

THE ROANOKE TIMES

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How former Virginia Tech coach Justin Fuente found himself to be a 'man on an island'

By Mike Niziolek

BLACKSBURG — Virginia Tech's loss to Syracuse was the tipping point.

The Hokies blew a nine-point lead in the final five minutes on Oct. 23 to a Syracuse team that was previously winless in the ACC. The game ended with the few remaining fans at Lane Stadium chanting "fire Fuente" as the teams walked off the field.

Athletic director Whit Babcock watched his hand-picked successor to Frank Beamer get heckled from the sidelines behind a pair of sunglasses doing little to hide his stoic expression.

Babcock had already confided to key donors in the days leading up to the game that Justin Fuente's tenure was on shaky ground.

That scene in October pushed Babcock to initiate informal conversations between the university's legal counsel and Fuente's agent about what form an amicable split might look like.

Tech was on the hook for a \$10 million buyout that was part of a contract extension that Babcock negotiated in January 2018. The Hokies thought offering an upfront payment instead of paying the amount out over the length of the deal (through 2024) in quarterly installments opened up a way to reduce that number (it did, at \$8.75 million).

The start of that delicate dance was the point of no return for the two sides, according to multiple sources familiar with the situation who spoke to The Roanoke Times in a series of interviews conducted over the last two months. The marriage ended on Tuesday morning when Tech formally announced that it had "mutually agreed" to part ways with its head coach with two games left to play.

Babcock and Fuente met every Wednesday — as they did throughout Fuente's tenure — and those conversations remained cordial, but as the losses piled up both men knew a change was increasingly likely.

Fuente's focus remained on finishing out the 2021 season and trying to solve the myriad of offensive issues plaguing the team until his very last day in the office.

That didn't go unnoticed by players, who credited the staff for helping shield them from what has been described for The Roanoke Times as a "somber atmosphere" inside the Merryman Center over the past two months.

It's why players were stunned when they arrived on Tuesday for meetings and practice to learn that Fuente was leaving.

While Babcock said the decision was made with “their best interests” in mind — he also addressed players on Tuesday morning — many players found the timing of the announcement insulting and placed the blame on administrators. Fuente was given a choice to coach the final two games, but that offer came after Babcock told him he wouldn’t be brought back as coach for the 2022 season.

“Everyone assumed he was gone, but if you didn’t get rid of him three weeks ago, why now?” one source said. “It was weird.”

Commonwealth woes

The three games that defined Justin Fuente’s tenure were losses to in-state foes that most associated with the program would rather forget.

It started with a 49-35 loss to Old Dominion in 2018, a 29-point underdog, that was at the time the largest upset against an ACC opponent in four decades, according to ESPN Stats & Info. Tech was 2-0 and ranked No. 13 after opening the season with an impressive win on the road over Florida State while ODU was 0-3 and went on to finish last in the Conference USA East Division.

The ODU game was a perfect storm with the Monarchs getting a once in a lifetime performance from former walk-on quarterback Blake LaRussa, who put up a career-high 495 yards and five touchdowns (four passing), in front of a raucous sold out crowd.

One former player compared that loss to James Madison scoring an upset win over the Hokies in 2010. That 2010 team also went on to finish 11-3 with a win in the ACC championship game over Florida State while Fuente’s squad needed to find a last minute replacement opponent to reach six wins and qualify for a bowl.

The 39-30 loss in the 2019 season finale to Virginia was also a setback for the program since it ended a record 15-game win streak in the rivalry, but that loss came with a caveat as well.

Virginia quarterback Bryce Perkins had established an impressive set of credentials as a two-year starter and was well respected across the league. The dual threat quarterback lit up the Hokies with a near-perfect second half performance to capture the Commonwealth Cup.

Many weren’t as forgiving of last year’s loss to Liberty with many sources describing that as a low point of Fuente’s time in Blacksburg and it was mostly of his own making.

The game came down to a coaching gaffe in the final seconds — Fuente inexplicably called a timeout before the Flames attempted a 59-yard field goal, which Tech blocked and returned for a game winning touchdown — that cost Tech a victory.

“Oh, that timeout,” a source said. “That was like when it got really ugly. Everyone was like, he’s got to go.”

The sequence highlighted what one source noted was a distinct change from the swagger Fuente showed a couple years earlier in a late game situation against Pittsburgh. The Panthers lined up with a fresh set of downs at Tech’s 1-yard line with less than a minute to go and the sequence unfolded with Fuente holding onto a pair of timeouts.

“Against Liberty, he didn’t trust his coaches, he didn’t trust his personnel,” the source said. “He was totally different against Pitt, man. That was one of the best goal line stands in Tech history because he trusted his team.”

Quarterback carousel

The lofty expectations fans had for Virginia Tech at quarterback when Fuente was hired were understandable given his resume. Fuente made a name for himself mentoring Andy Dalton and Paxton Lynch.

Tech’s 10-win season right out the gate with junior college transfer Jerod Evans at quarterback set the bar even higher.

Evans’ decision to leave for the NFL was a bigger setback than anyone anticipated and one of the most significant events of Fuente’s tenure. The mercurial quarterback informed the staff after the Hokies comeback 35-24 comeback win in the Belk Bowl over Arkansas.

Fuente was caught off guard by the timing of the decision and Evans’ lack of interest in receiving any feedback from NFL scouts. The coaching staff thought if Evans came back it would have given wide receivers Isaiah Ford and Bucky Hodges a compelling reason to stay in Blacksburg as well.

Tech had a ready-made Coastal contender and reaching a second straight ACC championship game could have propelled the program to the glory days of the Michael Vick-era.

The Hokies got a constantly spinning quarterback carousel instead with bad luck (mostly injury related) and questionable decisions contributing in equal measures. The list of starting quarterbacks since Evans departure included Josh Jackson (16), Braxton Burmeister (15), Ryan Willis (14), Hendon Hooker (14) and Quincy Patterson (1).

The common denominator during that time was offensive coordinator Brad Cornelsen.

Fuente remained steadfastly supportive of Cornelsen throughout his tenure and didn’t take kindly to questions about changing play callers even amidst long stretches of offensive futility. When Fuente was asked about taking over play calling duties during the 2020 season, he called the question “the most ludicrous crap I’ve ever heard.”

Burmeister’s struggles this season came as no surprise to those with knowledge of the situation given the lack of autonomy quarterbacks have traditionally had in Cornelsen’s offense, according to a source.

There was hope during the offseason with Burmeister getting all the first team reps that Tech’s offense would flow more freely — and the first half against North Carolina showed promise — but that proved to be an outlier and there was growing frustration among the offensive players about Cornelsen’s approach as the season went on.

“You have got to let your quarterback be your quarterback,” a source said. “There wasn’t autonomy to read the defense on a run-option. He would tell the quarterback whether he should hand it off or run. You can’t manage every piece of it.”

Cornelsen would also dictate where his quarterbacks needed to throw on passing plays before the snap and criticize them for passing elsewhere even if the intended target was covered. A source ran through

multiple instances for The Roanoke Times of when Burmeister was “ripped” this fall for making a positive play only because the ball went to a different receiver than Cornelsen wanted.

“It’s frustrating cause there’s a tremendous football team there,” a source said.

Cold shoulder

Former players from coach Frank Beamer’s era constantly felt shortchanged by the new regime and weren’t shy about sharing those feelings on social media.

The frosty relations were surprising to those within the program considering Fuente made a concentrated effort to hire multiple coaches and staffers — Justin Hamilton, J.C. Price, Darryl Tapp, Corey Fuller and Jeron Gouveia-Winslow — who played for Beamer.

The common gripe among alums was that Fuente made little effort to connect with them and didn’t seem interested in having them around the program even in an unofficial capacity.

That feeling intensified when the 1999 team was honored at halftime of Tech’s loss to Duke in October 2019. The evening came and went without Fuente getting a chance to meet up with the couple dozen players who were back on campus.

It’s hard to knock Fuente for the incident since his focus was on the game, but it highlighted the blindspot he had for public relations. The approach worked well at a win-starved program like Memphis, but it wasn’t a recipe for success at Tech, especially with alums accustomed to Beamer’s open arms approach.

Tech set up a series of Zoom calls during the offseason in hopes of rebuilding those connections. Former Tech offensive lineman Dwight Vick moderated one of those calls that was for former players only.

Vick conducted interviews with athletic director Babcock, both coordinators and new linebackers coach Jack Tyler. It was a well-attended event with players representing teams going back to the 1960s.

Fuente participated in a Zoom call moderated by Mike Burnop later in the spring, but didn’t join his fellow coaches for the one moderated by Vick. The fact that Fuente didn’t go the extra mile didn’t come as a complete shock to sources on the call.

In Fuente’s six years in Blacksburg, former players could only recall the coach appearing at one event — a preseason type picnic event in his second year — where the coach spoke directly to a larger group of former players.

That delayed effort wasn’t enough to get many of the more influential former players in his corner as the team struggled this fall. One source said Fuente was content to be a “man on an island” to his own detriment.

“He never really engaged,” a source said. “They were trying to embrace him and there was a huge disconnect. I don’t think it was personal, but there was nothing ever there.”

There were also strained relationships with a small, but vocal group of Fuente’s own former players that frequently criticized the coach on social media.

The group consisted mostly of players who were recruited by Frank Beamer who didn't appreciate the contrasting styles between the two, according to multiple sources. Many of them left the program after the transfer portal was put in place during the 2018 season.

That initial wave of transfers created what multiple sources described as an "overblown" narrative surrounding the program and the portal. Tech had 41 scholarship players enter the portal over four seasons (just over 10 players a year), which wasn't much higher than the average that was being reported by most other ACC teams.

While fans spent 2021 lamenting Hendon Hooker's departure given his success at Tennessee, he was an exception among the group. There were only 12 transfers that stayed in the Power 5 and even fewer that ended up as starters.

"Look, there were some issues with guys, some had to go and others just wanted to leave," a source said. "That's just the nature of the business. That happens everywhere."

Baylor episode

Fuente's brief flirtation with Baylor after the 2019 season soured his relationship with a large portion of the fanbase for good.

According to sources with knowledge of the situation, Baylor athletic director Mack Rhoades had long coveted a chance to interview Fuente. The former Missouri and Houston athletic director reached out again just as Fuente finalized his coaching staff for the 2020 season.

Fuente didn't envision leaving Tech, but agreed to the interview at Baylor mostly as a courtesy to Rhoades, whom he respected. Nothing went to plan when Fuente's meeting with Baylor leaked out publicly.

According to multiple sources, that became a point of frustration between Babcock and Fuente. The two eventually repaired their relationship and reports of friction within the athletic department over the last year and a half were overblown.

It wasn't as easy for Fuente with Tech's fan base.

While he used Baylor's interest to help secure more resources for the football program, that didn't really register with fans. They grew increasingly frustrated by his decision to wait more than three weeks to address the topic.

Babcock acknowledged this was a misstep last year when he spoke about retaining Fuente for the 2021 season.

This might not have been an unforgivable sin had Fuente built up more good will with fans early in his tenure. He opted for a more guarded approach and his main interaction with the fanbase came at the program's annual fan day.

That frustration reached new levels this fall with fans hammering social media with their criticism of Fuente. Players and their families who knew Fuente well were dismayed by the level of vitriol directed at the coach in recent weeks and admitted privately that the situation had become untenable.

“This shouldn’t have happened,” one source said. “I think Justin had multiple chances to save his job and make changes. I just hate it for Virginia Tech, it’s tough. Really tough.”

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When dinner is on the O-line

By Mike Niziolek

CHRISTIANSBURG — What does it take to feed Virginia Tech's offensive line? Mission BBQ area director operations for Western Virginia David Clark has an unofficial formula for that.

"They eat about two and a half times what a normal person would eat," Clark said. "We've done a lot of catering for Tech in the past and we kind of figured that out based on experience."

Clark and his staff at the Mission BBQ location in Christiansburg rely on that formula to feed Tech's offensive line a weekly dinner this fall.

Mission BBQ reached out to Tech's offensive line after the NCAA adopted a uniform policy across all three divisions allowing student-athletes to profit off their name, image and likeness as of July 1.

A deal quickly came together with the restaurant agreeing to provide Techs' entire offensive line — scholarship players as well as walk-ons — weekly dinners through the 2021 season in exchange for some social media promotion.

To hear Mission BBQ co-founder and co-owner Bill Kraus explain the deal, the real benefit for the company is just getting Tech's linemen through the door on a weekly basis.

"Customers kind of bump into it, and it almost becomes something people will want to experience and watch those guys cause you can see the pure joy they get from it," Kraus said.

Kraus said honoring offensive linemen is in line with the company's mantra, "proudly serving those who serve."

The Maryland-based restaurant chain was opened on the 10th anniversary of Sept. 11 and supports the military, first responders, police and firemen through fundraisers, giveaways and hiring local veterans. One of the traditions at each location is the observance of the national anthem at noon.

The company has 108 locations spanning across 17 states and that includes 20 locations in Virginia.

"We were interested to see where this whole thing could land and see where we could get involved," Kraus said, of the NIL changes. "...When you really think about who epitomizes the make of the football team it's often those guys up front. The unsung heroes of a team. If there's one thing we know about those guys, it's that they love to spend time together and they love eating."

Mission BBQ signed the offensive lines at Notre Dame and Wisconsin to similar deals.

"When I think about an offensive lineman, that's what's in their heart," Kraus said. "They love doing their part and ultimately love keeping people safe."

And so every Tuesday this season — the dinner was moved to Wednesday on the off week — Mission BBQ guests in Christiansburg are welcome to dinner and a show of sorts.

Before the Hokies came in, the cooks prepared around 45 extra pounds of protein to go along with eight or 10 more quarts of each of the restaurant's side dishes.

"We just give them all the food they want," Clark said.

Clark has multiple tables reserved in the middle of the restaurant with place settings all laid out. One table runs almost the length of the dining area and there's another table right next to it to accommodate up to 21 players.

The veterans arrived early on Wednesday and set up at the smaller table. Hoffman sat on one side next to Luke Tentua and Johnny Jordan. Tyrell Smith, Silas Dzansi and Lecitus Smith sat across from them.

All the underclassmen sat together at the larger table.

"That's the little kids table today," Dzansi said, with a laugh.

The restaurant had a six-pack of sauces on each table, but Hoffman asked for "Alabama White" before the food arrived. Hoffman gets teased for the special request — he describes it as a horseradish-type sauce — but most of his teammates use the sauce after trying it.

Once the food started coming out of the kitchen, it didn't stop until dessert was set on the table. Clark mixes in a specialty dish — last week it was a smoke and seared New York Strip — to go with the restaurant's staples. The steak drew whistles and cheers when it was brought to the table.

"I'm getting fat today," Tyrell Smith said, as the first server appeared.

Smith lit up when the first dishes were brought to the table in large bread tins. The pulled pork and sausage came out first and were quickly scooped up. Ribs and mac and cheese weren't far behind.

The food is passed around and quickly disappears before going one full rotation around the table. The first serving of steak — about a dozen steaks cut in half — were gone in an instant.

The topics of conversation are what you'd expect from a group of collegiate student-athletes — the breakout Netflix show "Squid Game" (Jordan highly recommends it), Jesse Palmer being named the host of "The Bachelor," the merits of Zaxby's and how it's impossible to hear coach Justin Fuente when he's mic'd up at practice.

That's about as close as they come to discussing football and the only mention of next week's game against Notre Dame is about ticket allotment. Players ask around to see if anyone is not using their full allotment of four tickets for the sold out game.

Tyrell Smith's age is a frequent source of ribbing. It starts when the seventh year offensive lineman gets noticed by a guest.

"When you live here for 10 years you know everybody," Tentua joked.

Jordan, one of the newcomers of the group, asked Smith how many senior days he's had, but can barely get the question out before bursting into laughter.

"Do you just have to bring back your framed jersey back each year?" Jordan asked.

Smith tells Jordan he should try to come back next year since the NCAA is just handing out extra years of eligibility, a remark that made Hoffman laugh.

“Must be nice,” Hoffman said, shaking his head. “They weren’t doing that a couple years ago.”

Hoffman’s request for immediate eligibility drew national attention in 2019 when the NCAA denied his petition (and numerous appeal attempts) in what was thought to be a textbook case for a medical hardship waiver.

The chatter died down once the food arrived and there’s a leisurely pace to the proceedings.

Clark checked on the group multiple times and waitresses frequently asked the players whether they needed any of the food dishes refilled.

As true freshman Jack Hollifield loaded up a second plate, Hoffman turned to the younger offensive lineman who he has mentored this season and asked what his weight is up to.

“Two eighty,” the tight end turned center said.

“We getting him right,” Hoffman said, with a smile.

When dessert is served there’s a scramble to claim all the cups of caramel bread pudding, with many linemen trying to get two.

Everyone takes a to-go box and some fill it up more than others. Dzansi grabbed two full steaks and as much pulled pork as he could fit in the container. He got nods of approval when he handed the box to a few of his teammates to check it out.

“That’s at least four pounds,” Tenuta said.

Near the end of the meal Clark came over to the table and recognized Tech’s offensive line for the whole restaurant.

“We want to fuel them up enough to go out there and beat Notre Dame the week after next, go Hokies,” Clark said, to cheers.

Those are the moments Kraus loves to hear about.

"I'm a firm believer that some of the fondest memories are those shared when gathered at a table," Kraus said.

Based on the feedback he's getting, Kraus fully expects the deal with Tech's offensive line to continue into the future.

“We hope this truly becomes a tradition of the offensive line room at Virginia Tech for hopefully many years to come,” Kraus said. “If you want to say tradition never graduates, we hope we are part of the subsequent offensive lineman that becomes part of the proud Hokie tradition that we become integrated in that fabric.”

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Hollifield family relishes beating North Carolina

By Mike Niziolek

BLACKSBURG — Virginia Tech linebacker Dax Hollifield knew exactly where he was going after the whistle blew.

Hollifield bookended a flurry of possession changes early in the fourth quarter with an interception in Tech's 17-10 win over No. 10 North Carolina on Friday night.

The sequence started with Tech's defense forcing a pivotal turnover on downs at midfield. Hokies quarterback Braxton Burmeister threw an interception of his own on the first play of the ensuing drive, but North Carolina's reversal of fortune was short lived.

Tech defensive lineman Norell Pollard tipped a pass at the line of scrimmage two plays later. The ball fluttered through the air nowhere near its intended target Josh Downs and Hollifield made a diving interception.

The North Carolina native ignored his teammates looking to celebrate and sprinted towards the Hokies sideline with one goal in mind.

"My dad is not a big UNC fan," Hollifield said, after the game. "Not a big UNC fan at all. Not a big one. And this game has always meant a bit more to me because growing up, I was not a big UNC fan as well. So when I caught it, I knew exactly where I was taking it."

Dax found his father Aubrey Hollifield behind Tech's bench and tossed the football to him. Aubrey made the one-handed grab in the front row and beamed with pride.

"I've been a part of his football life from all the way when he was a little kid," Aubrey Hollifield said, in an interview with The Roanoke Times after the game. "I've always been a part of it. We were doing drills when he was a little kid. This is some validation that what we did together mattered."

While Dax was reluctant to discuss the origins of his father's dislike for the Tar Heels after the game, Aubrey had no issues offering an explanation.

"I grew up a huge North Carolina fan," Aubrey Hollifeild said. "They told them I really wasn't good enough to play for them. They didn't recruit me ... it hurt a little bit and it sticks with you. I think that spills over to your children too."

Dax originally tried to get his father a game ball when he made an interception in 2019 at Wake Forest (his father's alma mater), but couldn't get to his dad in the stands. This time Aubrey got a few minutes with the ball before security arrived to take it back.

"It had a UNC logo on it," Aubrey Hollifield said. "I'm guessing that's why they took it back. It would have been pretty sweet to have."

Hollifield jokingly suggested he should have tried to hide the ball better, but whether the ball ended up in a trophy case or not — it was still a special day for the family.

Before Dax got to Virginia Tech, his father was on the sidelines for nearly every single moment of his career. The same goes for Dax's younger brother Jack, who is now a true freshman offensive lineman with the Hokies. The brothers last played together for Shelby High School back in 2017.

The Hollifield's had 15 family members attend the game on Friday night, but Aubrey wasn't initially going to be one of them. Aubrey is still an assistant on Shelby's staff and the Golden Lions had a game scheduled on Friday night against Crest High School, a fierce local rival.

"All of a sudden with the COVID protocols, the team had to cancel," Aubrey Hollifield said. "It was a last minute thing. I got told on Wednesday."

When he arrived in Blacksburg on Friday, he wasn't quite prepared for how emotional he got. It started when he saw both his sons get off the bus for Hokie Walk.

"There were tears and Dax cried," Hollifield said, with a laugh. "I don't know if it was the emotion we were playing North Carolina or that Jack was here, I don't know."

The intense emotional reaction continued when he got to his seats in the lower bowl of Lane Stadium.

"When I used to play, I used to get sick, almost throw-up," Aubrey Hollifeild said. "I would get so hyped up and when Dax started playing in high school I would get like that. I hadn't been sick as much lately, especially the last couple of years, but right before the game I was starting to get that feeling."

His biggest fear was that the people around him might think he had COVID and he wouldn't get to watch the game. The uneasiness turned to joy once "Enter Sandman" hit and the players jogged out onto the field in front of a capacity crowd for the first time since 2019.

"There's nothing else out there like this," Aubrey Hollifield said. "The atmosphere, you see all those people out there? Running through that tunnel, I've seen it a million times and I still get chills."

Aubrey Hollifield got settled in and witnessed a vintage Tech defensive performance. The Hokies held the ACC preseason player of the year Sam Howell to 208 yards on 53% passing. He threw a career-high three interceptions under constant pressure from Tech's front seven and was sacked six times. Hollifield had four tackles with a half a sack and the interception.

The defense that gave up 56 points and 656 total yards (including a program record 399 yards rushing) to the Tar Heels last year was nowhere to be found.

"We've been working so hard for the last eight months to really just get this last season off our back," Dax Hollifield said. "That's in the past obviously, but it's just been really just wearing on us ... the job we did last year wasn't good enough."

When the Hollifield's met up after the game in front of the Jamerson Center, the relief on both their faces was easy to see.

"I thought the six overtime game was awesome, but this right here, this was a great win," Aubrey Hollifield said.