the 1995 and 1999 defenses. We'll try to answer the question, "Which defense was better?" and since this is "Inside the Numbers," we'll attempt to answer the question using just statistics.

It was inevitable that "Inside the Numbers" would eventually cover this topic. The question is, what took so long for me to get around to writing it? I don't really know the answer to that one. Former VT defensive tackle and occasional TSL columnist Jeff Holland set me up with the data way back in April, and I've been sitting on it since then, waiting for a good time to analyze it. The

time is here.

For those of you with Virginia Tech football media guides, or "Maroon Books," from 1996 and 2000 (which contain defensive stats from 1995 and 1999, respectively), you'll note that Jeff's stats won't match the media guide stats. The reason is that the Maroon books only include regular season stats, whereas Jeff added bowl game stats for the 1995 and 1999 Sugar Bowls to the regular season stats to get full-season, 12-game statistical totals. There are a few exceptions; statistics which are for the regular season only are marked with an asterisk in this article.

Given that Jeff fed me the data, I am at his mercy for its correctness. I did some spot checks, and it appears to be okay, although I did have to correct the following errors:

- Sack totals for the 1995 team — Jeff said it was 49 sacks, but the Hokies actually had 48 regular-season sacks, plus 5 more in the 1995 Sugar Bowl, for a total of 53 sacks (source: 1996 media guide, pages 5 and 121).
- Interception leader for 1999 — Jeff said the interception leader had 2, but Anthony Midget intercepted 4 passes that year, plus another in the Sugar Bowl, for a total of 5 (source: 2000 media guide, page 178).
- NFL players drafted for the 1995 team — Jeff said it was 5, but that was the number of players who went to NFL camps, not the number of players drafted. The number of defensive players drafted in 1996 (from the 1995 team) was just one: J.C. Price (source: 2001 media guide, page 289).

One point of interest before we begin: the 2001 Virginia Tech media guide lists over 50 team defensive records (game records and season records) on page 217, and among all of those listings, only *three* records are held by the 1995 and 1999 teams. Defenses from the 1952-1957 Tech teams and the 1981-1984 Tech teams appear numerous times in the defensive records, but the '95 and '99 defenses rarely appear in the listings.

This seems to fly contrary to the belief that the 1995 and 1999 defenses were the best ever, but one

obvious point is that the Tech teams of the early 80's didn't play nearly as tough a schedule as the mid-late 90's Tech teams did. The early 80's teams had great defenses, but they snacked regularly on the likes of William and Mary, Richmond, Appalachian State, Duke, Wake Forest, and VMI.

I can't evaluate the toughness of scheduling in the mid-50's, because I don't know anything about college football from that era, and for all I know, Davidson, the Citadel, Marshall, and Washington and Lee, whom Tech played regularly back then, were powerhouses.

But this isn't a subjective comparison: it's a numbers based comparison. And you know what that means: formula time!

The Scoring

From the eclectic collection of statistics Jeff sent to me, I carved it down to 31 defensive statistics: things like points per game given up, rushing yards per game given up, interceptions, sacks, etc. Out of those 31 categories, 8 of them aren't even related to things that happen on the field; instead, they are things like number of All-Americans, number of NFL draft choices, etc.

Each individual statistic is worth one point to the team that was better in that statistical category. For example, the 1995 team had 53 sacks, and the 1999 team had 62, so the 1999 team gets 1 point for having more sacks.

In addition, the 31 statistics are grouped into five categories, and the categories are worth points. For example, 5 statistics are grouped under the category of "Rushing Defense." The 1995 team won 3 of those 5 statistics, so they outscored the 1999 team 3-2 in "Rushing Defense." Since they won that category, the 1995 team gets an additional 2 points, because the "Rushing Defense" category is worth 2 points. So overall, the 1995 team outscored the 1999 team 5-2 in the "Rushing Defense" category.

Here are the five categories and the points awarded to each category: Total Defense (3 points), Scoring Defense (3 points), Rushing Defense (2 points), Passing Defense (2 points), and Players (1 point). In the case of a tie, category points are awarded to both teams. For example, each team scored 5 points in the "Players" category, so each team got 5 points plus 1 point for "winning" the category, which makes the "Players" category a 6-6 tie.

So, let's take it category-by-category ... and see which defense was better, the 1995 or the 1999 defense!

(continued on next page)

Category 1: Total Defense (3 points)

This category is a catch-all that centers around average yardage statistics but also includes miscellaneous stats such as first downs allowed, third-down conversion percentage, and others.

	Stats	Stats	Points	Points
	1995	1999	1995	1999
Avg yards per game	280.9	256.6		1
Avg yards per play	3.96	3.90		1
1st downs allowed	193	173		1
Fumble recoveries	8	12		1
TD's scored	7	7	1	1
Safeties/PAT returns	1	3		1
3rd down conversion %(*)	26.5%	25%		1
		Stats Won	1	7
		Bonus Points for Winning Category	3	
		Total Category Points	1	10

* Regular season stat only

You can see that the 1999 defense clearly dominates this category, outscoring the 1995 defense 7-1, plus getting 3 points for winning the category. That makes it a 10-1 romp. The biggest surprise to me here is that there is such a disparity in the yards-per-game statistic. But that disparity is balanced out by the near-equal numbers put up in the yards-per-play category.

Category 2: Scoring Defense (3 points)

It's interesting that the defensive ranking that is quoted the most often is yards per game. In other words, "Nebraska had the number 10 ranked defense in the country," means that only 9 other teams gave up fewer yards.

But what if that Nebraska team was 30th in scoring defense? Are they really the number 10 defense in the country? That's a rhetorical question, but you have to admit that the true measure of a defense's success is how many points it gives (or *doesn't* give) up.

	Stats	Stats	Points	Points
	1995	1999	1995	1999
Avg points per game	13.8	13.5		1
TD's allowed	19	21	1	
Shutouts	2	2	1	1
Gave up 10 points or less	5	6		1
		Stats Won	2	3
		Bonus Points for Winning Category		3
		Total Category Points	2	6

This points-per-game statistic is much closer than the yards per game statistic was, and it's interesting to note that the 1995 defense did a better job of keeping the opponents out of the end zone. Nonetheless, the 1999 defense ekes out a win in this category, and then gets 3 bonus points tacked on for a 6-2 margin.

Category 3: Rushing Defense (2 points)

Going back to the days of the dominating Tech defenses of the early 80's, the lynchpin of a good Tech defense has been the rush defense. Any successful defensive effort stops the run first, so it's no surprise to find out that the '95 and '99 defenses were great run-stoppers.

	Stats	Stats	Points	Points
	1995	1999	1995	1999
Avg yards per game	77.4	72.1		1
Avg per carry	2.01	2.10	1	
Rushing TD's allowed	7	5		1
100+ yard rushers allowed	1	4	1	
<100 yards rushing allowed	8	7	1	
		Stats Won	3	2
		Bonus Points for Winning Category	2	
		Total Category Points	5	2

This category is oh-so-close, and at this point in the scoring, the 1995 defense finally starts to turn the tables on the 1999 defense. The '95 defense gave up more yards per game and more touch-downs rushing, but they make up for it by allowing only one opposing running back (Billy West of Pitt) to run for more than 100 yards. The 1995 defense held *entire teams* to less than 100 yards rushing more often than the 1999 defense did.

What makes the 1995 team's victory in the Rushing Defense category more impressive is the fact that the 1999 team had 9 more sacks for 81 more yards lost than the 1995 team. The 1999 team had 62 sacks for 480 yards lost, compared to 53 sacks for 399 yards lost for the 1995 team.

The 81-yard sack-loss advantage of the 1999 team equates to 6.75 fewer yards rushing per game over the 1995 team, since sack losses enter into rushing statistics. In other words, in pure run defense, not including sack statistics, the 1995 team actually bested the 1999 team in yards rushing given up per game.

Category 4: Passing Defense (2 points)

This category, which includes 7 statistical lines, yields some very interesting results.

	Stats	Stats	Points	Points
	1995	1999	1995	1999
Avg yards per game	203.5	184.5		1
Avg yards per attempt	6.26	5.86		1
Avg yards per completion	13.64	11.90		1
Passing TD's allowed	12	14	1	
Completion % allowed	45.9%	49.2%	1	
Interceptions	16	11	1	
Sacks	53	62		1
		Stats Won	3	4
		Bonus Points for Winning Category		2
		Total Category Points	3	6

In terms of yards given up, the 1999 pass defense is clearly superior to the 1995 pass defense, no matter how you slice it. But in terms of TD's, completion percentage, and interceptions, the 1995 defense was better. The 1999 team breaks the tie with more sacks, which means they win the category and the 2 bonus points that come with it.

Two things about the Pass Defense category interest me:

1.) During the regular seasons, the 1995 defense actually gave up *more* passing TD's than the 1999 team, 11 to 10. But the 1995 defense only gave up 1 passing TD in their Sugar Bowl against Texas, whereas the 1999 defense coughed up 4 TD's to FSU.

2.) As good as the 1999 defense was, they weren't great at intercepting the football. The 1998 defense that preceded it had a whopping 26 interceptions (23 in the regular season, and 3 in the Music City Bowl), but INT's fell off drastically in 1999 to just 11 (10 in the regular season, and 1 in the Sugar Bowl). The 1995 defense was pretty good at picking off passes, but again, nothing special. They had 13 regular season picks, and 3 more in the Sugar Bowl.

Category 5: Players (1 point)

	Stats 1995	Stats 1999	Points 1995	Points 1999
All Big East 1st team	4	3	1	
All Americans (any team)	2	4		1
Big East Defensive P.O.Y.	YES	YES	1	1
National Defensive P.O.Y.	YES	YES	1	1
Tackle leader	137	89	1	
Sack leader	14	17		1
Interception leader	5	4	1	
NFL players drafted	1	4		1
		Stats Won	5	5
	Bonus Points for Winning Category		1	1
	Total Category Points		6	6

You can measure a defense not just by what they achieve on the field, but off it, in terms of individual awards. There are probably other individual award categories that I could dream up, but these are the ones Jeff fed to me, so I went with them. Note that in addition to the non-statistical categories here, it's worthwhile to compare the leaders for tackles, sacks, and interceptions.

I'm sure that looking at the lists above brings many questions to mind (for example, who was All-Big-East first team for the 1995 team?), so I'll answer them all. Here are the details from the scoring above:

All Big East 1st Team Players

1995 (4): Cornell Brown, J.C. Price, William Yarborough, George Del Ricco

1999 (3): Corey Moore, John Engelberger, Anthony Midget

All-American (any team)

1995 (2): Cornell Brown (multiple teams), J.C. Price (AP 3rd team)

1999 (4): Corey Moore (multiple teams), John Engelberger (AP 2nd team), Jamel Smith (AP 2nd team), Anthony Midget (*Sporting News* 3rd team)

Big East Defensive Player of the Year

1995: Cornell Brown

1999: Corey Moore

National Defensive Player of the Year

1995: Cornell Brown (*Football News*)

1999: Corey Moore (*Football News*, Bronco Nagurski Award)

Tackle Leader (regular season only)

1995: George Del Ricco, 137

1999: Jamel Smith, 89

Sack Leader (regular season only)

1995: Cornell Brown, 14

1999: Corey Moore, 17

Interception Leader (regular season only)

1995: William Yarborough, 5

1999: Anthony Midget, 4

NFL Players Drafted

1995 (1): J.C. Price (Carolina, 3rd round)

1999 (4): John Engelberger (San Fran., 2nd round), Ike Charlton (Seattle, 2nd), Corey Moore (Buffalo, 3rd), Anthony Midget (Atlanta, 5th)

After you shake it all out, this category is a tie, and both teams (1995 and 1999) get 6 points.

And the Winner Is ...

The 1999 defense got off to such a dominating start, winning the first category 10-1, that there was no way the 1995 defense could ever catch up. Here's the final scoring:

Category	'95 Points	'99 Points
Total Defense	1	10
Scoring Defense	2	6
Rushing Defense	5	2
Passing Defense	3	6
Players	6	6
Total Points	17	30

It's worth noting that even if you eliminate the bonus points awarded for winning the individual categories, the 1999 defense still wins, 21-14.

There you have it folks, in hard numbers: the 1999 defense is the greatest Hokie defense of all time!

The Data

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

<http://www.techsideline.com/tslextra/issue011/95vs99defense.htm>

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

<http://www.techsideline.com/tslextra/issue011/95vs99defense.xls>

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

Inside TSL: Tracking Camm Jackson

I always wondered what happened to Camm Jackson. Now I know.

by Will Stewart, TechSideline.com

My fascination with Camm Jackson dates back to the very earliest days of Hokie Central, so far back that Hokie Central was still called “Will’s Hokie Sports Home Page” when I first wrote about Camm.

I started Hokie Central in March of 1996, and within three months, two players from Amherst High School had verbally committed to Tech: lineman David Pugh (in April '96) and linebacker/running back Camm Jackson. The commitments stand out in my mind, because they were the first two com-

mitments that I ever reported on the web site. Both commitments came at the end of Pugh and Jackson’s junior years.

Here’s what I wrote about Jackson’s commitment in June of 1996:

Linebacker Camm Jackson of AA champion Amherst has followed in the footsteps of teammate David Pugh and has committed verbally to Tech. Jackson is a multi-talented football player who has distinguished himself by being named to the All-State Group AA Defensive Team the last two years, and he was Defensive Player of the Year in 1995. Not only that, but he rushed for 1500 yards last year. Jackson’s commitment was no surprise, as he says that he’s “always wanted to be a Hokie.” — Hokie Central News and Notes, June 17, 1996.

The 1996 football season came and went, and as signing day in February of 1997 approached, I wrote the following about Camm in another News and Notes article:

My favorite recruit this year? That’s easy - it’s Camm Jackson, the linebacker/running back from Amherst who was one of Tech’s first verbals this year. I like Camm not because of his playing ability or what he might do at Tech, but because of something he said when he committed. He said that he’s “always wanted to be a Hokie.” That’s my kind of kid. I can’t wait to see him play. — Hokie Central News and Notes, January 23rd, 1997.

In the March 31, 1997 edition of the Hokie Huddler, Jackson’s recruiting profile appeared. His picture showed a handsome young man with a magnetic smile, and the quotes in the “Why he chose Tech” section were enough to make any Hokie swoon:

“I followed them (Tech) ever since I was six years old,” Jackson said. “I had planned to go there to get an education anyway. I hadn’t even planned on football. As I came up through middle school, I realized I might get a scholarship, so I worked hard to get it. I’ve always wanted to go there.”

His high school coach, Mickey Crouch, agreed. “Ever since we talked for the first time about playing college football, all he’s ever talked about is Virginia Tech.” — The Hokie Huddler, March 31, 1997

I continued to reference Camm Jackson for several months, in articles I wrote about Tyrone Robertson and Yubrenal Isabelle. Robertson, from GW-Danville, signed a letter of intent the same year that Jackson did, but later intentionally failed to graduate from high school in order to get out of his letter of intent. Isabelle, from Bluefield, West Virginia, reportedly verbally committed to Tech, but then reneged and committed to UVa, where he later signed and had a good career at linebacker.

I held Camm Jackson up as an example of the kind of lifelong Hokie I wanted entering the program, as opposed to uncommitted, wishy-washy kids like Robertson and Isabelle.

Then Jackson showed up for freshman drills in the fall of 1997 and tore up his knee. He had to return home to rehab. Hokie football went on without him, and he disappeared from the public eye, but I never quite completely forgot him, and I wondered when he was coming back.

The good news was that Camm was going to go back to Virginia Tech in January of 1998. Just before the 1997 Gator Bowl, I received the following email from a Hokie Central reader whose wife was Camm's high school guidance counselor:

At 11:46 AM 12/26/97 EST:

Will,

Camm will be heading to VT on 1-5-98. My wife talked to him last week. He's planning on attending the Gator bowl. We are staying at the Omni and Camm is supposed to come by and see us. If you are there maybe you can meet him.

His rehab has gone good. Although he had to return to C-ville last week to make sure he had not contracted Hepatitis B from one of the surgical team. Dr McCue told him he may be a step slower.

But once again, as far as I knew, Camm Jackson never made it back to Virginia Tech, and it became apparent that his window of opportunity was closing. As the spring of 1998 continued into the summer and the fall of 1998, there was still no sign of Camm Jackson.

The 1998 recruiting class (featuring Michael Vick, Jake Houseright, and Lee Suggs) arrived in the fall, and amidst all the hoopla, Camm Jackson of the 1997 recruiting class was forgotten. It appeared he would never play football for Virginia Tech.

The Hokies signed another recruiting class in February of 1999, this one including stars Nathaniel Adibi, Keith Willis, and Andrae Harrison. I attended the Recruiting Roundup at Greg Roberts Sports Club that year, as I do every year, to see some film and get the lowdown from the coaches on the new class.

Imagine my surprise when the subject of Camm Jackson, his commitment now nearly three years old and his LOI signing now two years in the past, came up. I don't remember exactly what was said, but I wrote this in a column recapping the roundup:

Camm Jackson, a 1997 recruit who injured his knee early in freshman drills and eventually dropped out of school, "will come back." I believe that the coaches said he is currently in

school, but don't quote me on that.

That was February of 1999. In April of 1999, I received a note that saddened me and convinced me that Camm Jackson was through as a Hokie football prospect:

To: will@hokiecentral.com
Subject: Camm Jackson
Date: Wed, 21 Apr 1999 11:58:56 PDT

Will,

I'm a longtime reader of Hokie Central and a diehard Hokie fan. Everything has been going so well recently with our program....Unfortunately, I was smacked in the mouth with some extremely disturbing news today. Let me explain to you how I came about this information. I work both in Lynchburg General Hospital and the Amherst County Sheriff's Department. I was in my office today at the Sheriff's department and overheard an arrestee being processed. The officers called this kid by name....Camm Jackson.

My ears and curiosity immediately perked up. He is being charged with two counts of felony forgery and uttering. I tried to contact the Commonwealth Attorney (Amherst is his jurisdiction) but he is out of town until Monday. I just found out that these are actually Blacksburg charges, so this will probably make the press up there.....man o man.

I waited, but I never heard Camm Jackson's name mentioned in the press as being brought up on charges. The implication is clear: once a promising recruit, he had fallen so far off the radar screen of Hokie football that when the reporters who daily comb the court files saw his name come up, they didn't even recognize it.

Almost a year later, I received an email from the Commonwealth Attorney who eventually tried Jackson, and it wasn't even on the same charges:

At 11:39 PM 3/14/00 -0500:

Will: I now have the answers as to why we won't see Camm Jackson again in a Hokie uniform — I tried him today (in Montgomery Co. Circuit Court), and he was convicted of the felony charge of unlawful wounding.

Only the local weekly took much interest in the case, and I hope that state papers don't pick up another story of a former Hokie being convicted. I feel sorry for his dad; he's trying to get the kid to turn himself around. I don't know if he'll make it or not, but he sure has tossed his opportunities aside for the time being.

(The conviction for unlawful wounding did not show up in the research that Neal Williams did for his article on Jackson that appears elsewhere in this issue, although Williams did note that one of the documents he uncovered in his research was sealed. He did not, of course, go through the procedures to get it opened.)

He sure has tossed his opportunities aside.

My mind goes to that statement in that last email, and I think about how easy it is to type those words. It contains the same number of words as, say, the phrase, "I went to town and bought bread." But one of those two phrases is trivial, and the other is not; it tells of the chances of a lifetime wasted.

"He sure has tossed his opportunities aside," as accurate as it is, doesn't begin to tell the whole story of Camm Jackson, and the choices he made, and the path he took. Had he not injured himself, and had he stayed in school, he would be a redshirt senior, like his high school teammate, David Pugh. And maybe, like Pugh, he would be a star, a potential All-American with the good possibility of an NFL career in front of him. We'll never know.

Why has Camm Jackson stayed in my mind for so many years? Why do I feel haunted when I look at the picture of the handsome kid with the smiling face in that March 31, 1997 edition of the Hokie Huddler? Why should it matter?

With all the great success stories in Hokie football in the last five years, why does the story of Camm Jackson captivate me?

Perhaps it's because I feel like I tried to warn him.

I have a copy of a letter that I sent to Camm Jackson in March of 1997, barely a month after he had signed his letter of intent to attend Virginia Tech on a football scholarship. As many longtime Hokie fans can never forget, in 1995 and 1996, the Virginia Tech football team suffered a rash of embarrassing off-the-field incidents and player arrests, a situation that got so out of control that the university eventually drafted a Comprehensive Action Plan (CAP) designed to lay down rules for athlete behavior and punishment.

For some reason, the debacle of 1995/96 moved me to write a letter to Camm Jackson and to tell him how important his role as an ambassador of Virginia Tech football was, and to never forget that he was representing the school wherever he went, and to conduct himself accordingly.

Given how Camm's life turned out, it's almost eerie to read the letter now. Here it is, dated March, 1997:

Dear Camm:

Greetings from Hokie Central! My name is Will Stewart, and I run Virginia Tech's premier unofficial sports Internet web site, "Hokie Central." As you finish your senior year at Amherst and prepare for Virginia Tech, I wanted to drop you a line and welcome you to the Virginia Tech sports family.

Every year, I have one or two favorites among the incoming players, and this year, you and teammate David Pugh are my two favorite Hokie football recruits. The reason is simple - I started Hokie Central in March of 1996, and yours and David's commitments were the first two commitments I reported on the web site. As more and more players committed, they all started to kind of run together, but I'll always remember the two of you as being the first, because you both sound like true Hokies through and through.

I sincerely hope that you will enjoy your time at Virginia Tech as much as I did (I graduated in 1987). College will be an amazing experience for you, and I urge you to live every moment to its fullest, because when it's over, you'll be surprised at how quickly it went by. I'm sure that will be especially true for you, because you'll be busy with your football career.

But in addition to wishing you luck, I wanted to talk about some things that I hope will stay with you during your four-to-five years at Tech. I didn't play college football (it's tough, when you're 5-8, 150 pounds, and slow), so I don't know what it's like, but I wanted to give you a fan's perspective that I hope you'll remember and take with you as you go.

When you enter Virginia Tech this fall, and you become a Virginia Tech football player, there is a lot of responsibility that comes with that honor. You will serve as a representative and ambassador of the university everywhere you go, and people will watch you to see how you act and how you carry yourself. I want you to always remember that your actions reflect not just on yourself, but also upon the thousands of Tech fans and graduates who have come before you.

It's a tremendous responsibility for a young man who is only 18 years old to carry, and I wonder if many of the student-athletes at Tech are even aware of it. As you know, we've had quite a bit of trouble off the field in the past year, and Hokie fans will be watching the next incoming class - your class - very closely in the hopes that we won't ever experience again what we went through this past year. We are looking for you to be the type of person that makes us proud both on and off the field.

As your football career at Tech progresses, it will seem that people only care about what you do on the field, but I'm sure that I speak for Hokie fans everywhere when I say that what you do on the field is not nearly as important as what you do OFF the field. We are more concerned that you become a good student and a good citizen, someone who reflects well on Virginia Tech. If your entire career comes and goes and you never play in a single game, that will be all right, as long as you graduate from Tech and are successful in your life after football ... and as long as you're happy and you're satisfied with the effort you put forth at Tech.

Always remember that you're different from other students, and that you have responsibilities that they've never dreamed of. Carry yourself with pride and dignity, and when you look back on your days at Tech, you won't have a single regret.

Now, back to football - you will find very quickly after arriving at Tech that the cornerstone of Tech football is hard work, and that those who work hard will be successful. Listen to the coaches, because they know what they're doing. Pay attention to them, and put your maximum effort into it, and before you know it, you'll be playing in front of 50,000 fans who are cheering your every move.

I'm looking forward to seeing you in a Tech football uniform, and I wish you luck in your Tech career. Hopefully, we'll get to meet face to face someday.

Always remember that college is supposed to be fun - work hard and play hard, and you'll

discover that the fun takes care of itself. Sorry this letter is so long, but as fans of Hokie Central know, I can't say anything in less than two pages! Good luck at Virginia Tech!

Sincerely,
Will Stewart
Hokie Central

Is the letter pretentious? Sure, I think so. Would I write a letter like that these days? Not on your life. But I was much more of a "fan" back then, and I was excited about Jackson.

I sent the letter to Camm via his guidance counselor at Amherst, and a few weeks later, I was told that he had received it, and that among other things, "His mother really liked it."

I'll bet she did. It's a shame for Camm, his family, and the thousands of Hokie fans who were looking forward to seeing him play, that he did not follow the words of advice that it contained.

Camm Jackson has a lifetime to think about the choices he has made, and what it has cost him. But in the wake of all that has happened, Hokie football has moved on without him. He is a forgotten man. We can only hope that life gets better for him, and that he is able to move on and put his past behind him.

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