

Virginia Tech Football
Head Coach Justin Fuente Q&A Highlights
Early Signing Day Media Conference
Dec. 18, 2019

Opening statement:

“Lot of balls in the air right now for us. We just got back on the practice field today. We will go, obviously, today and tomorrow and will take off a day for graduation and then go Saturday and Sunday. Then, we will give the guys a few days off for Christmas and will meet at the bowl site to get ready for a great challenge in Kentucky. Today is signing day and I’m awfully excited about what we were able to add to our class. There are a lot of dynamics to this and a lot of people that have helped us on this campus to help sell Virginia Tech. We are still dealing with a couple of people throughout today.

“I would say, we don’t have a lot of room with a pretty darn good football team coming back. I’m excited about that. We did, at running back, thought, though, that we needed immediate help to go along with the rest of our squad. I think we did that and then also planning for the long term. Next year’s class is going to be really, really big and large. So, we tried to plan a little bit ahead.

“What I would say I’m most proud about is our camp system, with it really paying off this year. A couple of the guys that maybe were lesser known, were products of our camps that we evaluated in camp and are pretty excited about. And then we tracked them throughout their senior years and then it all kind of came to fruition today. All of those miles traveled and logistics, in terms of getting camps set up, really paid off for us today.

“I don’t know, I’m sure you all will ask about the next signing period (in February), there’s not a lot to do in terms of that. We’ll meet that when we go forward. But I’m just excited about what we were able to add today. On the defensive line, we’re preparing for a future there.”

On the defensive linemen that signed and with majority being taller than 6-foot-3:

“I do think relative speed and length are important and we have made a concerted effort to get longer. We have really been historically long in the defensive secondary and maybe not as long up front. I think I’m right in that evaluation, at least since I’ve been here. So, we just made a concerted effort to get a little longer up front as we move forward.”

On what the advantages are for getting taller defensive linemen:

“When you are trying to keep people off of you, offensive players want those guys in there tight, when blocking them, and the defensive guys want them far away. I know that’s oversimplifying it and if you’re tall, that doesn’t necessarily mean they’ll all play, but we are trying to continue to take up more space on the field. They all are developmental players that will have to get into the system and lift, feed and get along. I think we can restrict some space and move onto an opportunity for some productive play.”

On behind the push to Texas players as of late:

“Well, we have several people on our staff that have strong ties to the state. You know, it’s just a different world than it was five years ago, quite honestly. It’s just so much easier, not to just communicate but for people to look and see and touch and feel programs and colleges without having been there. I just think we are beginning to scratch the surface of what we can do. We have a beautiful product here to sell, and I think it is going to appeal to some people maybe that live farther away or are at areas that haven’t historically been productive to Virginia Tech. Part of that is a function of

technology and part of that is it's easier to sell your school and program from a distance than it used to be."

On whether Tech will focus more on recruiting out of Texas going forward:

"First of all, there are great football programs down there. It's not the end all, be all of recruiting, I understand that. But it's pretty hard to argue the statistics and talk about the quality of players and programs that are down there. I think people would be taken back if they really got a close look at the quality of programs that are in that state. I think it would be shocking to some people if they really got to get on the inside and see what it looks like. So, yes, is the answer to the question and we are constantly evaluating what we are doing and are constantly talking about that and having those conversations about what we can do better. Our camp circuit is one thing, where are we recruiting, where do we have connections and are evaluating players at and are trying to continually evolve. So, it certainly has made me rethink a little bit about what we're going to do."

On how the early signing day has pushed up everything:

"Well, I think it's pushed up the firing process (of head coaches). I don't think there's any doubt about that. I'm sure it wouldn't take somebody too long to look up to see the dates of when coaches have been let go since the early signing period took place and then beforehand, too. I feel like it's moved up, with guys being let go half-way into the year. On the other end, besides coaching firings, I didn't feel any pressure before the signing period. I wanted to make sure we did it right. We still have some hiring to do and I don't expect there to be anything here in the near future on it. We are pretty down the road on the other things. We're really far down the road, but we're not able to take the next step for a little while. It hasn't affected me much, in terms of what we try to do, because I think it's more important to get it right, than to rush into something because of an imposed deadline."

On him mentioning needing more depth at running back and now bringing in graduate transfer Khalil Herbert:

"First of all, I would say Khalil is a fine young man with a great family. Obviously, he's a talented football player. We vet those young men pretty extensively when we bring an older player into our program. Obviously, we try to do it with our young players too. It's really important to me to try to influence the young players with really good older players if we are going to bring somebody new in here. I feel like Khalil is going to fit right in. He's got experience under his belt, he's a great worker and he's a highly intelligent young man. He comes from a great family, but I think he's going to come right in and blend in with our crew seamlessly."

On whether he expects attrition at the running back position:

"Would you anticipate attrition if you were a head coach in Division I football these days? We'll see how it goes. We'll put the ball down and go compete. In today's day and age there's no telling."

On signing only one in-state recruit:

"Honestly, there were some that we didn't get and some that we didn't like. That's the truth and I was pretty slow with some things because of the small numbers. I was pretty hypersensitive in trying to make sure we did things the right way because of our number situation. I would say it's because of all of those factors. I don't think it's indicative of anything to come. Those are just the facts of it."

On Wilfried Pene and the backstory of his route to the United States and Virginia Tech:

"I think he's a guy that can come in and could play on either side of the ball in his career. Obviously, a unique situation. We have a punter from Australia [Oscar Bradburn] and a tight end [Wilfried Pene] from

France, not a hot-bed for college football recruiting. As a guy that we have known about for a long time, he came to the United States to have a chance to play college football. He ended up at a preparatory school in Connecticut and we have just tracked and tracked and tracked and got a chance to see him live. We're just really excited to see what he can do. He's an aggressive, athletic guy with great size and strength and he enjoys the weight room. He taught himself English in a year on his own. He jumped right into taking classes and did not speak English when he started. There's something about people like that, that have the courage to pack up and go away from your family, learn a language and adapt. That's pretty special."

On whether there was a concerted effort to recruit some bigger running backs:

"We certainly made a concerted effort to get bigger. Marco [Lee] is a big, strong young man. I think Jalen [Hampton] is just touching what he can be size-wise. He has a really good frame and he has a chance, in a year or two, to be a bigger person than 195 [pounds]. Jordan [Brunson] is a little more developed already. He's a 210-212-pound guy that's pretty far along from a physical standpoint. We certainly did make a concerted effort to get bigger. We do have some smaller guys that I really, really like. I think we have a chance to have something really special back there with a couple of different styles. I don't want them all to look the exactly the same, and we haven't done that since we've been here quite honestly. We made a focused concerted effort to go and get this thing balanced out in that room and try to be more productive."

On where he sees Derrell Bailey playing on the defensive line:

"We'll see. There's no telling how big a young man he's going to end up being. He'll start out as a defensive end, but he's another one of those guys that, when he comes in for a semester and goes back home, people are going to say 'oh my gosh'. He's just scratching the surface of what he can become. He's long, athletic and when he gets in the weight program and starts lifting, I know he's going to be a big strong kid."

On getting players from Texas to visit Blacksburg:

"That's how you know if they're interested, that's kind of the litmus test. There are more guys down there than you can recruit, but if they come up, they're serious. That's kind of how we handle it. We go through it and evaluate it. If they come up, it stamps it that they're serious about us."

On whether he figured out all the coaching details for the Belk Bowl:

"We're going to talk about that. All of the details haven't been worked out. I don't know if the new hires will be involved with that. They have a lot of stuff on their plates too. In terms of getting moved, preparing for the next recruiting session and getting up to speed with what we have going on. I'm going to let Bud [Foster] build it however he wants to build it and then we'll figure it out. We haven't made any final decisions yet."

On whether he has looked at Kentucky yet and what has he seen from them:

"Absolutely. I had player meetings Monday and Tuesday from 8-12 both days. I really enjoyed that and got some feedback about what we've got going on. No. 1 [QB Lynn Bowden] is a special player. For them to move him to quarterback and go run the ball like they have been able to run the football is really remarkable. When you look at them on defense, it's different than what I thought I was going to see. They are huge on the defensive line. People have a hard time running the football against them. They play '50' defense and get to some four-down stuff and make it really hard to move the line of scrimmage. Some really good offensive lines have not been able to move the line of scrimmage because they are just so darn big. It will be a tremendous challenge. If I'm not mistaken, coach [Mark] Stoops has

a bunch of guys coming back next year, as well. There's maybe eight or nine serious. I'm sure they're building towards finishing of this year and building toward next year, and we're doing the exact same thing. It's going to be a heck of a battle. I'm looking forward to the competition."

On Kentucky changing its offense with Bowden moving to QB:

"I do have a tremendous amount of respect for what they have done as coaches, maybe more respect for what Bowden has done as a player. I mean he's pretty special now. I expected to turn on the film and see a little bitty guy, but he's a big, strong kid that can really run and is shifty. For them to just throw him back there at quarterback and let him go and run the show is pretty impressive. Obviously, the coaches deserve a tremendous amount of credit in terms of putting them in a position to succeed. What that kid has done is pretty cool."

On the importance of seeing recruits in person at camps:

"100 percent. For us, we don't get too caught up in the numbers. You can have a guy that runs a slow 40 that doesn't know how to start and get out. We want to see them run, watch them work and interact with them. To me that's part of it. Having a chance to work on the field with them, and Tyree [Saunders] was one of those guys. Great personality, highly intelligent and obviously a big skill set. They couldn't get him the ball this year, they just couldn't. They had quarterback issues and that sort of stuff, so they couldn't get him the ball, but he was fantastic in camp.

"The one that came out of nowhere was Dorian Strong. Never heard of him, didn't know anything about him. He comes to camp, runs really, really fast, is really long and competes the entire day. We bring him on to campus a week later, meet him, talk to him, offer him a scholarship and he commits on the spot and he has a great senior year. He wins a state championship, he's playing both ways. He had been a track guy his whole career and he got into football. He sat behind some good players as a young player and then boom, he has a great senior year. We saw several of these guys work out live. It really makes you feel pretty excited about them"