



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

FEB. 2, 2024

## VIRGINIA TECH BASEBALL

### 2024 PRESEASON MEDIA AVAILABILITY

### TRANSCRIPTIONS

#### JOHN SZEFC, HEAD COACH

##### **On thoughts and expectations heading into a new season ...**

“We got about two weeks left. It’s good that we have two weeks because we still got a lot of preparation that we have to do. But I mean, we feel pretty good about it thus far. Knock on wood, we haven’t had any major injuries in the preseason. So, we feel like we have the availability of our players, which if you don’t have that, you’re in a lot of trouble. Obviously, a lot of things have changed with the ballpark, with the surface being new. [New] lights, as of last year. They’re still kind of working on finishing up the new turf bullpen in left field. We’ve had a lot of work done to the indoor facility. There has been a lot of change here, facilities wise, which has kind of helped us prepare for the upcoming season. So I mean, you know considering all we lost last year to injury and the draft, we feel like we’re in a pretty good place. We’re in a very similar place to where we were two years ago, where we have a lot of players that you don’t know who they are – on the mound, specifically, very similar to what that was in 2022. So, we’ll see how it goes. I mean, two years ago at this point, I wasn’t really sure what we were going to be at that point. I can tell you that I can’t really tell you exactly; I can’t put numbers on it and say, ‘Hey, we’re going to be this and this, or ...’ I don’t know. All I do know is I think we got a lot of the guys that have come in, both freshmen and transfers, are good enough to be immediate impact ACC players and we’re just going to roll it out there and see what it looks like.”

##### **On what areas of improvement are being looked at to be better than last year’s team ...**

“I think the health is a big part of it and I think we got to play defense and pitch a lot better than what we did last year. But I do think that if our guys are available and they’re not injured, that we will. I think our problems started last year when Griffin Green got hurt and then everyone was asked to do something a little bit more than what they were doing. You know, then [Jack] Hurley got hurt; [Clay] Grady got hurt; it was like, [Carson] DeMartini could only DH. So, it was kind of on and on and on. So you know, part of our success in [2022] was not just that we had a lot of good players, but the main thing was that they were healthy. We had one injury the whole year and it was to one of our backup players, so we were really lucky that year in that we had the access to our players. I mean, any coach would tell you that they want to have that, that they need to have that to have success. So, I’d tell you the same thing.”

##### **On what is liked about the pitching depth ...**

“Well, it definitely is ‘depth.’ That’s the right word to use. It’s a deeper staff, probably than we’ve had here in the past. The one thing we don’t have returning on that staff is returning ACC starts. So, people would say, ‘Wow, man. That’s not good.’ We had zero returning ACC starts in [2022] and that worked out pretty good. So, I think as far as the staff goes, you have a lot of talent, you have a lot of experience – not necessarily here – but there’s a lot of guys on that staff, eight in particular, that had pitched at other places last year. But you know, we’re in this day and age of the transfer portal, so that’s a lot of athletic rosters [or] team rosters are going to look that way. So, you bring guys in, you get them acclimated with the program and our system and what we do and you trust that their ability is going to fit in this conference and this level, which I have no doubt that it will based off what we have already seen. And, you trust that they’re good enough and you’re going to run the best matchups out there day in and day out and see where it goes.”

##### **On what the starting rotation will be ...**

“No, I can’t tell you I do. I can tell you that if you ask me that question in about eight or nine days, I will. But, the thing about our preseason here: it’s really short. I mean, you can’t really start playing intrasquad games until [Jan. 26]. So I mean, we’re

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sitting here on [Feb. 2]. Like, I have an idea of like, six to eight guys that might fit into that, but those guys still have two more outings before we even play. So, I could tell you three or four guys and it might be the other three or four guys based off what Charlotte looks like. You know, righties versus lefties. They have a lot of new players, too. You're looking at a lot of, you know, uncharted waters here as far as preparing scouting reports for who we have to play and then seeing how our guys are going to match up with that scouting report."

### **On if there is a clear-cut No. 1 pitcher in mind ...**

"No. Nope, I don't think there is. I think, you know, the whole [No. 1, No. 2, No. 3] thing, I mean, some places might have that. I think, you know the other thing is that a group of arms that you run out there against Charlotte could be your initial starting three. It might not be the same three you run out there the next weekend against Rhode Island. Or, four weekends from that against Notre Dame. A lot of it's going to be based off, you know, how they [perform]. Honestly, like there's two really high-level freshmen in that group: Brett Renfrow and Madden Clement. So, they could fit into that. But, like, that's uncharted waters for them. They haven't thrown a college inning yet, you know. So, it's very similar to like Drue Hackenberg two years ago. He didn't pitch in the fall. He hadn't thrown one college inning yet. No one knew anything about Drue Hackenberg: who he even was, you know, nonetheless how he was going to perform. So, you know I think you have those two guys. You have a guy like Griffin Stieg, who you guys are going to talk to. He's a really high-level guy, who has experience, mainly out of the bullpen last year, but he's come a long way in a short period of time. But, what people remember about him, is maybe relief outings last year. That's all they know. You know, so they don't really kind of know where he's at right now, where Renfrow is now, where Clement and some of these other guys [are]. We have Brady Kirtner, who's back, who didn't sign with the Mets. That's a big addition to our staff, whether it be as a starter, or as a middle guy, or he can pitch in just about any scenario that you ask him to. But that's like a really high-level arm that's back and we've been kind of building him up to potentially start. So like, there's a lot of ways we can kind of go with it. You know, I just can't tell you as I stand here [on Feb. 2] exactly how that's going to unfold right now."

### **On the passing of legendary Florida State baseball head coach Mike Martin ...**

"Coach Martin: he was about as good a guy as there was in this game. I mean, I think people that didn't know him personally like look at his numbers and his accolades as being, 'He's this great coach.' Which, he was. He won a ton of games. I would tell you, there's a stat that he had that I think was the most impressive stat to me: he had won like 40 games for like 30 straight years or something like that. Like, that's incredible. Because you're dealing with a lot of different classes of players. You know, you're not running Tom Brady out there for 15 straight years, you know what I'm saying? The players change and he changed with them. I can tell you like, I had a good relationship with him when I was at Maryland before I came here, when Maryland was still in the ACC and I got to know him a little bit then. Honestly, the best story I can tell you about him was, it was pre-COVID, it was right around the time he won, it might have been his 2,000th game or something at the time, I don't know. He won so many games. We were down there that weekend and I brought both my sons with me, who were younger at the time, and that guy, man was like, the most welcoming, nicest guy you ever [wanted to meet]. That weekend was all about him. But, if you watched how he interacted with other people, like I just remember bringing my sons up to the plate to do the lineup card thing. And I mean, it was never about him to him. It was always about other people, you know. So, as good of a baseball coach as he was – and it was really, really good, obviously – he might have been a better person, actually."

### **On Carson DeMartini's growth as a player and as a leader ...**

"I mean, I'd say he's right on time. You know like, he had that freak injury last year. He had to have the labrum surgery in the summer. He's come back well. Is he 100 percent right now? Probably not, but it's [Feb. 2]. I would say by another two weeks, he'll be right where he wants to be. But like, it's a gradual comeback, you know. With the weather being up and down here, certain days we'll kind of turn [him] loose and other days when it's, you know, cold out here and windy, maybe [we] won't. But we have Clay Grady, [who's] coming back from surgery. One of our freshmen, Ethan Gibson, none of you even know. He's coming off a surgery. He's a really high-level guy, too. So, all three of those guys play the left side of the infield, where you have to make long throws. So, we've been trying to be really like careful with the amount that we ask them to put their foot on the gas this early, understanding that we're trying to get to May here with this group. Is it about [Feb. 16]? Yeah, it is. But, there's a lot that happens after [Feb. 16]. But, in relation to Carson, obviously he's an elite-level player. I mean, from a hitting perspective and defensively. I mean, you know he played, he started as a true freshman on that [2022] team, so his experience is probably off the charts compared to a lot of other guys in college baseball. I think

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when you combine all those things together, you know, you have a pretty elite-level guy right there. And I think probably where he's matured the most, probably, is not actually even in his baseball; it's how he kind of handles the group and directs the group where other people around him become better. It's almost like the point guard that makes everybody better with how he sets them up and can distribute the ball. Well, that's kind of the way he is, I think, on a baseball perspective. You know, he's going to be good. His skills are way advanced. I'm not really even – I have no concern about [where] he is skill wise. I don't really have any concern about him, period. It's just, for me it's actually more fun to watch him interact with guys and help grow guys as opposed to watching him take BP or something like that.”

**On what stands out about Garrett Michel's growth from the summer into the offseason ...**

“Well I mean, you talk about another pretty advanced guy who started as a freshman [and] had a really good summer in Cape Cod. He's probably one of the more experienced, decorated hitters that would be a middle-of-the-lineup kind of guy in this league. I would expect he would be a really high-level run producer, as far as RBIs and [slugging percentage], as he was last year. And I think that experience from last year and what he did in the summer in Cape Cod is only going to help him be that more advanced this year. So I mean, I think he'll be one of the more elite-level offensive players in our league. I can't tell you exactly what his numbers are going to look like because now, as it is with a lot of our returning guys, there's scouting reports out on those guys. Like, people know who they are. Garrett Michel is not some 'unknown' anymore. He's well-known. So, [it'll become] difficult [for him]. He'll get pitched more carefully. He'll probably see a lot less velocity, straight stuff. He'll see more spin. But, I think he's more equipped to handle that as well, you know, with his experience.”

**On what this team is capable of if it stays healthy ...**

“I don't know, man. I mean, I think a lot of really good things. I would expect that they'd be an NCAA tournament-type team that could go deep in the NCAA tournament. You know, if they play up to their capabilities and if they stay healthy. But, as far as you know, records or anything like that, or personal numbers, it's hard to say. But, I couldn't have told you that two years ago. Or, last year either. On paper, we actually were better last year than we were in [2022]. And then, we had six pretty substantial injuries that kind of hurt us last year. But, on paper, that team was actually better. If you go back two years ago, I know we had a great year in [2022], but on paper, that team was not like this well-accomplished, you know, going-to-go-to-a-Super-Regional-type team. But, it did for a lot of different reasons. And I think as long as you have really good players and they can stay healthy and they understand that it's a long haul versus just a short sprint – you know there's a lot of things you have to get through during the course of a college baseball season – but if you can get guys through it, then you'll have a lot of success with them.”

**On what makes Sam Tackett's potential so high ...**

“Well, he had our best fall. Like, he kind of had like a really breakthrough summer. You know, he led the NECBL in just about every offensive category. Then, he played a couple weeks in Cape Cod. He had a similar breakthrough summer, this past summer, to what Christian Martin did the summer before – and Martin came back and won a job and led our team in hitting last year. I'm not saying Tackett's going to do that, but he's got enough ability to hit, to hit for power. He'll play a very quality right field for us, if he ends up being our everyday guy out there, which at this stage of the game, it appears as if he would. He just plays like with a lot of confidence, man, like there's a lot of intangible stuff with him that you can't really like measure with a radar gun or a stopwatch, really. But, he's also been here. This is his fourth year now. So again, you talk about an experienced guy that's been around here, that's been through the NCAA tournament, that's played in Cape Cod. Like, it's important for these guys to get out on their own in the summer and figure some things out, live in different places. You know, swing a wooden bat for hitters and have failure. Usually, when those guys come back off that, that's where you have great years. A good example of that is looking at what Cade Hunter did two years ago. I mean, he had a rough summer – him and [Nick] Biddison, both in the Cape Cod league. Biddison was like catching bullpens as a backup catcher. And he comes out here and did what he did in [2022] and ends up being a fourth round draft pick, you know. So, I mean, it's just a very inexact sport, man. I mean, you can write out what you think is going to happen and it's usually not going to go that way. It might go 60 percent that way, but the other 30-to-40 percent, you got to kind of feel through it.”

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## CARSON DeMARTINI, JUNIOR THIRD BASEMAN

### **On what is most exciting about this year's team ...**

"I think the unknown is probably the most exciting part about this year. You know, you look at anybody who's looked at our team in the past and it's like, 'Man, we normally have guys that are, you know, set in spots, roles, starting pitchers, bullpen [arms], the outfield ....' We don't know this year. And there could be a multitude of guys that could flow in through that and I think that's the most exciting part. We got such a deep core that, like it doesn't really matter who's out there."

### **On the ceiling for returning four infield starters ...**

"I mean, it's huge, first of all. Everybody says, you know, your second-year guys typically have the best year they have and I mean that's Clay [Grady], "Chick" [Christian Martin], and [Garrett] Michel, three guys returning. They had great years last year. I really think, you know, the biggest part is just the game slowing down for them. I think it's really easy to let the game speed up on you. Especially in the ACC, guys start running, pitchers are throwing hard. I mean, everything's kind of happening fast. I think like the fact that they can kind of worry about like not just themselves but, you know, maybe the outfielders or a pitcher, or something like that. They don't really have to worry about themselves so much because they've already done it."

### **On how it feels to be fully recovered from injury ...**

"Yeah, I am ready to roll. I'm ready to roll. I'm 100 percent. [My] shoulder's all healed up. I'm ready to go. I think it's just exciting to get back. I'm always pretty nervous. You can't really say you're not nervous to get rolling. But yeah, I'm just ready to roll. Looking forward to Charlotte."

### **On whether recovering from injury is more mental or physical ...**

"I think it's purely a physical thing. Really like, my shoulder didn't feel the best throughout last year. But I mean now, I had a great doctor. I worked with "Staggs" [Kyle Staggers, director of sports medicine], our physical therapist, our athletic trainers. Everybody's helped me. My shoulder feels good. It's strong. It's as healthy as it can be. It's surgically repaired so, you know, once I kind of get past that – I mean, I threw a ball in the hole the other day as hard as I could across the infield and it had some zip on it. You know like, getting past kind of that mark; [diving], pull-ups, push-ups, all that sort of stuff. So, I think now it's just getting it physically ready to roll."

### **On what new teammates have stood out ...**

"Yeah actually, we were talking about it earlier. I think Ben Watson – center fielder, transfer – I think he played Division III [at Elizabethtown]. Ben's been great for us. He's been hitting well, playing good defense. Grant Manning, pitcher on the mound, I think is going to be a big dark horse guy. Not a lot of people know his name. [He's from Chapman], another small Division III school. He's had a lot of success in the fall here and early spring. So, I think those two guys are going to make a big impact for us."

### **On what it means to have Brady Kirtner return after the 2023 MLB Draft ...**

"Yeah, I mean it's huge to have a guy like that come back. I mean, you know everybody is looking for a shot to play pro ball and he got one and turned it down because he thought he was worth more than that. So I mean, that just kind of proves what kind of player he is. What he's looking at, is he's like, 'Man, you know. I'm better than that. And I think I can excel way further than what I did last year.' Even though he had such a great year. And then from the leadership side, I think it speaks measures to the younger guys and I mean even [to] returning guys, I think it's just big to have a guy like that come back with experience that can share his knowledge."

### **On stepping into a leadership role in 2024 ...**

"Yeah, I think it's just, now it's just I feel like guys are looking at me [for] what to do. Whether that's on or off the field, in the weight room, how we eat, what we do, you know, after practice. I think that's the whole leadership role. It's not a very like nerve-racking thing for me, but it's just something that it's nice to have. But, it carries a lot of weight and it's really important, especially if we have new guys playing this year, showing them how we play baseball here and what not."

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### **On how well this team has meshed during the offseason ...**

"I think this group actually meshed very quickly. I was actually up here earlier in the summer and I was up with a lot of like the transfer pitchers, freshmen guys and it was really nice to kind of get to know guys before the season started. I didn't play a single inning this fall. So, that was my whole job, to build team camaraderie and meshing guys and what not. So, that's kind of something that I think excelled this fall for us. And I think it's going to show for us this year, kind of like that [2022] team, how close we are and how tightly knit a group we are."

## **BRADY KIRTNER, REDSHIRT-JUNIOR PITCHER**

### **On his decision to return to Virginia Tech after the 2023 MLB Draft ...**

"That was a really tough decision, to end up ultimately coming back to school after the draft. But, I am happy in the decision that I made. It was a really tough one. But, being here, coming through the fall with this group of guys, I think it's been totally worth it. The guys this year, it's different. I think we have a very tight group of guys in the locker room. Everybody is working towards the same goal: we all want to go to Omaha. And I think everybody has their head on their shoulders this year, so, I am excited for this group. There is a lot of unknown in it as we're trying to fill roles, but I think the future of this year looks really bright."

### **On if the unknown about the 2024 team is exciting ...**

"It's exciting. I mean, we've been in this position before, especially while I have been here. So, kind of getting back to that is exciting. Having a group of guys, we have a lot of transfers in this year, especially on the pitching staff. There [are] a lot of unknowns. We have to fill in our starting roles and reliever roles, figure out where everybody goes here on [Feb. 2] with Opening Day two weeks away. We still don't have all of our roles set. So, I think that's a good thing. [On] the hitting side, we returned a lot of guys, so I do think we do have some things that are known on that side. We returned our infield. But, it is exciting to see where it's going to go over the next couple weeks."

### **On the key to preparing for the upcoming season ...**

"Everybody being on the same page, working towards the same goal. Everybody having that mindset that they want to achieve what they want to achieve. And that's part of the unknown [and] being good, because nobody has a set role, so we're all working, basically all together. We all want to get to the place that we want to be at and everyone's working to get that goal, so it's making everybody push each other that much harder."

### **On locking down a possible starting role ...**

"That was the goal, coming back, to get in a starting role and that's kind of the way that we've been building up so far through the fall and early spring right now. I think I could bring a good amount. I've been able to add a third pitch in my changeup. I think that's a big factor in transferring from the bullpen to a starting role. But, I am excited to see over the next couple weeks, to see how I build up and how I can be effective in that role."

### **On young 2024 pitchers people may not know ...**

"There's two big freshmen I am excited to see this year: Brett Renfrow and Madden Clement. They have a good work ethic and they've shown really good stuff, especially at a young age. So, those would be two names to look out for."

### **On the growth of sophomore pitcher Griffin Stieg ...**

"I think he has a really high ceiling. He's my throwing partner, so I get to see him up close everyday and see the progress that he's made from last year with all of his pitches and his velocity. And really, his mindset shift from being a freshman [to] being a more experienced sophomore now. So, I think that's his big thing, keeping his mindset right and continuing to become better everyday. I think his ceiling will be really high in the future."

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### **On the growth of other returning second-year arms ...**

“I would say the same thing. I think the biggest shift from freshman year to sophomore year is just growing up and maturing and really getting your first year under your belt. You’re feeling college baseball. So, now that they have that, coming out with that better mindset this year, they’ll be able to dominate on a different level.”

### **On preparing to transition from the bullpen to a possible starting role in 2024 ...**

“It’s just been a different mindset. I mean, coming out of the pen, it’s rushed. Like, I’m in the dugout, then I have to go into the bullpen to get ready and I’m right in the game, so you don’t have a lot of time to prepare. So, having that shift in mindset, I have time now before the game to get all my stuff in and preparing a different way and really building up to be able to throw more pitches and go longer into the game without having velocity decrease and things like that.”

