

Atlantic Coast Conference Football Kickoff

Thursday July 18, 2019

Justin Fuente

Dalton Keene

Reggie Floyd

Virginia Tech

THE MODERATOR: We welcome in Virginia Tech.

Approaching the podium now is Dalton Keene. Questions, please.

Q. Some words you would utilize to describe this year's offense as you get set for the season.

DALTON KEENE: Some words? The first word that comes to mind is grit. It's something that our strength coaches say a lot, all our coaches say a lot, something that means a lot to all of us.

I think it's something that we really needed to improve on, is grit. That's the definition that they like to use is staying loyal to something you said you were going to do, long after the mood you said it in has left you. That's something that really speaks to me and the rest of us on offense especially.

Q. The tight end position may be the deepest corps on the team. Would you agree with that? If so, what makes you guys so deep this year?

DALTON KEENE: Yeah, it's been awesome. We had a lot of young guys really develop into the players we wanted them to be. Now that I'm one of the older guys, I was able to take a step back, coach those guys, help them develop.

We have James Mitchell. All the hype about him his legit 100%. He's one of those guys that he was given everything he got, great athleticism, but also one of those guys that is a super hard worker, shows up every single day. He's someone that I would feel really comfortable having playing next to me.

Q. You mentioned that you're now one of the older guys. Is being one of the older guys, does that mean automatically you have become a leader?

DALTON KEENE: You know, just being old doesn't automatically make you a leader. There's a lot of things that go with that. Game experience is one of those things. It goes further to work ethic. You can't be a leader if you're showing up late to workouts, stuff like that.

But that's something that I've been trying to work on a lot this off-season. Really that's just taking the

next step in my game.

Q. What can you say about Justin Fuente as a head coach, what your takeaways have been from his leadership? There were adversity and injuries last year. What have you seen from him leadership-wise heading forward into 2019?

DALTON KEENE: Yeah, I'll talk specifically on this off-season, too. It wasn't just the players that were upset about last season. We could tell it hit home with Coach Fuente. That's something we all expect.

I love having him as a coach. He's a tough-love guy. He's going to push you every day, but love you just as much, which is something that I think is really great about him.

Q. If you could just discuss what your off-season was like in terms of what you wanted to focus on improving in your personal game. Also if you can talk about your quarterback Ryan Willis, the kind of rapport and chemistry you've built with him.

DALTON KEENE: Yeah, this off-season a big thing for me was just getting healthy. I had a minor knee deal that took me out for a little bit. Again, it was something minor. Now my whole body is feeling better than ever. There's a really good chance to get some rest, like I said earlier, work on some other aspects of my game like my leadership, coaching the young guys.

Then Ryan Willis, it's been good to develop some chemistry with him. There's always really good competition at quarterback. We got a bunch of guys there fighting for that job. Ryan has been doing a great job. He's been a good leader this off-season for us.

Q. Our season will be a success if we what?

DALTON KEENE: Take it one game at a time. We've had our sights set on Boston College from day one of the off-season. I think if we set our sights any further than that, it's going to be a bust. We'll overshoot it.

We got to focus one game at a time. We'll take care of Boston College, then after that we'll move on. So that's the biggest thing for us, is just relaxing and having a small view on the season.

THE MODERATOR: You can switch places with Reggie Floyd now.

Questions for Reggie, please.

Q. Describe Dalton as a teammate.

REGGIE FLOYD: Dalton is a hard worker, no matter what, through injuries, little nicks, he's never going to stop. 110% no matter what he's doing, whether in the classroom and on the field. Just a great brother and a role model.

Q. With a lot of youth having to play last season, what can you say about what that does on the defensive side, having that experience going into this season? Might have hurt you last year, can help you this year.

REGGIE FLOYD: Like I tell everyone, last year of course we were forced somewhat to grow up and mature faster than we expected. That was like a plus for us.

Of course, the outcome of the season wasn't as we planned. This year the chemistry, the bond that we have, all the mental issues where people were second guessing their techniques, things like that, all have changed. Now it's just a great relationship between everybody that's on the defense.

Q. What is it like to practice against Ryan Willis, especially given what he showed us during the 2018 season?

REGGIE FLOYD: It's great. Ryan is a very, very great quarterback. From just technique, and of course his vision, looking you off, giving you these different reads, making you second guess a couple of plays sometimes. Then his communication with his players on the offensive side is wonderful for everybody.

Q. Five of the top six tacklers are returning on your defense. We mentioned experience. How much is that experience going to play a role, especially week one facing a back like AJ Dillon?

REGGIE FLOYD: It's going to take a lot of experience. I'm pretty sure that Coach Foster and also Coach Fuente is going to have a game plan that is ready to stop everything that comes our way. We're prepared for it when that time comes.

Q. Your freshman year you did not start any games. You started 12 your second season. You started all 13 last year. What is it like to be a starter? What does it mean to be a starter?

REGGIE FLOYD: It's a great feeling. Of course, everybody wants to come into college starting. My freshman year, I was able to come in and I didn't redshirt but I was able to watch Chuck Clark, Terrell, Maine (Tremaine), just all the older guys do everything they were supposed to do, listen to what Coach said, take everything play by play. That was a great example for me to learn and improve and show to the other young guys that were looking up to me.

THE MODERATOR: Reggie, thank you for the time. We'll have you switch positions with your head coach and spend some time with Coach Fuente.

Questions, please.

Q. What can you say about the offense in the hands of Ryan Willis, your thoughts on him and his leadership, as well as maybe some of those weapons that will be stepping up here hopefully in the fall.

JUSTIN FUENTE: Well, we'll see how it all plays out through fall camp. Ryan was thrown into game action early in the season, at times played well, at times could have played better.

The key for us I think is to continue to evaluate that whole position. We have some young guys that have been working incredibly hard, too. We'll see how they do through fall camp, kind of figure it out as we get into camp.

I am excited about the people we can put around whoever that quarterback is in terms of some wide receivers, running backs, tight ends. The direction we're headed on the offensive line to hopefully to continue to increase our production.

Q. How excited are you about this linebacker corps that you're bringing back three talented guys, then you have a freshman in Dax Hollifield that produced well for you in his freshman year?

JUSTIN FUENTE: Certainly, I think we've created some competition in there for some guys. We have several guys that people may not know about that I think are going to have a chance to push the guys that everybody knows about at those two positions.

For as uncertain as we were last year about both of those two spots heading into the season, I

mean, we essentially lost both starters and both sets of backups. So we were able to get experience, and experience is great, but it doesn't automatically mean you'll have success the next time around.

I've been really pleased with the level of commitment from that room, an improvement, leadership, trying to influence others in a positive manner. We're awfully excited about that position unit moving forward.

Q. We had one of our head coaches yesterday talk about the rhythm of the coaching staff before practice actually begins, how they meet intensely for five straight days, eight hours a day. Take us behind the curtain with you and your staff. How do you handle preparations before the kids hit the field for the first time?

JUSTIN FUENTE: We get quite a bit of it done before vacation time. The July month essentially, early in July, is vacation. I give the practice plans out to the coordinators well before that, the entire schedule is laid out for them. They can work as far ahead as they'd like.

We spend some of the summer months preparing for our first couple opponents. We obviously spend some of it focused on ourselves schematically and personalize what we can do differently.

As we lead into camp, we try and get a little bit ahead at least in our scripting so that we can really focus on what we're trying to accomplish and get things going.

Plus it's your last time to kind of come up for air before you dip down into the season. In short, we try to get as much of it done ahead of times as we possibly can.

Q. Your three seasons that you've had at Virginia Tech, what can you say your major takeaways have been? Looking in the mirror for yourself as a coach, what have you seen and learned?

JUSTIN FUENTE: It's such a unique situation in terms of what we inherited, following a Hall-of-Fame coach, continuing to try and build on that legacy, all that's been accomplished at Virginia Tech.

I've never felt better about the direction and the purpose that we all have moving forward with this program. If there's one thing I think we do well, it's evaluate, self-evaluate as coaches, as players in terms of how can we do things differently, how can we do things better, how can we be more efficient in our protocols. What can we do to help our kids play at a higher level.

This year, like many other years before it, we've kind of had an exhaustive search through all those sorts of things, really kind of enjoyed that process. Maybe included some more input from some of our young people maybe more than we have in the past, which I think has been good, to continue to build and move this program forward.

Q. You have here a couple of young offensive tackles in Christian and Silas. How come they've been able to see the field so early? Talk a little bit about the progress and development they've made.

JUSTIN FUENTE: Well, I've been really proud of those two. Neither one of those two guys were recruited by anybody. When I say "not anybody," I mean not anybody. Really proud of our staff, the evaluation model they used to try and ascertain in those guys had what it took to play at this level.

Incredibly gifted athletically, the both of them are. But what's given them a chance to play early has

been their work ethic. They have completely immersed themselves in preparation physically, mentally and emotionally, while still handling their classroom duties.

They've made incredible strides in the weight room, made incredible strides mentally in terms of picking up scheme and understanding what we're trying to get accomplished.

They all had the tools beforehand, and they were kind of raw molds of clay, so to speak. But through their decisions and their actions, determining how they're going to work and the dedication they're going to put in to trying to perfect their craft, it's given them a chance to play early.

Q. (No microphone.)

JUSTIN FUENTE: Well, I'm certainly not going to take the credit for it. It was kind of a group effort. They were both in unique situations.

Silas was a 240-pound kid that won the regional slam-dunk competition. But we really felt like he had the frame to grow and prosper and become a big, large human being that he is now.

Christian didn't quite -- we didn't quite know about that athleticism. He was maybe a better player than Silas as a high school player, but we could tell early on he had great flexibility, great hip mobility. Really felt like he had a chance to blossom into really good players.

Then the key is getting to know them, to try your best to determine if they have what it takes to work themselves into giving themselves a chance to play. Anybody could see that thing. Anybody could see their athleticism. It was trying to figure out if they really had deep down what it takes to give themselves a chance to be good players. They certainly do.

Q. I'm sure something that the front office of the ACC, Swofford, is excited about the launch of the ACC Network. As far as your program specifically, what kinds of opportunities as far as advancing facilities or just having those kind of resources available, what does that mean for the program?

JUSTIN FUENTE: Well, I think it's probably much more complex than the way I'm about to present it.

We have several projects, facility projects, underway, not just in football but in several sports. Those can't be the end of what we're doing. It's a continuous battle to continue to improve.

There's obviously a financial side of the network that's going to be beneficial. I think if you take a step back and think about what this league has been able to accomplish under the current revenue situation, where we rank, start to think about what we can accomplish when those numbers begin to increase, I think it's a pretty scary sight for other people.

I think that's part of what gets people so excited about that aspect of this network.

The other aspect of it is obviously the exposure and the access to your program and your school, a chance to educate people maybe in different parts of the country about what a special place Virginia Tech is, or many of the other schools in the ACC.

I think it's hard to put a price tag on that value.

Those to me, there's many more, I'm sure, but those to me are the two major aspects of the network

moving forward.

We have so many great stories to tell. When I say "we," I don't mean Virginia Tech, I mean everybody. Even if you took football and basketball out of it, start thinking about the Olympic sports, all the great athletes that have come through this league through the years, how really neat it would be to hear those stories. Those stories alone I think are pretty special. Not to mention when you start to delve into the football and basketball history of this league.

I'm excited to watch it. I'm excited to see the product that we put out there and get to educate myself on some of the stories I may not know about.

Q. Will Ryan Willis be your starting quarterback? Any word on the transfers Hoffman and Burmeister?

JUSTIN FUENTE: We'll see in Ryan is a starter. Part of that deal is I have guys on our roster, one of whom you alluded to, that plays quarterback that I don't know yet if he's going to be eligible or not. I promised those guys opportunities to compete for the job. I don't think it would be wise of me to close the job before I know who's eligible to compete for it.

In short, we'll see how that all shakes out. I have not heard on either one of our two transfers, Braxton or Brock. I hope to hear in the near future.

Q. You talked about self-evaluation. Your first two games, Boston College and Old Dominion, two of your more disappointing losses from last year. When you reflect on those games, what lessons can you and your players learn to improve on those performances?

JUSTIN FUENTE: Well, I don't -- I think our lessons, certainly there's individual lessons from individual games, but there's an element of learning from the entire season and the entire process.

There's two ways to look at it. I think they're both correct. One, we certainly understand what's expected at Virginia Tech. We don't shy away from those expectations. We dedicate ourselves every day to living up to those.

We also know that last year was not good enough. But there's also an element of pride in what our kids did accomplish when faced with a tremendous amount of adversity. Throughout the entire season, the amount of guys that played beat up, the amount of guys that pushed through injuries, the amount of guys that we lost that were unable to continue to go, the amount of distractions we had for them to continue to battle through the entire year, I think we can learn from that, too.

We have a first game this year that is on the road and is a conference game against a very good opponent, that we have a tremendous amount of respect for. They're well-coached. They have a clear identity and mission in what they're trying to accomplish. We'll have to prepare and play very well to have a chance.

We're looking forward to that opportunity. I think there is a level of hunger and eagerness on our team to get back out there and try to rewrite the script or redefine our identity from a year ago.

Q. As you build a program, you obviously have a certain set of characteristics about your program. Every year the team has its own different personality. When do you identify what that particular personality is? Pre-season, first open date?

JUSTIN FUENTE: Well, we try to get a good handle on it through the off-season, through the springtime. The thing is you have guys join your team, you don't have a complete team in the

spring. You have teams join your team in the summer, heading into fall camp, which I think adds to it. You try to get a good pulse, your finger at least on the pulse of the squad throughout winter conditioning, spring ball, ultimately the summertime.

As you go through camp, I think you begin to fine-tune it. If you start with a broad-based canvas, when you come back from Christmas break, you try to narrow it down as the season goes along, then really get down to the details in fall camp.

Q. On a note of levity, we will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the moon landing on Saturday. Would you have any interest in ever going into space or landing on the moon yourself?

JUSTIN FUENTE: No, I'm good on earth, if that's all right (laughter). I've never been asked that question before, though. I appreciate that.

But, no, I think my feet squarely on the ground is where I'd prefer to stay.

THE MODERATOR: We will leave it at that. Virginia Tech, good luck this year.

JUSTIN FUENTE: You bet. Thank you.

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