

Virginia Tech Football
Head Coach Justin Fuente Q&A Highlights
Pre-Spring Media Conference
February 28, 2019

Opening Statement:

“Thank you all for coming. Excited about our guys and what we’ve been able to do this winter. I’m looking forward to our favorite time of the year, which is spring practice. It’s such a great developmental time for your team.

“I do have a little of an announcement here. We’re going to push spring practice back a little bit. We were originally schedule to start Sunday, we’re going to push that back to after spring break. We’ll start on Wednesday, March 20, and there’s several reasons for that. First of all, this won’t affect the spring game, it will still be April 13. We’ll just practice three times after the spring game, so nothing will change there. It will still be a big scrimmage for us and we’ll have a couple days of practice after that.

“We set the spring game schedule about a year in advance, so we can work it out with the university, which I think is a good thing. I make that schedule there shortly thereafter and as we get closer to starting and look at where we are from an injury standpoint, a health standpoint, and a developmental standpoint, and a little bit from a staff standpoint. We have several new graduate assistants who literally just got in the door, we decided to make this switch. I think we’ll be able to get maybe three or four guys that are right now kind of doing half of our stuff with us, I think they’ll be closer to full go by then. I think also there will be some guys that on the other side of it will be able to get a little bit more work at the end of spring. We’ll be able to get some guys at the beginning and some guys at the ending and maybe pick up a couple guys at the end of spring. It gives us a little bit more time before we start with Coach Hilgart, who has done such a good job with us for many years. I’m excited about that change, I feel good about that change and I’m excited moving forward.

“Obviously, we promoted Justin Hamilton to coaching our safeties, I think he’s proved himself in his short time here to be very capable and ready for all of those duties he’s filled in for us on the road. Obviously, he’s got a bright future in coaching and I think he’s a really good young coach and he’s going to fit in really well. Lastly, congratulations to our indoor (men’s) track team for winning another ACC Championship.”

On status of injured players:

“Those guys on there are not going to practice (referring to list provided to the media). None of those guys will practice at all. The guys I’m talking about are not even on that list. Like Damon Hazelton coming back from a hamstring that has been driving him crazy for a while and I think we’ll be able to get him back if we push it back. Aiden Brown has been dealing with a toe issue and there’s a couple guys like that I think we’ll be able to get back if we push it back. These guys may be able by the end of spring to run around but definitely not practice.

“All of these (injuries) are from the season. Christian Darrisaw played all season like that, he wanted to continue to play and battled it through. He had to get it fixed and just won’t be ready to go. Xavier (Burke) got injured in the middle of the year, Tyree Rogers played the whole year through injury. It is what it is.”

On whether DB Devon Hunter could potentially play running back:

“He’s going to be on defense.”

On what he expects to see from Hunter this season and will he remain at the whip position:

“As of right now, we’re working through the 2-deep. We’ll probably put him at the boundary safety position. I couldn’t be more happy with Devon Hunter. I don’t think everybody quite understands, and I probably don’t either, the pressure that gets put on some kids to be immediately great players. It’s not fair and it’s kind of a product of the system we deal with right now. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a guy handle it better than Devon. In terms of his work ethic, his humility and the way he continues to try and improve both mentally and improve his body. I’ve been really pleased with Devon. Everybody’s developmental timeline is different and sometimes it doesn’t match what people on the outside expect it be, but I know this, he’s pouring everything he’s got into it every single day.”

On whether it is back to square one with the defense:

“We start in spring back at square one every year. It doesn’t matter if you have the Edmunds’ brothers coming back or not, we start from square one. Now, the more experience you have the quicker you can move through that. That sometimes helps and that should help us with as many guys that got experience last year and are coming back. We’ll start with the fundamentals, the basics and push our way through those 15 practices trying to improve. Hopefully we have some guys that have some more experience and will be able to move a little bit quicker.”

On the situation with QB Hendon Hooker:

“I met with Hendon’s (Hooker) mom, dad and himself, and I’m just going to keep those conversations between the Hooker family and myself. We’re excited that Hendon is with us. I think we’re all going through a learning experience. Talking about those experiences and those types of things is important. I’m happy to have him back and competing for a job.”

On his favorite and least favorite part of spring football:

“I like when it’s warm (laughs). I don’t like when we practice in snow flurries. I just the fact that there are no scout teams, it’s just good versus good. We are preparing for the season, but we’re not preparing for a specific opponent. We get to work our people. We get to go compete and teach football, and it’s the purest form of just teaching football that we get. There are scrimmages, but there’s no opponent, it’s just us pushing each other and trying to teach and form your team. That’s what I like the best.”

On how he handles the transfer portal situation with players putting their name in and then returning to the team:

“I would say this, each situation is different. Without going all of the way into these kids’ business. I hope you guys understand that there is a large part of me that just wants to protect these kids. I know they have a face mask on and they’re big, strong and athletic, but they are just kids, They’re our kids. The reason I am ambiguous about these things is because of them and their privacy. Each situation is different and we handle each one differently. The communication back and forth formulates the head coach’s opinion about the situation. As we communicate back and forth or if there is no communication back and forth, that formulates your opinion. As far as the team, those are individual situations as well. I think we’re all in the education process about what all of this stuff means and is. Coaches and players across the country are in the process of understanding what all of this stuff means. Is there a way to educate and address these situations with the team without calling out or embarrassing individual people.”

On players missing conditioning while in the transfer portal and then coming back:

“Well, we’re going to make it up (smiles). I understand what you’re saying. You certainly done want this two-week vacation deal and we don’t have that. That’s not an issue.”

On the challenges of adjusting to different quarterbacks every year compared to having a returning player:

“If you can’t be productive at that position, you have no real chance. Not all of those guys can do the same thing. Tweaking and maneuvering it around to both evaluate their skill set and try and highlight what they’re good at is coaching. Brad (Cornelsen) has done it with a bunch of different guys. Really tall guys, athletic guys and big strong guys. Jerod Evans was different from anybody else that we’ve ever had and Ryan (Willis) is different and that is a challenge. Everybody would like to have the same guy back there for three or four years in a row that’s just an unbelievable player. Part of the challenge is surrounding him with guys that can make plays too. We’re slowly improving in those areas. We’re getting better at wide receiver, we’re continuing to improve at running back and on the offensive line to help those guys become productive players. It certainly is a challenge and it’s part of the gig.”

On whether the mental workload and volume of the offense is different for each specific quarterback:

“They’re all on a different learning curve. You don’t take the mid-term freshman graduate and throw him in there with the whole package on day four. You try to trim it down so that guy has a chance to master something. You can’t emphasize everything, you have to emphasize something so that guy has a chance to develop. Maybe after eight practices, we can move forward or whatever it is. When you have three guys that have some experience, you have a chance to feed them everything, but maybe highlight what they’re better at throughout practice to give them a chance to have success. Which adds a little bit to what you’re doing, but making sure you make a conscious effort for it not to get too big. I think that is an important checkpoint along the way.”

On how hard is it for the other players around those quarterbacks:

“That’s why you keep it manageable. Those are the people you don’t want it to be hard on that you will make it hard on if you get carried away with it. Let’s make sure that Tre (Turner) can still play; but is not hampered by too much.”

On how have the early enrollees have adapted:

“Brion Murray has done really; really well. He hasn’t played a tremendous amount of football so it’s going to be a learning experience for him. He’s got a great attitude and he’s been working his tail off. (Dashawn) Crawford is very similar in terms that he’s always around. I think he’s very grateful for the opportunity. He’s been working hard and doing a good job. Some of these guys jump into these offseason programs and it’s a shock to the system a little bit and those guys have continued to push through and done well. Murray has gained a little bit of weight and those guys are doing well.”

On with all of the injuries; will there be an unknown about what the defensive line will look like at the end of the spring:

“Absolutely there will still be an element of unknown at the end of 15 practices, but we don’t play at the end of 15 practices. Our job is to get the guys that we have out there playing as well as we can play together, so that when we do add some new pieces in there, we can evaluate those new pieces and see how they fit.”

On having a young team once again:

“We’ll be drawing upon some youth again, but I do think it will be a little bit more experienced youth than last year, but still young nonetheless. I really like the leadership qualities that many of those guys that got a little taste of playing time last year have. I’m anxious to get it all put together. We haven’t even practiced in the spring yet, but I see guys that are working hard and that have a chance to be really productive. Some of them got experience last year and some of them didn’t. Nadir Thompson played a little bit and then got hurt. I’m just so anxious to put it all together and see how it looks and continue to cultivate that leadership. We can’t wait. You can’t sit around and wait on somebody else to do it. Just empowering those guys to not worry about their age. Some of them are experienced young people and they need to be ready to push into those roles and we’ve got to empower them to do it.”

On what does transfer QB Braxton Burmeister add to the team and what did he like about him through the process:

“He got thrown into the fire as a young player. A good athlete and comes from an athletic background. He has ties to Virginia Tech. I’m probably going to get this wrong, but his grandfather maybe went to school here or something, but he has family in Virginia. There was a draw back to this part of the country. Otherwise, we would have never thought about a guy in San Diego coming this way. There was some history there that brought this all together. We’ll see what his situation is (eligibility, enrollment, etc). I don’t know what it’s going to be he gets here. We’re going to support him in his endeavors however he wants to handle all of that sort of stuff and we’ll see. From a skill standpoint, he’s a football kid that loves football, is highly intelligent and he will bring some athleticism into that room and a little bit of experience.”