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Sports

REKULAPELLI: On a world without sports

Sports across the country take a hiatus as all efforts shift to managing the escalating coronavirus pandemic

Photo by [Emma Klein](#) | The Cavalier DailyBy [Akhil Rekulapelli](#)

March 19, 2020



As the coronavirus pandemic tightens its grip on a worried nation, people across the United States have filled their gas tanks, pantries and cabinets in anticipation of a lockdown. Yet among the pantries laden with non-perishables and the cabinets flush with toilet paper, one thing remains empty — the place sports holds in many fans' hearts.

After center Rudy Gobert of the NBA's Utah Jazz tested positive for COVID-19 March 11 before a game against the Oklahoma City Thunder, the NBA decided to suspend all play until further notice. This triggered a domino effect that led to the cancellation of the college basketball season and national championship tournament, the postponement of the MLB and NHL seasons and the eventual [cancellation](#) of all NCAA winter and spring championships.

Although these measures were rightly taken to slow the spread of a virus that has infected over 8,700 individuals across the country as of Wednesday night, it is tough to forego the positive effects sports can have on our community in times of hardship. Virginia alumnus Chris Dembitz — who runs the comedic Phony Bennett account on Twitter, which offers hilarious takes on Virginia sports to his 19,000 followers — knows this as well as anyone.

“For me, sports have always been there through the most challenging times of my life, offering an escape, a two- or three-hour distraction from my troubles,” Dembitz said. “They don't make your worries disappear, but for a while, you can push those to the back burner while you care about something lighter.”

There is something unique about watching a group of people donning your city or university's name try to shoot a ball into a hoop or hit a ball into the stands. You can lose yourself in the rhythm of the game, analyzing every cut, every spin, every bounce of the ball. You yell your own plays or call fouls with a foolish hope that the players, coaches and referees on the other side of the television hear your pleas.

Yet, even more so, you lose yourself in the narratives — the feel-good stories that captivate a nation, like Syracuse All-ACC guard

Tiana Mangakahia and her valiant fight against breast cancer, or Virginia men's basketball's redemption tour that turned a historic loss to a No. 16 seed into a national-championship run for the ages. Whether or not you're a fan of Syracuse or Virginia — or even basketball itself — is secondary to the true tales of resiliency that sports show us — tales that can motivate and inspire us during this time of global struggle.

"In troubling times, we need to work even harder to find the beauty in life, to find a reason to smile, a reason to cheer and even a reason to laugh," Dembitz said. "Sports gives us that opportunity."

Even in the context of this crisis, sports have still found a way to play a role.

"I think for a lot of folks, the seriousness of the coronavirus outbreak was brought into focus by the cancellation of sports," Dembitz said. "For sports fans who haven't been personally affected by the outbreak just yet, this carried weight."

For example, when the NCAA men's basketball tournament was cancelled March 12, many Virginia fans were heartbroken, especially given the eight-game winning streak the Cavaliers were on. The defending national champions looked poised to make a deep run in the ACC and NCAA tournaments, but now the Virginia faithful will never know how far the 2019-2020 Cavaliers could've gone.

But the fact that March Madness — an event that garnered \$933 million in revenue last year — was cancelled, has allowed coaches to use their platform to laud the decision and emphasize public safety.

"No one wanted it to end this way, but in light of all the uncertainty and people who would be put at risk, I support and understand the NCAA cancelling [March Madness]," Coach Tony Bennett said. "It is important in these circumstances for us to consider the bigger perspective and act toward the greater good."

There is no doubt that many of us will miss sports during this time of international hardship. Sports have given us some of our highest highs and some of our lowest lows. They have brought about stories that even the authors of fairy tales look at in awe. Most importantly, they have carried us through the inevitable moments when life throws a wrench in our plans.

"I think we feel the loss of sports in trying times more than in good times, which speaks to their ultimate value to us," Dembitz said.

Yet, in this peculiar time where no balls are being bounced or laps being run, it is important that we realize the remarkable effects sports have on our lives. Sports will undoubtedly come back, but now knowing what a world without sports is like, you just might find yourself cheering a little louder, crying a little harder and smiling a lot more when they do.

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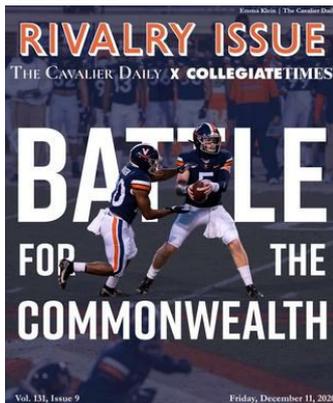
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Sports

2020 Virginia football: The big preview

The defending ACC Coastal Champions look to build off a decade-best 9-5 season in 2019



Senior cornerback Nick Grant and senior outside linebacker Charles Snowden hope to secure the Commonwealth Cup one last time before leaving Grounds.

Courtesy Virginia Athletics

By Akhil Rekulapelli

September 1, 2020



Following an off-season dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic, Virginia football looks to improve on a 2019 season that saw the Cavaliers [defeat rival Virginia Tech](#), win the ACC Coastal division and [secure an Orange Bowl appearance](#). However, this year's Cavalier squad will look noticeably different from the 2019 team, as Virginia loses stalwarts in quarterback Bryce Perkins, wide receivers Joe Reed and Hasise Dubois, linebacker Jordan Mack and cornerback Bryce Hall to graduation. Along with the changes in the personnel, the Cavaliers' schedule will also look different. Due to the pandemic, Virginia will play a [conference-only 10-game slate](#) that includes challenging road games against Virginia Tech, Florida State, Clemson and Miami.

The breakdown

Offense

With the loss of All-ACC quarterback Bryce Perkins, Virginia was already in a tough position under center. However, with the pandemic cancelling spring workouts, sophomore quarterback [Brennan Armstrong](#) and junior quarterback [Keytaon Thompson](#) only had an abbreviated summer session to develop rapport with the offense. While Armstrong had the edge on Thompson during fall camp due to his familiarity with the team, Thompson clearly beats Armstrong out talent-wise. The New Orleans native was the fifth-ranked dual-threat quarterback out of high school and showed flashes of excellence at Mississippi State. Watch for Mendenhall to bring Thompson in if Armstrong struggles with the offense early.

At the skill positions, Virginia returns 2019 starting running back junior Wayne Taulapapa, but loses two All-ACC honorees in wide receivers Reed and Hasise Dubois. Taulapapa will be joined in the backfield by [Towson graduate transfer Shane Simpson](#), who was an FCS All-American in 2018 before injuries marred his 2019 campaign. While Taulapapa posted 12 touchdowns in 2019, he often struggled to get involved in the option and to create big plays on the ground or off screens. Simpson should fill this role nicely, providing the Cavaliers' run game with a new dimension due to his speed and pass-catching abilities. [Junior Indiana transfer Ronnie](#)

[Walker Jr.](#) should also see action in the backfield if his waiver appeal is approved by the NCAA.

Out wide, Reed provided the Cavaliers with exceptional speed on screen and slant plays, while Dubois had the one of the surest pairs of hands in the nation — dropping zero passes in 2019. Stepping up in their place will be senior wide receivers Terrell Jana and Ra'Shaun Henry. Jana served as Virginia's third option behind Reed and Dubois, posting 73 receptions and 878 yards receiving in the 2019 season. The Vancouver native has shown a strong ability to find seams in the opposing defense, and should make Thompson and Armstrong's jobs a little easier. Henry, on the other hand, is a graduate transfer from FCS school St. Francis, where he earned first-team All-NEC honors in the 2019 season. Like Dubois, Henry can sky over defenders and absorb hits while holding onto the ball. Yet despite the addition of Henry, Virginia is still thin at the wide receiver position due to the loss of sophomore wide receiver Dontayvion Wicks to a season ending injury. For Jana, Henry and a supporting cast that includes junior wide receiver Tavares Kelly Jr. and freshman wide receiver Lavel Davis Jr. to fill the shoes of Reed and Dubois, the Cavaliers will certainly have to be creative in the passing game.

At tight end, the Cavaliers lose Tanner Cowley, but return sophomore Grant Misch, who played in all 14 games for Virginia last season. Yet the presumptive starter for Virginia is graduate transfer Tony Poljan, who appeared in 37 games over three seasons for Central Michigan. Poljan brings a quarterback's intuition to the tight end position for Virginia, as he played quarterback for the Chippewas in his first two seasons in Mount Pleasant. Finally, Virginia returns all five starters from last year's offensive line, including All-ACC junior center Olusegun Oluwatimi. The Cavaliers had trouble protecting Perkins at times last year, but the increased chemistry in the offensive line should pay dividends this coming season.

Defense

Virginia loses three starters from last year's Virginia Tech tilt coming into the 2020 season, namely seniors in inside linebacker Jordan Mack and right end Eli Hanback, as well as junior safety Chris Moore, who transferred to Georgia State as a graduate transfer. Perhaps the biggest loss for the Cavaliers, however, is All-American cornerback Bryce Hall, who suffered a season ending ankle injury against Miami.

In the front seven, while the loss of Mack and Hanback is a substantial one, they are replaced by two seasoned players in senior inside linebacker Rob Snyder and senior right end Mandy Alonso. Following a 2018 season that saw him start seven times for the bowl-eligible Cavaliers, Snyder suffered a season ending injury four games into the 2019 season. If he can stay healthy, Snyder's hard-nosed mentality should improve an already solid Virginia run defense that was 40th in the nation in rushing yards allowed per game in 2019. Like Snyder, Alonso provides a bevy of experience, having already played in 34 games for the Cavaliers. The Florida product showed up big in key moments throughout the 2019 season for Virginia, including the Commonwealth Cup-clinching sack and forced fumble this past November.

Rounding out the front seven is an extremely experienced cohort of players that has a cumulative 75 total defensive starts. Outside linebackers junior Noah Taylor and senior Charles Snowden puzzled opposing offensive lines last year with their exceptional length and speed and could find themselves receiving first-team All-ACC honors by season's end. Senior inside linebacker Zane Zandier led all Cavaliers with 108 tackles last season, and time and time again proved his ability to plug the gap and stop dynamic running backs. Senior left end Richard Burney has had a career plagued with injury, but after being awarded the first jersey number selection of the year, Burney is poised to have a breakout season. Finally, sophomore nose tackle Jowon Briggs — the highest ranked recruit of the Mendenhall Era — has the potential to be a defensive anchor for Virginia and could enter the All-American conversation by his senior season.

Looking at the secondary, Virginia fell victim to numerous injuries throughout the season, having lost cornerbacks Hall and Darius Bratton, as well as safety Brenton Nelson. This year, however, sees the return of Bratton and Nelson alongside an experienced trio of seniors in cornerback Nick Grant and safeties DeVante Cross and Joey Blount. With the three injuries last year, health is clearly a point of concern for the Cavalier secondary, but if they can stay healthy, their experience and disciplined play could guide Virginia back to the ACC Championship.

Games to watch

At Virginia Tech, Sept. 19

As is the case every year, Virginia's 102nd tilt with Virginia Tech has implications for both ACC ranking and state bragging rights. With Armstrong making his first career start, this game is more ideally positioned for the Hokies, who have an established quarterback in junior Hendon Hooker. On the defensive side, the Hokies had All-ACC junior cornerback Caleb Farley opt-out of the season, while the Cavaliers return an experienced defense that found answers for Hooker in 2019. Overall, look for this game to be a tough fight that goes down to the wire.

Vs. No. 18 North Carolina, Oct. 31

As Coach Mack Brown's team has soared from sleeper to dark horse ACC contender, the Cavaliers' home match-up against North Carolina will prove if the Cavaliers are truly worthy of an ACC Championship berth. With loads of young four and five-star talent marshalled by 2019 ACC Rookie of the Year, sophomore quarterback Sam Howell, the Virginia defense should have their hands full with a Tar Heel offense that averaged just over 33 points per game last season and returns 10 of 11 starters.

Vs. Louisville, Nov. 7

Coach Scott Satterfield surprised ACC experts last season by leading Louisville to an 8-5 record — [including one against Virginia](#) — and a Music City Bowl win. As more of his recruits come into the Cardinal program, Satterfield has all the makings of a coach who could restore Louisville to its glory days of Lamar Jackson and Teddy Bridgewater. Furthermore, with its position at the tail end of the season, this game could make or break the Cavaliers' hopes of a second consecutive ACC Championship berth.

Prediction

The ACC schedulers did Virginia no favors this season, as the Cavaliers face a brutal road slate that features consecutive road games against Virginia Tech and Clemson. With plenty of new faces on the offensive side of the ball and a new quarterback in Armstrong, it's easy to question the Cavaliers ability to repeat their Orange Bowl appearance. On the flip side, Virginia returns

numerous experienced players on defense that could stifle dynamic offenses in North Carolina and Wake Forest.

Finally, given that the divisions have been dissolved for this one-of-a-kind 2020 season, the Cavaliers face an even tougher path to the ACC Championship game with a 10-game conference-only schedule. I predict that the Cavaliers will go 7-3 this season, with away losses at Clemson and Miami and a home loss against North Carolina.

The Cavaliers kick off their 2020 campaign in a battle for the Commonwealth Cup against Virginia Tech Sept. 19 in Blacksburg at Lane Stadium.

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Virginia vs. No. 1 Clemson — a breakdown

The Cavaliers head south to face the three-time national champion and defending ACC champion Tigers



Virginia will look to avenge a 45-point blowout loss to Clemson in last year's ACC Championship game.

Courtesy Virginia Athletics

By Akhil Rekulapelli
October 2, 2020

Following a [38-20 victory](#) over ACC Coastal rival Duke, Virginia football gears up for what is conceivably its toughest game of the season against No. 1 Clemson. The Cavaliers (1-0, 1-0 ACC) have dropped four straight contests to the Tigers (2-0, 1-0 ACC) and will certainly have to bring their A-game if they want to topple a Clemson squad that has won two national championships in the last four seasons.

The Cavaliers last faced the Tigers in the 2019 ACC Championship, where they were overwhelmed in a [62-17 loss](#). Clemson exploited a Virginia defense riddled with injuries as then-sophomore quarterback Trevor Lawrence threw for 302 yards and four touchdowns. On the other side of the ball, the Cavaliers struggled to make headway as senior quarterback Bryce Perkins was intercepted twice and the team had lost senior wide receiver Joe Reed to injury.

With both teams having lost key players from last season to the NFL Draft, there will be some unfamiliar faces on the field. Nonetheless, this match-up for the Cavaliers will remain a difficult one, as everything will have to fall Virginia's way if they want to pull off a historic upset.

Players to watch:

Virginia senior linebacker Charles Snowden

Last year, Clemson scored 62 points against the Cavaliers — the most points allowed by a Virginia defense since a [63-21 loss](#) to

Illinois in 1999. Despite the loss of wide receiver Tee Higgins to the NFL Draft and junior wide receiver Justyn Ross due to issues around a congenital fusion of his spine, the Tiger offense remains potent, and the Virginia linebackers — namely outside linebacker Charles Snowden — will be tasked with slowing it down. Snowden was a force to be reckoned with last year for the Cavaliers, earning All-ACC honors and showing an innate ability to get the outside edge on the offensive line to sack the quarterback. For Virginia to halt Clemson's offense, Snowden will have to continually bring pressure and use his extraordinary length to bat down passes and cause havoc in the pocket for Lawrence. If Snowden is successful, look for the Cavaliers to have a fighting chance to take down ACC royalty.

Clemson junior quarterback Trevor Lawrence

While it's safe to say that most if not all of Clemson's starting lineup is laden with NFL prospects, only a few players in the country match the Hall of Fame potential of Lawrence. After leading Clemson to the national championship in his freshman and sophomore seasons — winning the former — Lawrence is a lock to be a top-five pick in the 2021 NFL Draft. His combination of size, athleticism and pinpoint accuracy gave the Virginia defense trouble last season, as he proved to be able to make plays with his arm and his legs. However, with the aforementioned loss of Higgins and Ross out wide, Lawrence has had to rely more on his skills over those of his wide receivers this season, focusing on chunk yardage — going down the field in plays of 10 or 15 yards — over big plays like those against the Cavaliers in 2019. Despite the loss of weapons, Lawrence will face a Virginia defense that showed its vulnerability to passes across the middle against Duke. The Georgia native could have a big game if he exploits that weakness, especially in an offensive system that is miles ahead of Duke and its other ACC counterparts.

Keys to the game:

Get to Lawrence

For Lawrence to be stopped, the Virginia defense cannot give him time to throw the ball. Part of why Lawrence has enjoyed historic success is the offensive line in front of him and his ability to nimbly escape the pocket under pressure, which grants him time to scan the field and accurately target his receivers. Snowden and junior linebacker Noah Taylor will have to repeatedly challenge the Tigers' offensive tackles and put pressure on Lawrence, forcing him to make poor throws that stall drives and cause interceptions. By limiting Lawrence's ability to energize his offense, the Cavalier offense can then keep pace with the Tigers and stay within striking distance. On the other hand, if the Virginia defense lets Lawrence take his time, the game could be out of Virginia's reach by the end of the first quarter.

Dictate the pace on offense

Last year, the Virginia offense looked jittery after going down early to Clemson, as former quarterback Bryce Perkins made errant throws under pressure. While it's easier said than done for new QB1 sophomore Brennan Armstrong, Armstrong will have to stay calm and find his receivers as the Tiger defense barrels in. Against Duke, Armstrong was solid in the fourth quarter, but looked to do too much at the game's start, throwing deep balls into tight coverage and asking too much of his receivers. The Virginia offense has thrived on quick slant and out routes that allow it to methodically march down the field and Armstrong cannot let an early deficit convince him to force deep throws against a dynamic Clemson defense.

Virginia takes on No. 1 Clemson at Memorial Stadium in Clemson, S.C. Saturday. Game time is set for 8 p.m. and the game will be broadcast live on the ACC Network.

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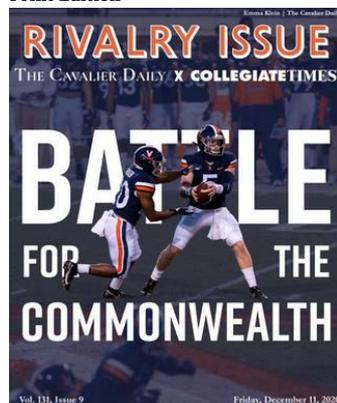
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