

THE ROANOKE TIMES

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## Hokies deliver complete performance in blowout victory at Boston College

By Damien Sordelett

CHESTNUT HILL, Mass. — Dorian Strong's slumber was interrupted not long after 7 a.m. Saturday. The Virginia Tech cornerback's phone came to life with a call before the typical wake-up time. He didn't think much of it, silenced the call and was eager to get at least 15 more minutes of sleep before the Hokies' matchup at Boston College.

The extra sleep wasn't happening. The sound of two fists banging on his door made Strong sit up in his bed. He heard the hallway at the team hotel filling with the noise of graduate assistants and analysts screaming it was time to wake up. The bustle of sheets and feet hitting the ground signaled his teammates were slowly getting out of bed.

Strong initially had a feeling of anger. He, admittedly, wasn't fond of the typical pregame routine being altered so late in the season. But then it started to click why the change was being made.

Juice. The Hokies had to bring the energy. Four previous road trips had slow starts that ended with losses. Something needed to change.

"All right, let's take this anger out on this football team, for real. Just embrace it. That's all it is," Strong said.

Embrace it the Hokies did. Strong set the tone with an interception on the game's first play from scrimmage. The offense flexed its muscles and ran roughshod over the Eagles to the tune of a whopping 600 yards. It was a performance that featured a wave of energy Tech hadn't shown on the road this season and led to a resounding 48-22 win over the Eagles before an announced crowd of 33,665 at Alumni Stadium.

"For them to make waking up important, to spend their time waking us up, getting us up, things like that, to me it was a sign that this one was important, that it was important to start fast," defensive back Derrick Canteen said. "We've been talking about it all week, but for them to go out of their way to bring that energy from the initial time you wake up, it meant a lot and it got things going."

Tech (5-5, 4-2 ACC) hadn't enjoyed a great track record on the road since the start of 2022, much less just this season. It had one win away from Blacksburg since Brent Pry took over the program — last season's finale at Liberty — and was coming off a lackluster outing the previous week at Louisville.

Bringing the energy was harped on throughout the week. It was ramped up Saturday morning, with the coaches joining in on the rambunctious attitudes and getting the players ready for the kickoff against the Eagles (6-4, 3-3).

"We came out with the right energy," linebacker Jayden McDonald said. "Everybody woke up with the right energy and we just took that with us to the game and just let it play through us."

Strong's first of two interceptions set the tone on defense. It was followed up by a Hokies' offensive performance that hadn't been seen against a Power Five team in two decades.

Tech's 600 yards of total offense marked the first time since Sept. 11, 1993, at Pittsburgh (675) that the Hokies reached that threshold in total offense.

It was a balanced effort led by the 354-yard outing from quarterback Kyron Drones.

Drones rushed for a career-high 135 yards on 20 carries. He completed 12 of 17 passes for 219 yards and connected on a 22-yard touchdown to Stephen Gosnell and a 5-yard scoring strike to Jaylin Lane.

"He's just getting better each week," Pry said of Drones.

Drones' two touchdown passes were sandwiched in between Bhayshul Tuten's three TD runs that were part of Tech's stretch of scoring 35 straight points.

Tuten had scoring runs of 7, 4 and 4 yards as part of his 78-yard outing.

"It felt great," Tuten said. "I think we worked all practice, all week on starting fast. I know the mindset, I think today we came out, started fast and it helped us a lot."

The Hokies rushed for a season-high 363 yards to mark the most rushing yards in a game since tallying 444 against Marshall in the second week of the 2009 season.

"I don't know if you ever come into a day expecting a day like this," offensive line coach Ron Crook said. "I expected them to come out and have a good day."

Tech had proven it could overwhelm the bottom feeders in the ACC. That much was evident in lopsided home victories over Pittsburgh, Wake Forest and Syracuse, teams that combined for two conference wins entering this weekend.

That hadn't translated over to the road. In fact, the Hokies sideline hadn't heard the fans chant, "Let's go, Hokies!" late in the fourth quarter at an ACC opponent since the 2021 finale at Virginia.

A dominating performance — which included holding the ACC's leading rushing team to 124 yards and containing quarterback Thomas Castellanos — sure made hearing those chants all the sweeter.

And it was all possible because of the energy that was brought earlier than the players were expecting.

"It feels amazing. It's just a confidence booster," Strong said. "Like, the guys now, we should know that we're good. As these next two games approach us, we're going to do everything in our ability to just go in there and have a strong week of practice. It starts on Sunday. We're going to have a strong week of practice, make sure we have the mindset and just continue to harp on the mindset."

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# Business finished: Jansen's overtime goal lifts Roanoke to first President's Cup title

By Damien Sordelett

Mac Jansen skated over to the Roanoke bench and allowed himself a moment of reflection.

The Rail Yard Dawgs captain closed his eyes. He listened. What he heard amounted to pure bliss.

A rotation of championship-themed songs from Queen, Carrie Underwood and others blared throughout the Berglund Center. Most of the 5,394 fans who flocked to Tuesday night's game were still in the arena and screaming at the top of their lungs. His teammates were still taking turns skating around the ice with the massive trophy in hand.

A feeling of euphoria coursed through Jansen's veins. Of redemption. Of completing the mission that was left unfinished one season ago.

Jansen and his teammates were President's Cup champions.

Jansen's goal less than three minutes into overtime lifted the Rail Yard Dawgs to a thrilling 2-1 win over Birmingham in Game 4 of the President's Cup Final. The goal secured Roanoke its first SPHL title.

"I'm speechless," Jansen said, his face reddened after shedding tears of joy while he reflected on the team's journey. "... It's incredible."

Jansen's emotions were tied into the feeling of one year ago. Roanoke hosted Game 4 of the Southern Professional Hockey League championship series but fell in overtime to Peoria and watched the Rivermen celebrate the title.

"I was just telling a couple of other guys it's full circle," right wing Nick DeVito said. "Last year we lost Game 4 in overtime and this year we decided we wanted to win a Game 4 in overtime. Obviously we went the hard route, but we got it done."

The Rail Yard Dawgs created the mantra of "unfinished business" that became their rallying call throughout the season.

Business was finished Tuesday night.

"It's beautiful," right wing Josh Nenadal said. "Losing in overtime last year, watching that trophy get raised on our ice by another team, this is the sweetest feeling. It's going to go down as one of the best nights of my life right now."

Jansen hadn't scored in the postseason leading up to Tuesday's game. The right wing, one of the Rail Yard Dawgs' most consistent players throughout the regular season, didn't need to score during the playoff run with a strong supporting cast around him.

That first goal — the final one scored in the SPHL season — felt so sweet.

“Going through a goal drought at the wrong time but throw pucks on net and the right things happen,” he said.

Jansen lifted his stick high into the air in celebration after his game-winner. His teammates threw their sticks and gloves onto the ice as they quickly skated toward him.

It led to a wild celebration on the ice as Birmingham watched dejectedly from their net.

“I was already off the bench by the time it left his stick. I was there,” Nenadal said. “It was never in doubt. He was the right guy to win us that trophy and I’m so happy for him.”

The fans’ celebration in the stands came about 18 minutes after the fans began the countdown toward the title.

Roanoke, nursing a 1-0 lead, denied Birmingham’s chances over a 65-second stretch late in the third period. The Bulls elected to empty the net with 75 seconds left in regulation and go on the attack.

The fans’ cheering reached a crescendo in that span. They repeatedly chanted “We want the Cup!” Whenever Roanoke cleared the puck to the other end of the rink, the noise in the arena got louder.

Then, suddenly, those cheers were silenced.

Carson Rose, whose second goal in Monday’s game forced overtime, was at it again Tuesday. The puck caromed off his stick and by goalkeeper Austyn Roudebush with 10.1 seconds left in regulation to even the score at 1-all.

“You’ve got to block the outside noise. It was a deflating goal,” Roudebush said. “We had the momentum, the countdown was going on, but we were dominating the game going back to the locker room and we knew we still had it. We just had to continue playing our game.”

The fans had to wait through the 15-minute intermission and the two-plus minutes of overtime to revel in the title.

“It’s a special moment,” Roudebush said. “You’ve got 6,000 people here for us. It’s amazing.”

Roudebush, the finals MVP, recorded 18 saves in the championship clincher.

“He’s the backbone of our team all year, he’s the MVP all year, you can’t say enough words about that guy. He’s the best goalie in the league,” Jansen said. “So well deserved for him, I’m so proud of him and if it wasn’t for him, we would not be here.”

Roudebush was on his way to a second shutout in postseason play by stopping the first 18 shots he faced.

That effort was almost enough to make a 1-0 lead hold over the final 25-plus minutes.

Nenadal scored in an unconventional manner at the 14:11 mark of the second period that put the Rail Yard Dawgs ahead. He received a pass from Gehrett Sargis on the left wing near the goal line and sent the puck toward the net. The puck slipped underneath Birmingham goalkeeper Hayden Stewart and trickled into the net for the one-goal advantage.

“I think that’s the beauty of playoff hockey — put the puck on net and good things happen,” Nenadal said. “That’s exactly what happened there.”

The championship was a long time coming for hockey fans in Roanoke. They hadn’t celebrated a title since 1987 when the Virginia Lancers, led by coach John Tortorella, won the Bob Payne Trophy in the Atlantic Coast Hockey League’s final year of existence.

Those games were played in the 3,400-seat Vinton Sports Complex.

The Rail Yard Dawgs call the Berglund Center home, an arena that seats 7,977 fans for hockey games, and the building came to life throughout the season. Roanoke ranked third in the league in attendance during the regular season by averaging 4,449 fans for its 28 regular-season home games.

Roanoke finished the regular season fourth in the league standings.

Roanoke was the only team to average more than 4,000 fans during the postseason, which featured a quarterfinals sweep of Evansville and redemption in the semifinals with a 2-1 series win over Peoria.

An average of 4,436 fans flocked to the Berglund Center for the four home playoff games, and 5,394 witnessed the championship coronation.

“We have the best fans in the league, in the world. You can hear it by the volume,” Jansen said, his words frequently getting drowned out by the fans’ screams and the blaring music. “It’s just so amazing to do it here after what we went through last year in this building and give them what they deserved.”

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Elijah Brooks never expected to be a coach. Now he's hoping to transform the Hokies' running backs.

By Damien Sordelett

BLACKSBURG — A blanket was peeking out of a dresser inside Steven Jerry’s office this particular spring morning in 2007. Another late night resulted in the William and Mary running backs coach sleeping in his office, and the blanket wasn’t fully in the dresser when Elijah Brooks walked in to discuss how the upcoming spring practice was going to unfold.

Brooks, who recently completed his playing career with the Tribe and was serving as a graduate assistant during the spring, inquired about the blanket. Jerry explained coaches opted to sleep in their offices when they burned the midnight oil and early meetings were scheduled the following day.

It came as a bit of shock to Brooks that coaches would sacrifice the comfort of their beds just to save a few minutes.

“On that day, I said, ‘Oh no, I will never be a coach,’” Brooks said with a laugh Tuesday.

The former tailback, a major contributor on three William & Mary teams, found his way into coaching not long after issuing that declaration of never being a coach. It took him 16 years before he returned to the commonwealth, this time as the running backs coach at Virginia Tech.

He is wrapping up his first spring with the program after being hired one month ago following a four-year stint at the same position with Maryland.

“It was definitely unexpected, but it was an opportunity that I couldn’t pass up,” Brooks explained of the move. “You try to plan your moves and things like that, but sometimes you’re afforded an opportunity that’s unexpected and you’ve got to run with it.”

Brooks was planning on sharing the same campus with his former basketball coach at DeMatha Catholic High School, Mike Jones, who was an assistant on Mike Young’s staff.

Jones, though, departed last week to take the same position at Maryland.

“He and I are really close,” Brooks said, jokingly adding Jones was his high school basketball coach when Brooks was 40 pounds lighter. “He was my mentor when he was the head coach at DeMatha and I was the head football coach at DeMatha, and so I saw an opportunity for us to come here, kind of unite, and as soon as I landed, he was heading out. I wish him the best, but I’m definitely glad to be here.”

Brooks’ hiring was a bit unexpected with the positions Hokies coach Brent Pry needed to fill on the offensive side of the ball. Quarterbacks coach Brad Glenn left for the offensive coordinator position at Cincinnati in late February and offensive line coach Joe Rudolph took the same position at Notre Dame in early March.

Ron Crook was hired as the offensive line coach, while Brooks’ arrival meant offensive coordinator Tyler Bowen shifted to overseeing the quarterbacks for the first time in his career.

Pry already had a strong rapport with Brooks dating back to Brooks’ time as football coach at DeMatha Catholic High School in Maryland, and it was just a matter of seeing whether there was mutual interest in leaving Maryland to join the Hokies.

“When they had an opening, they were familiar with me and they reached out to gauge my interest,” Brooks said, “and seeing what Virginia Tech is building here was something I wanted to be a part of.”

Brooks developed a reputation of getting the most out of his running backs during his four seasons with the Terrapins. Jake Funk led the bowl subdivision in yards per carry (8.6) and ranked eighth in the nation with 129 rushing yards per game in 2020, and Javon Leake and Anthony McFarland each rushed for at least eight touchdowns in the 2019 campaign.

Brooks' task this spring has been developing a running back corps that needs to establish itself after a dreadful 2022 campaign.

The Hokies ranked 113th out of 131 FBS teams by averaging 110.2 rushing yards per game. Leading rusher Keshawn King (443 yards) entered the transfer portal and second-leading rusher Jalen Holston (321) exhausted his eligibility.

That has opened the door for Malachi Thomas and North Carolina A&T transfer Bhayshul Tuten to get the main reps this spring. Thomas only played in three games last season while battling an ankle injury, while Tuten rushed for 1,363 yards and 13 touchdowns in his final season with the Aggies.

Those two, along with the rest of the young running back corps, were introduced to Brooks two days prior to the beginning of spring practice. It didn't take long for Brooks to make a good first impression.

"He makes sure we're getting it and learning it in the best way that we know how so we can apply it when we come out onto the field," Thomas said of Brooks' coaching style.

Brooks spent a few minutes Tuesday morning just with the running backs and calmly told them that he felt they were "off" during the practice. It wasn't a fire and brimstone message to fire up his players; it was a reassuring message that he knew they had more in them.

He explained that the coaching mentality comes from Morgan Wootten, the legendary boys basketball coach at DeMatha, and Brooks saw Wootten communicate with his players without demeaning them.

Brooks did that during his lengthy tenure as an assistant and head coach with DeMatha's football program before he joined Mike Locksley's staff at Maryland.

Brooks never envisioned being a coach, especially after seeing the types of sacrifices Jerry had to make back in 2007. He returned to his alma mater to be a teacher in 2007 and intended to only help out with the football program.

He said coaching became his calling after being around the players. It didn't take long to realize why coaches like Jerry would make those daily sacrifices.

"I have a blow-up mattress," Brooks revealed when asked if he sleeps in his office. "... I tell [Jerry] all the time, I understand the commitment that you have to have at this level. I appreciate him for everything that he did for me."