

W19 – Sports writing portfolio

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**Broken neck, renowned surgeon, admissions snafu led Bryce Perkins to U.Va.**

<https://www.dailypress.com/sports/dp-spt-bryce-perkins-uva-recruiting-journey-0428-story.html>

Marvin Zanders committed to Virginia's football program Jan. 30, 2017. A transfer from Missouri, he was the dual-threat quarterback Cavaliers coach Bronco Mendenhall craves.

Thousands of miles away, Bryce Perkins couldn't lift his arms above his head. He was recovering from a freak injury and wondered if he'd play football again.

This month, Zanders is preparing for finals at North Carolina Central, where he's a graduate student. His most recent college football game was Missouri's victory over Vanderbilt on Nov. 12, 2016.

Saturday, Perkins was the featured attraction of Virginia's spring game. After shattering the program's single-season record for total offense in 2018, he is U.Va.'s most celebrated incumbent quarterback since Matt Schaub in 2003.

And to think, absent a broken neck, the counsel of Peyton Manning's surgeon, a breakout performance against Mendenhall's alma mater and an unexpected decision by U.Va.'s admissions office, Perkins almost certainly wouldn't have landed in Charlottesville.

"It was all part of God's plan," says Bruce Perkins, Bryce's father and a former running back at Arizona State and with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. "U.Va. was the right place at the right time."

But what a frightening, meandering and unlikely journey it was.

Rated a three-star dual-threat quarterback by Rivals.com, Bryce Perkins committed to Arizona State in the spring of 2014, late in his junior year at Chandler High near Phoenix. Northwestern, Arizona and UCLA, where his brother, Paul, was a running back, also offered scholarships.

After leading Chandler to the 2014 state championship, its first in 65 years, Perkins redshirted as a Sun Devils freshman in 2015 and entered training camp the following summer hoping to compete with sophomore Manny Wilkins for the starting job.

One year ahead of Perkins, Zanders, a three-star prospect from Jacksonville, Fla., was entering his redshirt sophomore season at Missouri, where he would play in eight games as a reserve. Zanders and Perkins have never met, but their lives soon would intersect.

On the night of Aug. 5, 2016, Perkins called his parents. Citing his overall excellence in strength and conditioning tests, Arizona State coach Todd Graham and offensive coordinator Chip Lindsey were suggesting that Perkins might be more valuable as a hybrid than as a full-time quarterback.

Bruce Perkins spoke via phone with Lindsey that evening and arranged to meet Graham the next afternoon. He planned to ask for a release so Bryce could transfer.

Soon, all plans were on hold.

At practice the next morning, Perkins, wearing a no-contact gray jersey for a goal-line drill, accidentally collided with safety Deion Guignard.

“It was a read option,” Perkins says, “and I just kind of ran into one of the guys on defense. I had my neck down. It was kind of a freak accident. ... I thought it was just a regular stinger.”

Shawn Griswold was standing about 12 yards away in the back of the end zone. Now entering his second season as Virginia’s director of football development and performance, he was then Arizona State’s head coach for sports performance.

“I thought he broke his collarbone,” Griswold says. “He ran around the right side, barely got glanced and fell face down.”

Perkins underwent an MRI that afternoon, after which he and his parents met with Graham. Believing any possible injury was minor, the parties agreed that Perkins would transfer.

But when the MRI was inconclusive, Perkins had a CT scan the following day. The result was clear: He had fractured the fourth and fifth cervical vertebra (C4 and C5) in the middle of his neck.

Arizona State doctors recommended surgery to fuse the breaks. But while common in such cases, surgery often precludes a return to football.

Perkins understood the gravity of a broken neck and the potential for paralysis. But he wasn’t ready to ditch football. His brother had just been drafted by the New York Giants, and their dad had played in the NFL. Perkins wanted to follow their leads.

Using family and football connections, Bruce Perkins arranged for Bryce to see renowned spine surgeon Robert Watkins, co-medical director of the Marina Del Rey Hospital’s Spine Clinic near Los Angeles. The hospital’s website includes a testimonial from Manning, and a random encounter at the doctor’s office with another patient further assured Bryce and his dad.

“You know you’re in the right place when you see J.J. Watt,” Bruce Perkins says.

Echoing Arizona State's medical staff, Watkins said surgery would almost certainly end Perkins' football career. But he advised waiting on the procedure and fit Perkins with a 24/7 neck brace that strapped around his forehead and included back and breast plates.

Long a side sleeper, Perkins spent many a restless night adjusting to sleeping on his back. But it was worth it as natural healing worked its magic.

"That's when I really started seeing the hope and seeing the light of my future in football," Perkins says of Watkins' treatment.

Perkins saw Watkins in California every 3-4 weeks and leaned on Arizona State's staff, specifically head athletic trainer Gerry Garcia, for daily consults. In fact, Bruce Perkins credits the Sun Devils with "a fantastic job," even though a transfer remained possible.

"Bryce was telling my wife and me, 'Hey, I'm not having surgery,'" Bruce says, "and he said that so profoundly that we were like, 'OK, he knows something we don't. He knows his body.'"

"The rehab was just staying in the brace (4-5 months)," Bryce says. "The next step was getting the muscles in my right arm back because my arm was really weak. I couldn't even lift five pounds because the nerve damage from my neck to my shoulder was terrible."

By December, the Perkinses were convinced Bryce wouldn't need surgery, and in January Watkins cleared Bryce to participate in Arizona State's spring practices — without contact.

Also in December 2016, with Drew Lock established as Missouri's starting quarterback, Zanders announced he was transferring. Six-plus weeks later, he committed to U.Va., where Mendenhall needed a 2017 challenger to grad student Kurt Benkert, a pocket passer with little mobility, and a starter for 2018.

Perkins competed against a stacked deck at ASU in the spring of '17. Wilkins was the returning starter, and Blake Barnett, a former five-star recruit who had originally signed with Alabama, arrived via transfer.

"I had goals for myself," Perkins says, "so I had to make the best decision for me and leave."

But Perkins hadn't played since high school and was recovering from a broken neck. His options were limited.

Arizona Western, a community college in Yuma, offered a 2017 season in which Perkins could essentially audition for Bowl Subdivision programs. Matadors receivers coach Tom Ewan had coached Paul Perkins at Chandler High and recommended Bryce to head coach Tom Minnick.

Perkins signed with Arizona Western on June 5, and five days later Virginia announced that Zanders would not be joining the Cavaliers. U.Va.'s admissions office had denied his transfer.

The Cavaliers were back on the market for a dual-threat quarterback who could start in 2018.

With effortless speed and an above-average arm, the 6-foot-3, 215-pound Perkins fit the bill — if healthy.

“There was some hesitation with him until he took some hits,” Minnick says. “Even during the first couple games, there was still some hesitation, but after he got popped a couple times and (realized) he was good, then he started showing everything.”

Never more so than in early October on the road against Snow College in Utah, where Mendenhall played linebacker for the 1985 junior-college national champions and later served as an assistant coach.

Perkins threw for 376 yards and touchdowns of 94 and 11 yards against Snow. He also rushed for 70 yards and led a last-ditch drive that resulted in the game-winning field goal with eight seconds remaining. Arizona Western’s 29-27 victory was Snow’s lone defeat of 2017 and helped propel the Matadors to the national title game — they lost to East Mississippi 31-28.

Shortly after his team fell to Arizona Western, then-Snow coach Paul Peterson received a call from Jason Beck. Virginia’s quarterbacks coach was vetting another prospect, but Peterson endorsed Perkins.

“That was the very first time we had heard of him,” Beck says.

Beck’s evaluation of Perkins’ game tapes, coupled with the training staff’s assessment of his medical records, confirmed Peterson’s recommendation. Courtesy of fate and good fortune, the Cavaliers had unearthed their prototype quarterback.

Beck’s call offering a scholarship awakened Perkins from his usual 8 a.m., slumber, but when you aspire to quarterback a Power Five team, sleep is secondary. Perkins was unfamiliar with Mendenhall and Beck, but he certainly knew U.Va.

Ray Perkins, no relation, was a defensive lineman for the Cavaliers during the early 1980s, and following a brief NFL career, he settled in Arizona. There, he and Bruce Perkins met through a Bible study group organized by former NFL receiver Aaron Cox, and the families became close.

Though more than 30 years removed from Virginia, Ray Perkins, the athletic director at Tolleson Union High near Phoenix, knew Bryce could help the Cavaliers.

“I knew it when he was at Chandler (High),” Ray says.

Bryce and his parents scheduled a trip East. They would attend Paul’s game Thanksgiving night with the Giants at the Washington Redskins and drive to Charlottesville the next morning for Virginia’s Black Friday clash against Virginia Tech.

The Giants lost. The Cavaliers lost. Otherwise the weekend was perfect, even Bryce’s experience at Mendenhall’s ranch Saturday.

“It was different,” Bryce says. “I’d never seen so many green trees and green grass. Going to Coach Mendenhall’s house, that was my first time ever being on a horse, being on a ranch. I got on, we took a

little lap around his backyard, which is huge. It was a fun experience. I got off, I was a little sore. I was walking kind of like this, wobbling back and forth.”

Mendenhall cackles at the memory.

“That’s part of the, I would say, assessment process,” he says. “A lot of times I fall short of giving thorough explanations of how to ride, and I do that intentionally. I like to see how they’ll handle it. It’s safe and there’s sand in our arena and it’s a round pen. However, you’d think that a lot of these guys were riding a dinosaur or a tiger based on how they get on and off. But I like to just see how they’ll handle it and if they’ll ask questions. And he was poised, confident, uncertain but willing.”

“Once we had that visit with Bronco, and going to the game and seeing everything, it felt like, ‘Man, this is it. This is the right fit,’ ” Bruce says. “My wife knew, we knew, it was going to be the best place for him. Not only for the football, but the culture and the life after football.”

The following Saturday, Bryce played his final game for Arizona Western, passing for 139 yards, rushing for 123 and accounting for two touchdowns in the loss to East Mississippi. Two days later, on Dec. 5, he called Mendenhall and Beck to commit.

“He was hungry, had something to prove, and we had a huge need, a huge opportunity for him,” Beck says. “And so everything felt right.”

On Dec. 20, 2017, his 21st birthday, Bryce Perkins signed with Virginia. He enrolled in January, competed in spring practices and quickly established himself as QB1 for 2018, the position Mendenhall and his staff once envisioned for Zanders.

“The urgency to recruit Bryce was the urgency we felt to recruit Marvin,” says Mendenhall, entering his fourth season at U.Va. “We wanted that style, we wanted that system and we wanted it as soon as possible because we thought it was going to accelerate the program more than anything else. If Marvin comes — and there’s some unknowns about how he would have played — our need, and wow, the energy and effort we put into scouring the country and finding Bryce in Yuma, Ariz., probably doesn’t happen.”

Virginia faithful know what happened next.

His neck completely healed and an afterthought, Perkins led the Cavaliers to an 8-5 season and Belk Bowl rout of South Carolina, their first postseason victory since 2005. He passed for 2,680 yards and 25 touchdowns while rushing for 923 yards and nine scores, his 3,603 yards of total offense eclipsing Benkert’s single-season Virginia record of 3,144 from 2017.

Other than Trevor Lawrence, who as a true freshman last season helped Clemson win the national championship, there’s no returning ACC quarterback more accomplished than Perkins.

“Once he came on his visit and I had a chance to meet him and his folks, I was very impressed,” Mendenhall says. “But I didn’t know at that time just how poised and consistent and mature he would

be as well. So I would love to say we saw all of this in advance — there was a huge need that drove us — but he's exceeded expectations in just about every way."

Those who knew Perkins before he joined the Cavaliers aren't surprised.

"It's a well-grounded family with super, super-gifted kids," says Griswold, hired by Virginia soon after Perkins signed. "He's a very infectious young man that people gravitate to, and when this football thing's all said and done, he'll still be ... ultra-successful."

"I think what makes Bryce unique is that at any point and time he could have taken the easy way out and given up," Arizona State's Garcia says. "Thankfully, he remained positive throughout the entire process. His parents were supportive as well and displayed that same positive attitude that Bryce always had. I think that Bryce's optimism, determination and support system are what ultimately allowed him to have a great outcome."

Arizona Western disbanded football after last season, and Minnick has since become head coach at Garden City Community College in Kansas. But he and Perkins remain close, and during Virginia's off week last season, Perkins ventured to Arizona Western's game against Scottsdale.

"He was on the sideline cheering us on," Minnick says. "I gave him a hug and told him I love him. He's one of those players you don't get too often that you can count on. ... He has it in his mind that he can get to the next level, and he will just because he'll work hard enough to get it done."

"That's the kind of kid you want to coach, a kid that has all the confidence in the world and will work. He's not going to sit around looking at PlayStation and all that stuff. He's going to be working and improving his craft. ... I wish I had 100 of those kids."

Perkins injured his right (throwing) pinky in Virginia's fourth game last year, a victory over Louisville, played through the discomfort and had offseason corrective surgery. He missed one series of the Cavaliers' November setback at Georgia Tech with a sprained left ankle.

But when a broken neck has confronted you with football mortality, such ailments aren't about to derail your mission.

Virginia was "my last chance to get it right," Bryce says.

Seems that he has.

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**LaRonde' Liverpool nearly died in a car accident. Now the former Landstown star has returned to Wake Forest.**

<https://www.dailypress.com/sports/columns/david-teel/vp-sp-laronde-liverpool-wake-forest-recovery-20190903-izmvijc3kfgvxm6ehi4npx3pwe-story.html>

Five days after his family's world shattered, Herbie Liverpool went searching for answers. How mangled was the car? What did the intersection look like? Had anyone witnessed the crash? Who called 911?

"I wanted to see tire marks and pieces of glass and lights and signs and debris on the road," Liverpool says. "I wanted to get a feel for what happened to my son."

The tow-truck driver at the impound lot warned Liverpool that seeing the car would be jarring. Liverpool looked anyway, and cringed. He pried open the trunk, retrieved his son's belongings and headed for the junction of routes 40 and 35 in Sussex County, near Waverly.

Liverpool took photographs with his phone and strolled around. Then he walked up the driveway of the single-story brick home on the intersection's northwest corner.

Dogs barked when Liverpool rang the doorbell. Patty Worrel answered, and Liverpool asked if she knew anything about his son's accident. Worrel broke down.

"He's with Jesus now," she sobbed.

He is, just not in the way Worrel envisioned.

LaRonde' Liverpool was a redshirt sophomore defensive lineman at Wake Forest last season, and during the Deacons' open week, he traveled to Virginia State University in Petersburg to visit friends. On the morning of Friday, Oct. 12, one week after his 21st birthday, Liverpool left VSU in a 2011 Honda Accord and set his phone GPS for his parents' Virginia Beach home.

He drove south on Interstate 95 to Route 40 East, which would take him to Route 460 and a familiar path home. But Route 40 was not familiar.

Approaching the stop sign at the intersection of routes 40 and 35 in Sussex County, Liverpool was traveling at 40 mph, 15 below the posted limit, according to a State Police report. Southbound on Route 35, commercial trucker Oleksandr Tereshchenkov of Hollywood, Fla., was driving his tractor-trailer at the 55 mph limit.

Neither was impaired or distracted. The weather and road conditions were ideal.

But Liverpool ran the stop sign – the police report says a citation is pending – and the vehicles collided at full speed, Liverpool's car broadsiding Tereshchenkov's trailer. Only at impact did Tereshchenkov brake.

Its roof virtually sheared off, the car "went under the trailer, struck the rear tandem and was dragged under the trailer for 50 yards before becoming detached and coming to rest" off the roadway, the police report says.

Less than 100 yards away, their backs to the intersection, Patty and John Worrel were in their driveway, packing the car for a weekend trip to Staunton. Patty screamed to her husband as they pivoted toward the chaos.

“Call 911!”

It was 10:59 a.m.

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### **“The golden hour”**

Car remnants littered the intersection. Farther down the road, Tereshchenkov brought the truck to a stop. He was uninjured, and the trailer had about \$8,000 in damage.

Patty and a neighbor, Mary Moore, rushed to the car. They feared the worst, and inside they saw Liverpool, trapped but alive.

They reached in, held his hand and prayed aloud. They spoke to Tereshchenkov, who repeatedly said he hadn’t seen the car until impact.

Two ambulances from the Waverly Rescue Squad rushed to the scene, arriving in 10-15 minutes, followed by the Wakefield Volunteer Fire Department and Courthouse Volunteer Fire Department.

Waverly paramedics Adam Tuck, Ronald Benton and Mitch Booden knew almost immediately that first responders would need to cut Liverpool from the vehicle and have him helicoptered to the VCU Medical Center in Richmond, the closest Level I trauma center.

“It was hard to assess all of his injuries,” Tuck says, “because the dashboard of the car was actually on top of his legs and had him pinned down. So we couldn’t really see what was going on from his knees down. But I could definitely tell he had a femur fracture, which can cause you to bleed a lot internally. That in itself is a pretty severe injury.”

The femur, or thighbone, is the body’s longest and strongest, so strong that only a severe impact can break it. Indeed, the leading cause of femur fractures is automobile accidents, according to the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons’ website.

“I remember him being very hysterical,” Tuck says, “which is completely understandable. ... As I was cutting the airbags out of the way, I was talking to him the whole time, trying to calm him down. ... He was in a lot of pain, and I believe we gave him some medication before we actually extricated him, because in order to get him out, we had to manipulate him and twist his body.”

Paramedics needed about 20 minutes to free Liverpool, and just as they did, Virginia State Trooper pilot Jeffrey Weber, accompanied by flight nurse Chris Stevenson and flight paramedic Michael Burnett, landed a Med-Flight helicopter in an adjacent field. They transported Liverpool to VCU, where a team headed by Dr. Jibanananda Satpathy awaited.

Medical personnel call the first 60 minutes following traumatic injuries “the golden hour.” Treatment within that window is essential to preventing death.

The flight log says the helicopter landed at VCU at 12:23 p.m., 84 minutes after the accident, 24 minutes after the golden hour expired.

An associate professor in VCU’s Department of Orthopaedic Surgery, Satpathy checked Liverpool’s vital organs, stemmed the internal bleeding and began repairing the fractures: both femurs and hips, and the pelvis.

Often a traumatic injury on its own, an open dislocation of the left knee would have to wait.

Among the immediate measures were external fixators, stabilizing frames that hold fractured bones in place. Using small incisions in the skin and muscle, doctors placed screws and pins into the bones and attached them to bars outside the skin.

Thus began LaRonde’s 54 days at VCU, many of them bedridden. Then came three weeks at Princess Anne Health and Rehabilitation Center in Virginia Beach.

His weight plummeted from 285 to 220, and his raw strength waned. But summoning his athlete’s resolve, and supported by legions, Liverpool graduated from wheelchair to walker to crutches to walking on his own, from bedpan to bedside commode to restroom toilets.

Finally, 71 days after the accident and three days before Christmas, it was time to go home.

“You know when you’re little and you’re running down the stairs Christmas morning?” LaRonde’ says. “It was way better than that. I was just happy. I’m here, I’m with my family and I’m in the house. It was, honestly, the best feeling ever.”

Faithfully and good-naturedly, he endured grueling sessions at Pivot Therapy in Virginia Beach. Proudly and quickly, he ditched the hospital bed his parents set up on the first floor of their home and reoccupied his regular room upstairs.

This spring, he joined his dad and some friends on a cruise to Bermuda. By summer, he was volunteering as an assistant coach under Tommy Reamon at Landstown High School, his alma mater, and working at the Virginia Beach Convention Center in catering and concessions.

On Aug. 26, nine surgeries, 12 blood transfusions and more than 10 months since the accident, LaRonde’ Liverpool returned to classes at Wake Forest. Around his neck was the crucifix his father gave to him during his hospital stay. Herbie had worn the crucifix, a gift from his wife, for years.

“After this ordeal, it definitely opened my eyes to I wasn’t doing enough in my faith,” LaRonde’ says.

“Anyone who has doubts about God and that He works, this is a true miracle right here,” says LaRonde’s mother, Sonia. “When Herbie and I stepped into that (hospital) room and we saw LaRonde’ in that bed, eyes just barely open, just bruises all over, face swollen – he was just completely covered in blood,

debris, glass. It was just horrific. That knee, just hanging off the bed, it was completely open. ... I just didn't know. How do we get through this? It was unbelievable to see your only child just laying there.

"Me as a parent, as a woman of faith, the only thing I could do, I just threw myself over him and I just lifted my eyes up to the sky and I started crying. I cried and I prayed. I cried and I prayed to the only (one) I know who could intercede and work that miracle."

Patty Worrel knows more than most just how miraculous this story is. She heard the collision and saw the crumpled car. She heard LaRonde's pleas – "Get it off me! Get it off me!" – and when Herbie, via FaceTime, showed her LaRonde' in the hospital, she was overwhelmed.

Holding hands to brace her unsteady gait, Herbie and Patty then walked to the field where the Med-Flight helicopter had landed. They talked about everything that Patty saw.

"She's the one I give first kudos to for helping save my son," Herbie says. "She and her husband, John."

Patty "was an angel," Sonia says. "I'm sure he was scared, and God just sent that one person to comfort him and be with him so he wasn't alone."

Months later, surveying the accident scene once again, Patty taps her heart.

"Tell (LaRonde') I'm still praying for him," she says.

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### **"It was torture"**

One month after his Dec. 22 discharge from the rehab center, and mere days after taking his first baby steps, Liverpool relaxes in his parents' living room on a Monday afternoon. For more than an hour, he and Sonia, both remarkably upbeat, discuss Oct. 12 and the aftermath.

His left leg encased by a massive brace, Liverpool remains in the hospital bed. His discomfort is unmistakable.

"There were plenty of times I was crying because it hurt," he says, "but it never hurt as bad as it should have. Like right now, my leg's hurting, but it's tolerable. Even in the hospital, it was rough, but it was never, 'Oh my gosh. I can't take this.'"

That's the football player in him talking.

"You're just so proud of the progress that he's making," says Wake Forest coach Dave Clawson, who plans to honor Liverpool's scholarship whether or not he plays another snap. "You'd like to hope and think that some of the things he learned as a football player have led to this. ..."

"He's used to training, he's used to working, he's used to overcoming obstacles both physically and mentally. There's no way that doesn't help him in a situation like this."

Liverpool first encountered injury hardship prior to his final high school season, tearing the anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) in his left knee. Sidelined for 2015 at Landstown, he then redshirted as a freshman at Wake Forest.

His knee at full strength, Liverpool played sparingly in 2017 as a tight end for the Deacons. He moved last season to the defensive front, where Clawson says he was poised to earn playing time.

But recovering from a routine ACL surgery paled to this, to being hoisted out of bed via a mechanical cradle between his damaged legs, to having a tube snaked through his nose and to his stomach to drain bile. So maddening was the tube that LaRonde' just ripped it out one day.

"It was torture," Sonia says.

Retired from the U.S. Navy after 20 years, most spent with Security Forces or Military Police, Sonia serves as a civilian security assistant at Naval Air Station Norfolk. Herbie is a sales and leasing consultant for Charles Barker Toyota, and both were working the morning of the accident.

Police called Herbie because LaRonde' somehow relayed Herbie's cell number to Adam Gross, the State Trooper on the scene.

"The only thing I remember from that day is – I don't remember seeing anything, but I remember hearing like a wind, like a really loud wind," Liverpool says, "and then some guy was asking me, 'What's your dad's name and number?' I think that wind was the helicopter."

Liverpool concedes that he, like most, has texted, checked messages and perused social media while driving. But he insists that was not the case Oct. 12. Rather, he was listening for cues from the GPS.

"I had no idea where I was," he says.

"It's an intersection where we typically have some pretty bad accidents ... and severe injuries because of the speed limits," says Tuck, a three-year veteran of the Waverly Rescue Squad. "It's kind of a blind intersection, too, because of the way it comes together."

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### **"Things other than sports"**

Word of the accident traveled at warp speed via calls, texts and social media, and the immediate support overwhelmed the Liverpools.

Friends and family from near and far sent cards and descended upon Richmond. The congregation at Portsmouth's Mount Calvary Baptist Church, where the Liverpools worship, shared sermon videos.

LaRonde's football family, from the Virginia Beach Mustangs youth team to Landstown to Wake Forest, mobilized as well. Their respective coaches – Bruce Pearl, Reamon and Clawson – visited, and Landstown's athletic department, headed by Dave Siock, organized an event at the school that raised \$1,400.

The universal outreach hasn't stopped.

"We've been able to manage (the medical bills)," Sonia says. "We have not had a want. We have not had a need – for anything."

Sonia took a leave of absence from work and relocated to Richmond for the duration of LaRonde's hospital stay, while Herbie commuted between Virginia Beach and VCU as often as possible. From VCU to Princess Anne to Pivot Therapy, the Liverpools rave about the care LaRonde' has received.

The affection is mutual.

"People like him and his parents make it easy to take care of these cases through their demeanor and approach and attitude," says Alex Vap, who has operated on Liverpool's left knee three times since the accident. "It reminds me of why I went into the field."

Vap is an assistant professor of orthopaedic surgery at VCU and is part of the hospital's sports medicine division. He did his residency at Duke University Hospital, working with the Blue Devils' basketball, football, lacrosse and soccer teams, and, in a serendipitous connection, went to medical school at Wake Forest.

Vap was not in the hospital when Liverpool arrived Oct. 12. But after Satpathy stabilized Liverpool's femurs, hips and pelvis, Vap addressed the left knee.

"So the inside part of the knee was exposed to the outside," Vap says, "and he tore several ligaments that caused the knee to shift out of joint. Luckily for him, there was no nerve injury that affects foot movement, and no vascular injury that inhibits blood flow. ...

"With the open knee dislocation, that patellar tendon that connects the kneecap to the lower leg was just totally gone, and he had return the ACL and torn pretty significantly his (medial collateral ligament)."

Even after three surgeries – the most complex entailed reconstructing the patellar tendon using a graft from a cadaver, reattaching that to the kneecap and repairing the MCL – Vap has yet to confront the re-torn ACL. Liverpool had hoped to have that surgery this summer, but all parties agreed discretion was the better part of valor.

Instead, Liverpool focused on restoring flexibility and strength to his left knee. He jogged in a pool, rode a stationary bike and allowed therapists to bend the knee until it would bend no farther.

Zach Tavarez, Andrew Drehoff and Paul Reed coordinated much of Liverpool's rehab at Pivot. They were conversational during the sessions, quizzing him on everything from football to nutrition – Tavarez sighed when Liverpool confessed to scarfing three Hardee's sausage biscuits before a February hydrotherapy workout.

But like all good coaches, the Pivot folks tested Liverpool's limits.

“Love you guys,” Liverpool would say through gritted teeth when the therapy became especially grueling.

But, oh the dividends. By August, 10 months after the accident, Liverpool was walking normally and back to his playing weight of 285.

“Early on, of course his focus was, ‘I just want to be able to get back and play football,’” Vap says. “I think over time he’s recognized that yeah, that’s his ultimate goal and he’d love to do that. At the same time, he understands how big of an injury he took and he’s focused on those small little goals that sometimes we take for granted that he’s starting to appreciate. Being able to drive, being able to get up and walk to the refrigerator without having to use crutches or wear a brace. ...

“Obviously I would love to get him back on the field. I would love to see him put on a uniform, make a tackle and all that. As sports medicine surgeons, that’s why we train and do what we do. But sometimes there are limitations. There are things other than sports.”

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### **“I just love that kid”**

In the late afternoon heat of a mid-August Monday, Liverpool arrives early to Landstown’s practice. Reamon and his staff are inside, but Liverpool, wearing his omnipresent Wake Forest gear, strolls onto the field to instruct two promising defensive linemen on technique.

His right hand in the dirt, his feet spread just so, Liverpool looks very much like a college football player.

But he knows better. In fact, he describes himself as a “former” Wake Forest defensive lineman on his Twitter profile.

“Normal before I got hurt was practice every day, meetings every day, class every day,” Liverpool says. “Now if I let that be my norm, life will never be normal again. ... But now I’m out here rehabbing, working, helping Coach Reamon. That’s the new normal.”

Reamon beams at the mere mention of his former player.

“Man, do we have a treat to have him out there after what he’s gone through,” he says. “His enthusiasm, his spirit, just watching him communicate with the kids. The grace of God that he’s even here. When I talk about him, I do so with the greatest love and spirit that I can deliver about someone, because when I saw him in that hospital bed days after – he is an inspiration.”

The Wake Forest community is similarly inspired by Liverpool’s return to student life. He drove to campus a few times during his recovery to check in with teammates, coaches and friends, and on his March 19 trip he fulfilled a promise.

Candice Burriss is the administrative assistant in Wake Forest's Department of Communication, and during a winter trip to Williamsburg, she visited Liverpool in the hospital. Tethered to his bed that day, he vowed to walk into Burriss' office unannounced as soon as possible.

"When you do," she told him, "I'll cry."

And so he did. And so she did.

"He's a very special young man," Burriss says. "I could just tell from the moment he walked in the office that he's just – I don't know – I was just drawn to him. I could just tell he was serious not only about his sports, but he was going to be a serious student. He's very humble. ...

"Not knowing how he was for awhile was really hard, and then realizing how serious the accident was was devastating. I wasn't concerned if he was going to play. Was he going to survive? ... I just love that kid. ... I told him, 'God has a plan for you and a purpose.'"

Liverpool's immediate plans are to continue his education – his major is communications – and stay close with his team. He's living on campus at Magnolia Residence Hall, attending every practice and helping defensive line coach Dave Cohen in any way he can.

The Deacons were 3-3 when Liverpool had his accident, and he watched from afar as they completed a 7-6 season with a Birmingham Bowl victory over Memphis. Soon thereafter, a care package arrived at the Liverpools' home.

It was LaRonde's No. 44 bowl jersey and bowl championship ring.

"In a lot of ways, the bonds between LaRonde, his teammates and our coaching staff are probably stronger than they were before the accident," Clawson says. "It's kind of neat that he still feels a part of it, and really as a coach, you hope you create an environment where kids do feel a part of it just because they're in the program and not necessarily because they're the ones making the tackle or scoring the touchdown."

Liverpool still has another surgery ahead, to reconstruct his left ACL, and the subsequent rehab will further test his will. But in the last 10 months, he's passed a lifetime of tests.

"I'm going to miss football, obviously," Liverpool says. "It's what I've done since fourth, fifth grade. ... But I'm grateful for the time I had."

And eternally grateful for the life and milestones ahead, the first of which will be Oct. 5, when LaRonde' Liverpool celebrates his 22nd birthday.

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**10 years in the making, ACC Network is set to launch**

[https://www.pilotonline.com/sports/college/university-virginia/article\\_0d7ffe52-c067-11e9-b321-f74523b14b7f.html](https://www.pilotonline.com/sports/college/university-virginia/article_0d7ffe52-c067-11e9-b321-f74523b14b7f.html)

From concept to reality, the ACC Network has been a decade in the making. Ten years of collective effort guided by one man's unwavering resolve. Ten years of milestones interrupted by one stunning setback.

Most telling were a football transformation, covert expansion and public commitment. And through it all, a business relationship became an enduring friendship.

"It's historic," ACC commissioner John Swofford said of the network's Aug. 22 launch, "and you don't get to be a part of (history) very often. So it's big. It's big for the league. It's been fun."

Swofford is traveling to ESPN's Bristol, Conn., headquarters Thursday and will be featured as the channel goes live at 7 p.m. But there will be no extended champagne benders or victory parades in the aftermath for the venture's partners, ESPN, its parent Disney and the ACC.

Work remains, the most important of which is making the network available to as many consumers as possible. Availability translates to revenue, and it's there the ACC lags far behind the Southeastern Conference and Big Ten.

Major cable providers such as Verizon Fios, DirecTV, Spectrum-Charter and Altice are contracted to carry the channel. So are streaming services Hulu, YouTube TV and PlayStation Vue.

"We're already in more homes than were online the first year of the Big Ten Network," Virginia Tech athletic director Whit Babcock said. "We're in way more homes than the Pac-12 Network has today, and every (distribution) projection we've been given over the last three years has been hit on the nose."

Cox Cable and Xfinity-Comcast, both prominent in Virginia, have yet to reach carriage agreements. Nor has the Dish Network, but as channels previously launched by the Big Ten with Fox and the SEC with ESPN/Disney, distribution negotiations can hinge on when previous contracts with providers end.

That's why the ACC and ESPN targeted 2019 for launch, to coincide with the expiration of some Disney/ESPN deals with major cable outlets.

Carriage negotiations "continue and will continue through launch and beyond launch," said Rosalyn Durant, ESPN's senior vice president of college networks. "We do believe that the fans continuing to demand it and fans' readiness to switch if their home provider doesn't provide it gives notice."

Babcock is a Comcast subscriber ready to change.

"I can get the Big Ten Network and the SEC Network in the state of Virginia," he said, "and the reality is part of my dollars are going to those conferences out of state. I believe it's still 40-some percent of the state of Virginia as of today won't be able to get it unless they switch. Hopefully, Comcast will see the value in it before their contract (with Disney/ESPN) runs out in 2021."

"It's great to be at this point," Swofford said, "but we have been very careful with our member schools to look at (carriage) realistically."

### **Carolina connection**

Swofford hails from North Wilkesboro, N.C., played football at North Carolina, began his administrative career as Virginia's ticket manager and served 17 years as UNC's athletic director. He's as ACC as Thacker and Packer and has led the conference since 1997.

Swofford shepherded Virginia Tech, Miami and Boston College into the league in 2004 and '05, growing membership to 12 schools, then the minimum for staging a championship football game. In the summer of 2009, two years after the Big Ten Network went live, Swofford asked a fellow North Carolina graduate about the viability of an ACC channel.

Based in Raleigh, N.C., Dean Jordan is the managing executive of properties at Wasserman Media and has led media rights negotiations for myriad college and professional sports clients, including Notre Dame and the College Football Playoff. He also helped Wayne Huizenga start the Florida Sports Channel in 1995.

While working for Huizenga's Florida Marlins baseball team, Jordan hired Michael Kelly as an intern, and by 2009, Kelly was the ACC's senior associate commissioner overseeing football, broadcasting and communications. When Swofford first mentioned the potential of the ACC Network, Kelly, now the University of South Florida's athletic director, suggested he call Jordan.

Swofford and Jordan had met in passing during Jordan's tenure as president and chief operating officer of the National Hockey League's Carolina Hurricanes, but it was Jordan's television expertise that Swofford needed.

"I very quietly had him do a document" about network viability, Swofford said. "Then I hired him as a consultant. It just grew naturally from that. ... It was pretty obvious to me that Dean was very progressive in his thinking and really understood channels."

Jordan confirmed Swofford's suspicion that even with membership that stretched from Boston to Miami and included other major markets such as Washington, D.C., and Atlanta, the ACC needed to expand its reach to make a channel feasible. Moreover, as both understood, ACC football had to shed its malaise — no conference team had finished among the Associated Press' top five since 2000.

In September 2011, the league addressed its demographics by unveiling Syracuse and Pittsburgh as new members, an expansion no one saw coming until the deal was done. One year later, Notre Dame agreed to join the ACC for sports other than football.

But those additions were muted in November 2012 when charter member Maryland blindsided everyone by announcing its intention to bolt the ACC for the Big Ten. ACC officials quickly replaced the Terrapins with Louisville — the market's television viewers devour college sports — but industry speculation of further ACC splintering was incessant.

Swofford never blinked, at least not publicly, confident in his vision for the league. And safe to say, the ACC rallied in 2013.

In April, its 15 schools signed a grant of media rights that essentially prevents member defections. Florida State then authored a perfect football season, winning a national championship and starting an ACC football revival that Clemson carried on with the 2016 and '18 national titles.

"There are very good reasons we haven't done (the network) previously," Swofford said. "The first one is we weren't capable of it. We weren't large enough, didn't have enough footprint, didn't have enough population, didn't have enough television sets and weren't good enough in football collectively. And we didn't have a grant of rights, which we had to have, in order for ESPN or any other partner to make that kind of commitment."

ESPN committed in July 2016 to the 2019 launch — the three-year runway afforded schools time to build on-campus studios and control rooms capable of producing linear television content — and omnipresent in the negotiations was Jordan. Since, he has been similarly involved with network distribution.

"He brings a level of experience that we don't have anywhere else in our league," Swofford said, "and the insights from that have been very important. And he grew up an ACC fan. He's fully vested in wanting this to be successful. ... He's been superb."

But the Swofford-Jordan dynamic transcends business. They are golf partners and often sit together at sporting events. Their beach homes are close to one another, and when Jordan had a recent health scare, since resolved, Swofford marshaled the considerable medical resources the conference's schools offer.

"He's one of my all-time great friends," Jordan said. "I put him in the category of just the special people in your life. He was so good and so kind to us when I was (sick). Those are the type of things you never forget."

And is it difficult to work for a close friend?

"It's fairly easy," Jordan said with a laugh, "because he's the commissioner, and I'm not. ... When we're out and we're being social and we're playing golf and we're doing whatever, we can be friends. It's a whole different dynamic than when we're in the office."

Jordan works with other Wasserman clients but won't be leaving the ACC scene after Aug. 22.

"You shift from launch to management," Jordan said, "and I've got a couple other things I'm helping the ACC with. So there's plenty to do. And this is a labor of love. Once you put this much time into it, you don't want to walk away from it, and fortunately there's going to be enough to do that I'll be able to keep my finger on the pulse of what's going on and help out where needed."

**Packer and Durham**

During the 1970s, play-by-play man Jim Thacker and analyst Billy Packer, the latter a former Wake Forest standout, anchored ACC basketball telecasts that are revered decades later. Even the primary sponsor, Jefferson Pilot Insurance, and its catchy jingle — "Sail with the Pilot, at the wheel ..." — are fondly remembered.

Those Wednesday and Saturday basketball games brought the conference then-unprecedented exposure, but nothing like a 24/7 channel.

The ACC Network will air more than 400 live events in the 2019-20 academic year, including 40 football games and 150 men's and women's basketball contests. The first football broadcast is Georgia Tech at Clemson on Aug. 29, but the first competition on the channel will be four days earlier, when reigning NCAA women's soccer champion Florida State hosts Wisconsin.

This fall season, the ACC Network will exclusively air a combined 90 events in field hockey, volleyball and men's and women's soccer.

"That's a huge benefit of the network that sometimes goes unnoticed," Virginia athletic director Carla Williams said of the exposure for Olympic sports, especially women's programs.

"As a former volleyball player at a very small school, I would have loved the chance to have been on TV," said Stacie McCollum, ESPN's senior director of programming and acquisitions, who's a graduate of Concordia University in Texas. "We continue with ACC Network Extra and the ton of (digital) content there, and we also have the added exposure on the linear (cable) network. For me, that's a very personal point of pride, just to continue to prop up ... women's sports."

The ACC Network will lean on insider access for programming such as a mini-series showcasing Clemson football and a documentary on Virginia basketball's 2019 national championship. Analytics will be the root of more non-traditional storytelling.

"We are going to be pretty aggressive in the execution of data and analytics as it relates to a storytelling device," said Amy Rosenfeld, the ACC Network's senior coordinating producer. "I think we're going to try to incorporate sort of the two tiers of storytelling, which is the human side, the human-interest side, but then also what is the next level of storytelling through data and analysis. ...

"I don't say this lightly, and I'm definitely dating myself, but I've been doing this a really, really long time, and I've worked on really, really big events. I've worked on Olympics, I've worked on World Cups. I have never been a part of an animation and graphics package that is as forward-thinking and innovative and cool as this ACC Network package."

The most consistent ACC Network presence will be "Packer and Durham," a daily talk show reprising a team first coupled last year on SiriusXM radio's ACC channel. Mark Packer and Wes Durham were raised in ACC families, and each knows and appreciates the conference's heritage.

Durham's late father, Woody, was the North Carolina Tar Heels' radio voice, and last year he was inducted posthumously into the National Sports Media Association Hall of Fame. Packer's dad is the aforementioned Billy Packer.

Televised from a studio ESPN constructed in the home of Packer's Charlotte, N.C., home, "Packer and Durham" will air from 7-10 a.m., and be simulcast on SiriusXM.

"I think my dad would be proud," Durham said. "I think he'd be happy they've entrusted people who know the history of the league."

Another chapter in that history opens Thursday. Will enough folks pay for the ACC Network and watch on their televisions, laptops, tablets and/or phones? Will the channel's exposure elevate the conference's already-accomplished Olympic sports programs?

Ten years since first broaching the concept and three years since finalizing the project with ESPN, Swofford is confident.

The ACC Network, he said, "is built to last."