

With 'wind in the sails,' Longwood chasing its first March Madness appearance

Gather 'round, all, to meet the most improbable regular-season champions of this college basketball season. Behold the spiritual journey of a lawyer-turned-CFO-turned-coach who relates to oil moguls and power forwards alike. Marvel at the talent he recruited to a program that hadn't experienced a winning season in more than a decade.

As important in these globally turbulent times, take a moment to smile at how small-town Farmville has embraced its Longwood Lancers, turning claustrophobic Willett Hall (1,900-seat capacity) into a raucous home-court asset and helping them earn the top seed for this week's Big South Conference tournament.

University president W. Taylor Reveley IV and then-athletic director Troy Austin yearned for a program that energized students and townsfolk alike when they hired Griff Aldrich as coach. But four short years later, everyone's expectations have been surpassed.

"To be honest it's been a little bit surreal," Aldrich said. "... To see the joy in the students, and their engagement, and their pride in Longwood. ... And then the community. [One] game the community side was full, and students were still filing in. It reminded me of my wedding. We got married in Houston, and my wife's side was packed already and the groom's side was still trying to fill the first couple rows."

As you'll see, the 47-year-old Aldrich is nothing if not self-effacing. But don't mistake that for meekness.

Graduating from University of Virginia law, earning partner status in Houston's largest international firm, building a private oil and gas enterprise and serving as chief financial officer for an investment house requires large doses of confidence, fire and ambition, traits quite evident during Longwood practices and games. But Aldrich's career arc precluded the seasoning that most college head coaches get on the assistant circuit.

Sure, he spent one year working for Tony Shaver at Hampden-Sydney after his playing days with the Tigers, and yes, he founded a faith-based youth basketball program, HIS Hoops, in Houston's Third Ward while thriving in the corporate world. But until he and Julie — she earned a theology degree from Oxford while Griff practiced law for Vinson & Elkins in London — ditched comfort and headed to Catonsville, Md., Griff hadn't fully committed to the business of college basketball.

This was 2016, and Maryland-Baltimore County, UMBC, had just hired Aldrich's close friend and former Hampden-Sydney teammate, Ryan Odom, as head coach. Odom promptly appointed Aldrich, a Virginia Beach native and Norfolk Academy graduate, as director of recruiting and program development.

You know what happened next. In Odom's second season, 2017-18, the Retrievers won the America East tournament and, as a No. 16 seed, ambushed top-seeded UVA in the first round of the NCAA tournament. Weeks later, Aldrich was the head coach at Longwood, a 10-minute drive from his alma mater.

Transitioning to Division I in 2004, and full-fledged members since 2007, the Lancers had compiled a 130-312 record over the previous 14 seasons. But Aldrich was all in.

"One thing I really admire about Griff is, he's followed his heart," Shaver said. "He's followed his passion. I think it was a leap of faith for Griff, and a leap of faith for Longwood as well, to make a move like that. My counsel to him was, 'You can get your basketball fix [in Houston] and continue the life you're living.' But when we were having those conversations I could tell it just wasn't enough for him.

"Remarkable is the only way I know to describe it."

Out of coaching since his 2019 separation from William & Mary, Shaver has enjoyed a front-row seat as Aldrich, and his program, have matured. Indeed, Shaver's son Austin is Longwood's director of basketball operations.

Tony Shaver's 17 seasons at nearby Hampden-Sydney, 1987-2003, combined with his current role as Aldrich's untitled advisor give him a unique perspective on Longwood's trajectory from Division III to Division II to Division I independent to, since 2012, Big South member.

The Lancers clinched the league's regular-season title with a 71-66 home victory over Radford last Wednesday. They are 23-6 overall, 15-1 in the Big South, 16-1 at home, and if they stumble in the conference tournament, they are still assured of competing in the postseason National Invitation Tournament.

Taking to the public-address microphone to thank fans Wednesday, Aldrich called the moment "a massive deal."

"It's just magical to be in Farmville and Willett Hall and see those games," Shaver said.

Did Aldrich, honored Tuesday as the Big South's coach of the year, see this coming? After all, Longwood finished .500 in the Big South in 2020 and '21, returned key veterans Justin Hill, Deshaun Wade and Leslie Nkereuwem, and added transfers Isaiah Wilkins (Virginia Tech and Wake Forest), DA Houston (College of Charleston) and Jordan Perkins (North Carolina Central).

Well, sort of.

This is Aldrich's biggest, strongest and most skilled roster, but he wasn't sure how the newcomers would mesh with his holdovers.

"I wish I could say I've figured out all the magic sauce on this," Aldrich said, "but I certainly haven't. ... I do think we pay keen attention to the character of the guys we recruit. That doesn't

mean we get it right all the time or even evaluate well at times, but I ... really think it's helped the locker room. I think that the guys all really love each other, and I think it's a credit to each individual person."

Aldrich and his wife are devout Christians and the parents of three adopted African-American children from inner-city Houston: Scott, Ford and Laura Lee, ages 10, 9 and 7. Griff said he and Julie felt "called" to have a multiracial home and called to coach at Longwood, but while faith informs their worldview, the only preaching to players revolves around the program's stated values of excellence, grit, humility, gratitude and service.

Well, that and taking good shots and playing sound defense.

Hill, the son of former UVA All-American Donna Holt Hill, leads the Lancers in scoring, while Wilkins paces them in rebounding, and both made first-team all-conference. Wade is the best 3-point shooter on a squad that ranks 35th nationally in accuracy beyond the arc and, according to Aldrich, he's Longwood's "spiritual leader" and "most passionate player."

In that regard, Wade reflects his coach, who's always pushing for more, who frets that winning 13 conference games by eight points or less is a sign of weakness rather than poise. So animated is Aldrich that his staff, Austin Shaver in particular, has to occasionally rein him in.

"Come to our practice, and you might go, 'Wow,'" Aldrich said of his intensity. "I'm a Christian but it's because I need a savior, not because I've got life figured out. It's good that His mercies are new every morning."

"I know his intensity comes from how much he cares about us, how much he cares about the program, how much he loves the game and wants to see it played right," said senior forward Zac Watson, the Lancers' most accurate shooter. "He's just a passionate guy, and I think we feed off that, and I respect that, because there's never a day he doesn't have it, and there's never a time he's going to ask us to do something he's not willing to do."

Aldrich's 24/7 drive has assisted fundraising as well, helping raise money for a transformation of the university's basketball facilities. Within two years, Longwood (enrollment 5,000) will have constructed a 3,000-seat arena and adjoining performance center, while converting Willett Hall to a practice gym.

"For a place like Longwood, we're never going to be VCU, and we're not trying to be VCU," Aldrich said. "But it just feels like there's a lot of wind in the sails right now."

The Lancers' task is to channel that momentum into a Big South tournament championship and automatic NCAA bid, a quest that begins with a quarterfinal Friday at noon in Charlotte, N.C.

"I've thought about those three games in three days," Watson said. "... It's really going to be a test of our physical, and also mental, toughness. It's probably going to be gritty, because it's just that time of year, but if there's a team that can do it, I think it's us."

Carolina ends Coach K's Duke career with a victory for the ages at the Final Four

NEW ORLEANS -- College basketball waited nearly a half-century for a providential NCAA tournament collision of Duke and North Carolina, for the bracket gods finally to conspire and bring the sport's premier rivalry to the national championship stage.

This wasn't possible until 1975, when expansion of the field allowed more than one team from a conference to qualify, and there was a near miss at the 1991 Final Four in Indianapolis.

But Lord have mercy, the Tar Heels' 81-77 victory over the Blue Devils late Saturday night in a national semifinal at the Superdome was worthy of the moment and the programs' celebrated histories.

"It was a game that the winner was going to be joyous and the loser was going to be in agony," Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski said. "And that's the type of game we expected."

'Twas a game that propelled Carolina into Monday's championship final versus Kansas.

'Twas the game that ended the retiring Krzyzewski's record 13th Final Four and his 42-year career at Duke one victory shy of playing for his sixth national championship.

'Twas a game that cemented Caleb Love and Armando Bacot into Carolina lore.

'Twas a game with ALL the feels, not to mention 18 lead changes, 12 ties and two hours and 16 minutes of exhausting tension.

That anxiety and energy among the 70,602 packed inside the dome was palpable from the start and never abated. Two reasons.

First, the game was far more competitive than the opening semifinal, Kansas' 81-65 victory over Villanova. Second, and duh, this was Duke-Carolina.

"I think it reached a level that you would expect," Krzyzewski said. "Those kids from both teams played their hearts out. I mean, the crowd was standing most of the game, I think."

Yes, it was. And if we on press row hadn't been attempting to tweet, write and merely wrap our heads around the spectacle of it all, we'd have been standing, too, high-fiving one another at our good fortune to watch all this transpire.

Neither team led by more than seven points, their respective counter punches impeccably timed. Whenever momentum was tempted to take sides, a Tar Heel or a Blue Devil would reveal the notion as folly.

Love, Bacot, Brady Manek or RJ Davis for Carolina. Paolo Banchemo or Trevor Keels for Duke, which played extended stretches with a small lineup due to Mark Williams' and Theo John's foul trouble.

Scoreless for the first 15 minutes, Love finished with a game-high 28. He missed seven of 10 attempts beyond the 3-point arc but made the shot of a lifetime, an no-conscience 3-pointer in the final minute to give the Tar Heels a 78-74 lead.

"I couldn't do it without my guys and my coaches," Love said. "I give all the credit to them. They put me in the position, and it was a team effort. Just one game away from a national championship, what else can you say?"

Oh, there's plenty more to say.

Bacot, a junior center from Richmond, recorded his 30th double-double, breaking Tim Duncan's ACC single-season record. He scored 11 points and snared 21 boards, the most rebounds in a Final Four contest since Kansas' Nick Collison had 21 in the 2003 title game against Syracuse, also here at the Superdome.

Bacot limped off the floor on a sprained ankle with 4:36 remaining, and reserve Puff Johnson made two clutch free throws in his stead before Bacot returned.

And how was Bacot feeling postgame?

"I feel amazing," he said with a wide smile. "I feel great. Better than ever."

"He will play [Monday night]," Davis said, laughing. "Even if he just stands there, he's going to play. ... There's been a couple of situations throughout his career where he has sprained his ankle and he's like come back right away. So it didn't surprise me for him to get back into the game."

Banchemo and Keels teamed for 39 Duke points, but Wendell Moore, AJ Griffin and Jeremy Roach shot a combined 7 of 32. The Blue Devils missed 8 of 20 free throws, including two by Williams with 46.7 seconds remaining and the Tar Heels leading 75-74, and were a miserable 5 of 22 beyond the arc.

"We gave it our all," Banchemo said, "and it sucks we came up short, but I'm proud of the effort that we put in and the way we went out. ...

"Just being able to go to war with Coach and the team for the whole season — he was so committed to us all year. Never made it about him."

Krzyzewski didn't want Saturday to be about him, either, but rather about his team's 32-7 record, ACC regular-season title and run to the Final Four.

“I’ve been blessed to be in the arena,” Krzyzewski said in the most discerning moment of his final news conference, “and when you’re in the arena, you’re either going to come out feeling great or you’re going to feel agony, but you always will feel great about being in the arena.

“And I’m sure that that’s the thing, when I look back, that I’ll miss. I won’t be in the arena anymore. But, damn, I was in the arena for a long time. And these kids made my last time in the arena an amazing one.”

This is Davis’ first season in the arena as a head coach, and wow. Erratic for much of the regular season, the Tar Heels (29-9) defeated the Blue Devils in Krzyzewski’s final home game, won taut NCAA tournament contests over Baylor and UCLA en route to New Orleans and ended Krzyzewski’s career in the ultimate Duke-Carolina encounter.

The inevitable question — how do you now prepare for Kansas? — asked, Davis laughed.

“That’s easy,” he said. “We’re playing for a national championship. ... I want them to celebrate tonight. I just do. This is a special moment for them. This is a special moment for our program.”

Special doesn’t do it justice.

Hokies 'forever champions' after emphatic ACC tournament conquest of Duke

NEW YORK -- Nearly a half-century ago at storied Madison Square Garden, Virginia Tech basketball reveled in a National Invitation Tournament championship, won on Bobby Stevens' shot at the buzzer against Notre Dame.

Fast forward to Saturday night, across the East River in Brooklyn, where the Hokies seized another championship, one their 1973 forefathers could not have fathomed, one earned emphatically, emotionally and versus the winningest coach in the sport's history.

Virginia Tech 82, Duke 67.

In the ACC tournament final. Before a raucous crowd at Barclays Center teeming with delirious Hokies.

And as the requisite confetti tumbled from the rafters and the P.A. blared the Tech anthem, "Enter Sandman," even old-school Hokies had to wonder if an ACC banner trumps the NIT.

Suffice to say, the college sports universe was different back in '73. Tech was an independent that pined for ACC membership but would first compete in the Metro, Atlantic 10 and Big East before the ACC came calling.

And with the NCAA tournament field at a modest 25 teams, the NIT was a large deal. But this is the ACC, college basketball's premier conference tournament, and to win it, Tech had to survive four games in as many days.

About those games.

Darius Maddox's 3-pointer at the horn stunned Clemson on Wednesday.

Justyn Mutts' all-around excellence and the team's ruthless offensive efficiency dispatched second-seeded Notre Dame on Thursday.

Keve Aluma and Maddox ignited a second-half rout of third-seeded North Carolina on Friday.

And Hunter Cattoor's performance of a lifetime buried top-seeded Duke on Saturday for Tech's first conference title since it won the Metro in 1979.

The ACC's automatic bid in hand, the 23-12 Hokies no longer care about the relentless NCAA bubble talk that clutters early March. At No. 7, they are the lowest seed to win this event and the fourth team to defeat seeds 1-3 en route to the title — Virginia in 1976 was the first.

But that UVA squad went 4-8 in the ACC during the regular season. After a staggering 2-7 start, this Tech bunch went 11-9 and started to flash the form most anticipated in preseason.

Here in Brooklyn, the Hokies defeated North Carolina and Duke by a combined 28 points on back-to-back nights, and they are the first ACC champions to win their semifinal and final over an Associated Press ranked opponent by at least 13 points.

Let that marinate for a moment: In a span of about 25 hours, Virginia Tech KO'd two of college basketball's iconic programs.

That's a long way from late January, when the Hokies resided in the ACC basement.

"I think as we're 2-7 and losing games we're not expecting to lose, that weight, that burden, that doubt creeps in, and that's tough," point guard Storm Murphy said. "It's tough to have that.

"We were talking about it in those moments; it was a dark place. We didn't want to be there. We didn't expect to be there. But the resilience of this team and the belief never wavered. I think we had more belief in those moments even than we did in the summer in the preseason with all the expectations."

Murphy is the Hokies' fifth-leading scorer, but in some regards he is their driving force, and during the handshake line, retiring Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski delivered a message.

"They deserve the utmost respect, and that kid is their leader," Krzyzewski said. "He's a tough player, and I wanted to make sure that he knew that Duke University feels — Duke basketball feels that way about him. ...

"What a journey they've had here, four incredible games, the last couple especially. They've been like a well-oiled machine. They're a team that you need two or three days of preparation for to put in your defensive game plan, and it still might not work."

Indeed, even with another day of preparation, good luck to Duke, or any other opponent, slowing Cattoor on Saturday. He scored a career-high 31 points and made 7 of 9 beyond the arc in what Krzyzewski, coaching his record 22nd ACC final, called a "Klay Thompson game."

A better comparison is Fletcher Magee, Division I's career 3-point leader, whom Mike Young coached at Wofford before accepting the Tech job three years ago. Projected as a possible heir apparent to Magee, Cattoor committed to Wofford but then accompanied Young to Blacksburg.

"I almost didn't get him because of Fletcher Magee," Young said of Cattoor. "Fletcher is from Orlando. Hunter is from Orlando. He said to me during the recruiting process — I thought I was going to lose him. He said, 'Coach, I don't think I can be Fletcher Magee.' I said, 'Hey, buddy, I don't need you to be Fletcher Magee, I need you to be Hunter Cattoor.'"

That he has become, not only a shooter with unlimited range but also a bulldog defender. He was relatively quiet in Tech's first three games here, but he staggered Duke (28-6) with four first-half 3s and never let off the gas.

When the Hokies joined the ACC in 2004, they had not reached the NCAA tournament in eight seasons. But Seth Greenberg coached Tech to immediate ACC respectability, and in 2007 his team tied for third in the league and returned the program to the NCAA bracket.

Buzz Williams built upon that foundation with three consecutive NCAA bids from 2017-19, reaching the East Regional semifinals in '19 before falling to Duke. When Williams bolted for Texas A&M, Hokies athletic director Whit Babcock sagely called Young home.

At Wofford, Young was 5-0 in Southern Conference tournament finals. Now he's 1-0 in ACC finals.

Think the man can coach a bit?

When Duke drew within 61-56 Saturday, Young calmly held up five fingers. Murphy promptly attacked Jeremy Roach, who was saddled with four fouls, off the dribble for a layup.

That's sideline poise. That's trust. That's coaching.

"It's really a special thing for our basketball team," Young said. "This is a special thing for Blacksburg, for southwest Virginia where I'm from, where I grew up, for the state of Virginia, for our unbelievable Hokie fan base. They'll always remember this, this team, and what they've accomplished."

Tech lost to Florida in the first round of last year's NCAA tournament, and this team strives for atonement. But no matter what transpires, an ACC championship banner is going up in Cassell Coliseum, up near that '73 NIT banner.

"We talked about it as a team, that now it's forever," Aluma said. "Like, it's etched, it's ingrained that we're forever champions."