

Barber: Virginia was where Mike Hollins' teammates died, so it's where he needs to carry on their dreams

March 22, 2023

CHARLOTTESVILLE – From the moment a gunman opened fire on a bus full of his Virginia football teammates and classmates, [Mike Hollins](#) hasn't thought much about himself. For Hollins, it's been about first protecting, then honoring, others.

It's why, while some urged and many expected him to transfer and get a fresh start after the tragic on-campus shooting deaths of three teammates on Nov. 13, to Hollins, the idea of carrying on anywhere [but the University of Virginia](#) didn't make sense.

Sure, he could work his way back from the devastating gunshot wound that nearly took his life, at a different school, closer to home in Louisiana, perhaps, or at least farther from the nightmare he endured.

But his personal recovery is but a small step in the mission Hollins believes he's on now, a quest to carry on the legacies of Devin Chandler, Lavel Davis and D'Sean Perry, his teammates who died that day. UVa is where their dreams were cut short.

So, UVa is where he'll carry them forward.

"Anyone would think about leaving after something like that," Hollins said Tuesday after practice. "But I also thought, what better place to refine who I am and reestablish my mental [health] than the place where everything took place? I could've left, transferred, but I think of it as sweeping everything under the rug. I think the best place for me to move forward, but not move on, and carry everything, is from Charlottesville, with the people who shared that experience with me."

Hollins already had made it safely off the bus on that awful night in November when — as his mother has told multiple news outlets — he went back onboard to try and protect others. Tuesday, he did not take questions about the shooting itself, as the alleged shooter has yet to stand trial.

Hollins was one of five people shot that day, a bullet ripping through his abdomen, sending him to the hospital for emergency surgeries.

It's not an overstatement to label Hollins' return to the football field a miracle. And it isn't hyperbole to note his decision to do that at Virginia is courageous.

Of course, from his point of view, where else would Hollins' pain be felt and shared the way it is at UVa? In a tragically sad way, Virginia could now be his safe space.

"No one in the country knows how I feel about the situation besides the people here in this facility, and I got an uneasy feeling when I thought about leaving here," Hollins said.

“I could’ve left, but what if I didn’t have the same support, because they didn’t go through the experience with me. They didn’t know D’Sean. They didn’t coach Lavel. They didn’t know Devin. Those little things are what kept me here, and I’m glad I stayed because the support is what I need now to get through.”

So, this spring, a mere four months since the shooting, four months since doctors told him it could be 4-6 months before he was able to do much of anything, even put on his socks, Hollins is on the practice field at Virginia.

His coaches monitor his workload and keep tabs on his emotional well-being, while Hollins fights for the starting running back position. The stocky, sturdy Baton Rouge native’s potential has outweighed his production to date on the field for UVa. Changing that is part of honoring his teammates.

People call Hollins a hero for returning to the bus to defend his teammates that day in November. They call his recovery a miracle and Hollins an inspiration.

From his perspective, he’s simply continuing on the same path he was on before. And now, he’s carrying the dreams and memories of his fallen teammates.

“I wasn’t capable of thinking of anything else besides, everything that went down here on campus, how I could keep their flame lit and how I could keep my flame lit?” Hollins said.

Barber: Liberty embraces disrespect, dominates Old Dominion

Nov. 11, 2023

LYNCHBURG – For three months now, the noise around Liberty’s football team has sounded the same.

The [Flames](#) aren’t as good as their undefeated record.

First-year coach [Jamey Chadwell](#) heard that outside noise and decided to let it right in.

“Our guys know the narrative right now,” Chadwell said. “Instead of me trying to squash it, I made the decision that we’re going to feed into that this week. And I think we came out intense and focused. Now, our challenge is, can we keep doing it?”

Liberty looked pretty legitimate Saturday, moving to 10-0 by dominating [Old Dominion](#), 38-10, notching a win against a Sun Belt Conference opponent and doing its level best to prove that, despite the perceived lack of stiff competition, it’s every bit as good as its unblemished record suggests.

“We talked to our team this week about earning respect,” a fiery Chadwell said after the win, pounding his hand on the table in front of him for emphasis. “We, at Liberty, and our conference doesn’t get the respect it deserves. This team played six games in the Sun Belt. Three up, three down and every game was within a touchdown. And we completely dominated them. And so, I don’t want to hear that, ‘Oh, you don’t play nobody.’ Our conference got us prepared for this game and you saw what happened.”

What happened was a thorough dismantling of Old Dominion from start to finish.

“We got our heads kicked in,” ODU coach Ricky Rahne said. “It’s not more complicated than that. We got outcoached. We got outplayed. We got out-toughed. There’s not a whole lot of good that comes out of the game.”

During the week, Liberty senior linebacker Tyren Dupree reacted to the team’s fresh No. 25 ranking in the Associated Press Top 25 poll by remarking, “If we lost this week, everybody’s back to hating us.”

After the Flames’ blowout of the Monarchs, what’s not to like?

This offense, which racked up 455 total yards, is led by a true dual-threat quarterback in Kaidon Salter, who possesses a big arm for downfield throws, legs that can give opposing defensive coordinators fits and a knack for playmaking that makes him worth the price of admission.

He wasted no time showing all of that off Saturday.

On its first possession, Liberty faced fourth-and-four at the ODU 43, and went for it. And it really went for it, with Salter throwing deep down field up the Flames’ sideline to C.J. Daniels for a touchdown, putting the Flames up 7-0 just 3:30 into the game.

On its second drive, on third-and-goal at the 2-yard line, Salter took the snap and ran to his right, where he was swarmed by a trio of ODU defenders. But none of them could get their hands on Salter as he reversed field and ran the other way, outracing sophomore defensive lineman Kris Trinidad to the pylon for the touchdown, putting Liberty ahead 14-0 with 5:44 left in the first quarter.

The Flames added to their lead with 11:20 left in the half when Salter pushed his way into the end zone behind right side of the line for a touchdown and a 21-0 edge.

By halftime, Salter had accounted for five scores, throwing for three, rushing for two and ending the notion that the Monarchs might prove a stiff test because they play in a conference with a stronger reputation than Conference USA, home to Liberty.

“We got respect for each other,” Salter said. “That’s all that matters. The media and all the other things, if they don’t respect us, they ain’t got to. We’re 10-0. We coming out. We executing. We fighting every day for each other. And we’re coming out on top every weekend.”

And the Flames’ defense, more than did their part, befuddling and battering ODU quarterback Grant Wilson and limiting the Monarchs to just a second-quarter field goal and a garbage-time touchdown with 1:27 to play. Old Dominion didn’t so much as reach the red zone against Liberty until there was 1:07 left in the third quarter.

The defense wasn’t just solid, it was disruptive, recording five sacks, 11 tackles for losses and an interception.

Points of reference are hard to come by for these Flames. In sports parlance, they haven’t played anybody. Their strength of schedule currently sits at the second weakest in the nation, according to ESPN.

Liberty, of course, would argue it’s played 10 opponents – all capable of winning – and set them all down in order, often in dominating fashion.

That was the case again Saturday when they routed an ODU club that took the state’s other undefeated team, No. 21 James Madison, to the wire in Harrisonburg last month. The Monarchs had played eight straight games decided by a single score, going 4-4 in that stretch. Against Liberty, the game was decided in the first 15 minutes.

“We’ll take on everybody, anywhere,” Chadwell said. “I believe in our team and our conference. When you talk about us and you talk about this conference, I do believe that we deserve more respect than we’re getting. Hopefully that was shown today.”

Of course, the transitive property in college football is about as reliable as a self-driving Tesla.

The big picture question now is whether or not the Flames can run the table and have enough things go right ahead of them to have a shot at a New Year’s Six Bowl. At least two teams, Tulane and Air Force, figure to be ahead of Liberty to be the highest ranked Group of five conference champion, though Air Force’s lopsided loss to Army last week and Tulane’s two-point escape against Tulsa Saturday certainly didn’t cement either of their cases.

If JMU gets the waiver its battling the NCAA for to become postseason eligible, the Dukes likely cut Liberty in line.

That of course, isn’t something Liberty control, so the Flames have to focus on themselves. Saturday, they did what they’ve set out to do each and every week this season.

They won again.

Another ugly chapter for Virginia in the Commonwealth Cup

Nov. 26, 2023

CHARLOTTESVILLE – The new chapter in the Virginia-Virginia Tech rivalry reads a lot like the pages that came before it.

[UVa's Tony Elliott](#) can't afford for the past to be prologue when it comes to the Commonwealth Cup.

"It starts with me. I have to do a better job of having the team ready to play, week in and week out," Elliott said after the Hokies blasted his Cavaliers 55-17 on Saturday. "I just didn't feel like we had the right look in our eye from the opening, really from the time we ran out for the game. And that's on me."

Seven years ago, the Commonwealth Cup series got a reset of sorts when Bronco Mendenhall started coaching at UVa and Justin Fuente took over the Hokies. That year, Tech capped the regular season with a 52-10 win over UVa.

Saturday, in the first meeting between Elliott and Tech's Brent Pry – the teams canceled last year's game in the wake of the shooting tragedy at Virginia – the Hokies rolled in similar fashion.

But while it may have looked comparable to 2016, it was actually much, much worse.

That year's Virginia Tech team won the ACC's Coastal Division. This one needed Saturday's win at Scott Stadium just to become bowl eligible.

That Virginia team came in on a six-game losing streak and won just one ACC contest all year. This year's group was 3-3 in its last six outings, including league upsets of North Carolina and Duke.

But instead of starting the next generation of the rivalry with – at the very least – a competitive showing, UVa got demolished.

"They played a good game. You've got to give them their props," said safety Jonas Sanker. "I guess I would say, we've gotta learn from this. Going into next year it's going to be all about how we respond. That's going to say a lot about the program."

The Hokies jumped out to a 24-0 lead in the first half and the Cavaliers never threatened to make it a game. Tech led 31-0 less than four minutes into the third quarter and UVa didn't put up points until opting to kick a field goal with 7:44 left in the period.

The crowd cheered. Maybe it was a mock cheer? Maybe it was the relief of avoiding a shutout? Whatever it was, it felt like the sound of surrender. And Elliott can't afford for surrender to be the theme of the Commonwealth Cup games going forward.

"I didn't have my guys ready to play, but I'm not going to make this bigger than what it is," Elliott said. "This is one game. We're going to learn from it. And we're going to get better this offseason. We've got to wait, unfortunately, for 365 days to get another shot."

If there's a silver lining for UVa, it's that Pry and Tech laid out a blueprint for just how quickly a program can turn things around in the transfer portal era. A year ago, the Hokies went 3-8 with an offense that never had enough fizz to fizzle.

Devoid of playmakers, it went into the portal and came out with running back Bhayshul Tuten and wide receiver Da'Quan Felton, among others. Saturday, Tuten ran for 117 yards and a score and took a kickoff back 94 yards for a touchdown and Felton caught six passes for 133 yards and two scores.

The Cavaliers were encouraged by the development of freshman quarterback Anthony Colandrea, pressed into action after starter Tony Muskett suffered shoulder and ankle injuries. The last time out, in a home win over Duke, he played an error free game.

His only misstep that day may have come in the postgame press conference, when he fired off a comment that became the talk of Tech fans and may have riled up the Hokies.

"After this game versus Tech, after we beat Tech, this program is going to shoot up and everyone in the country is going to know about us," Colandrea said then.

Elliott said he spoke to his rookie QB— and to Sanker, who made similar comments — about their choice of words.

"They've got to be smarter," Elliott said. "They got caught up in the emotions of a victory."

But in Colandrea and wide receiver Malachi Fields, plus an offensive line that returns in its entirety — barring portal defections — the pieces are in place to take another step forward. Some of the best defensive players, by year's end, were freshmen, including linebacker Kam Robinson, cornerback Dre Walker and safety Caleb Hardy.

Saturday's loss doesn't doom Virginia to a long losing streak like the 15-year drought in endured against the Hokies from 2004-2019. It doesn't mean Elliott, now 6-16 in his two years as a head coach, won't prove to be successful with the Cavaliers.

What it did was add another discouraging chapter for UVa in a book that already has too many of those.

