

Atlantic Coast Conference Football Kickoff

Thursday, July 16, 2026

Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

Virginia Tech Hokies

Coach James Franklin

Kemari Copeland

Tyson Flowers

Marcellous Hawkins

Press Conference



knowledge, the community knowledge was extremely valuable.

We've been able to hit the ground running. We are bigger, we are stronger, we are faster than we have been. There's no doubt about that. I think our depth is in a position to be able to compete.

From an expectation standpoint, from a culture standpoint, I think we're in a really good place. Again, I feel like we have won the off-season. All that's great. That sounds great in a press conference, it's a good sound bite.

The reality is we have to make sure all that translates to the season and go out and play a style and a brand that's going to make Coach Beamer proud, who was with us for dinner last night; Bud Foster proud; all of our alumni, Eddie Royal, who is here with us. We want to make all those people proud of how we play, how we conduct our business. We're excited for the opportunity.

Appreciate the opportunity and open it up for questions.

Q. In your tenure, 44 and 21 against top 10 opponents. What are some of the lessons that you learned at Penn State that you can bring to bring that winning mindset and attitude to the Hokies?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Well, I think the first thing is embracing the history and the past, right, understanding and learning from it.

What I also know is there's been a ton of really good things done over my time. Time as a head coach in the SEC, time as a head coach in the Big Ten, time in my experience now obviously in the ACC. Kind of got a unique perspective. Not too many questions that have that type of experience and that type of background.

Also three rebuilds. Going to Vanderbilt, a place that had not won in a very long time, then go to Penn State and follow some of the most difficult sanctions in college football history, and now showing up to a place like Virginia Tech that's extremely proud and great tradition and history.

JAMES FRANKLIN: Appreciate the opportunity. Very excited to be here representing Virginia Tech and the ACC on a national scale. I want to thank our president, President Sands, who has been phenomenal since we showed up on campus, and excited about our new hire of our athletic director, Brian White, who you guys are going to get to know. I think you'll absolutely love him. He'll do a phenomenal job not only for Virginia Tech but for the ACC as a whole.

We're in a really good position. It's been a sprint since we arrived in Blacksburg. But the guys have been phenomenal. We got three unbelievable representatives of not only Virginia Tech, the game of football, but also for the ACC. We brought these three young men because they've done it the right way. They're appreciative, they got smiles on their face, they've been working like crazy, they've totally embraced what we're doing from a cultural standpoint, from a leadership standpoint. They're killing it academically as well as doing all the things we need 'em to do off the field to lead our team to be successful.

We're so proud of these three young men that are with us.

We've been sprinting really since we arrived in Blacksburg. I think I would describe it as I think we have won the off-season. We've had a great off-season in terms of implementing our standards and our expectations and our culture.

Obviously when you're able to do something unconventional like we did in hiring Coach Pry as our defensive coordinator, I think that really helped, having someone like that that really understood the challenges of the place, the strengths of the place, the institutional

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For us, embracing what the ACC brings. Miami has done a phenomenal job. You look at what they were able to do last year, the run they were able to make, that's important for our conference. Embracing those types of opportunities.

That's why these three guys stayed at Virginia Tech, to play in these types of games. That's why I'm here. It is critical that we open up the season and play really, really well against VMI. There will be games like that that come later in the season that we'll be judged by, I'm ultimately going to be judged by. I embrace that.

That's why we're all here and excited about what the season will bring.

Q. You've had a lot of different stops. Everywhere you go to, you learn something good or bad. What did you learn that is going to make you be successful and compete for the ACC this year?

JAMES FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think everybody's journey is different, right? I talk about this with the players, as well. You got to embrace your journey.

I played Division II football. I coached Division II football. I think those humble beginnings -- Marcellous has a similar background as well. Those humble beginnings make you appreciate everything.

I think a sense of appreciation for what you have and your blessings in the places you were at are more important than they've ever been in college football. When you're in D-II, you don't have a nutrition bar, you have to wear a ton of different hats as a young coach, take on a ton of different responsibilities, that's valuable.

At each level there's different challenges and there's different resources. You got to take advantage of it.

Early in my career we always had to do more with less. Then when you get to a place like Virginia Tech, you got to understand how to do more with more. That's what we're all about. That's what we're going to embrace. I think my background and experiences in three of the major conferences in college football, as well as my time in the NFL, I think is going to serve me well at Virginia Tech and hopefully put these players in the best position to be successful.

Q. Obviously Virginia Tech has one of the strongest traditions in college football. How do you plan on honoring this tradition for old-school fans while putting your own stamp on things?

JAMES FRANKLIN: I think that's typically the challenge, right? I think one of the things that's great about Virginia Tech is there is so much history, there is so much tradition. I think that's one of the challenges, right, when you are trying to make the program more of a modern football program that's going to be able to compete at the highest level, you got to find the balance of those two things.

How can we make sure we're paying respect to the past, but how are we building for the future as well. That's a delicate balance. It starts by calling Coach Beamer and asking for his blessing to take the job in the first place. It's when we have an opportunity and we're in Charlotte and we can invite Coach Beamer to dinner with us last night and learn from his experiences. Having Bud Foster, who is still in town.

The reality is, what are the things that are critical to our core beliefs? What are the things that matter the most so that when you turn on the TV and you watch Virginia Tech play or you're sitting in the stands watching Virginia Tech play, what are the things that matter to you most about the brand, about the university, about the team? Let's focus on those.

Then all the other things, we're going to have to be aggressive, bold, thoughtful, doing things that are going to position Virginia Tech, the university, the athletic department, the football program, in the best position to be successful.

I think that's challenging. I think the best schools and the best universities and the best programs have been bold and aggressive in that. I think a lot of schools have held on to the history and tradition so tight and so long that they haven't adapted and become a modern athletic department, modern football program. That's why me and Brian are here, to help Virginia Tech with that process.

Q. Quick question about your use of the tight end position. I was at the USC game two years ago. I thought Tyler Warren had one of the best games I've seen any player any position the past decade. You look at NFL rosters, it's like half the tight ends are either Penn State, yours, or Kirk Ferentz in Iowa. What is your thought? What are you doing, how you use tight ends so well? A lot of teams don't seem to be using it as well as you do.

JAMES FRANKLIN: First of all, we keep Tyler Warren in the state of Virginia, not let him leave. That's where it starts.

But on top of that, I think your point is a good one. I'm a believer in the tight end position. Your point is a good one.



The majority of them out of high school and even in college are just big wide receivers. They're not asked to be true tight ends and stick their nose in the run game and be physical. To me, that's the only way that they are truly the mismatches that they should be.

If he's just a big wideout, you're going to put him into that category and you can play nickel. If now you play nickel, and we can motion him back into the box and get him connected to the tackle or in a wing position or hit position, now we can overpower you because you got nickel on the field, then that's going to create challenges for a defensive coordinator.

If you stay in base personnel, now we can line up from 12 personnel but actually line up in 11 or 10 personnel formations, now you're asking a linebacker to cover in space. Typically that's not their strength either.

So to take advantage of tight ends and really create the mismatches you want to, they have to be able to do both. They have to be respected.

If you can say this tight end is the blocker, this tight end is the receiver, again, you've lost the strength of the position. We want to be as multiple as we possibly can. We want to take advantage of these body types.

Also having the ability to develop 'em. Most of these high school tight ends are big wide receivers. They've just never blocked before. We just had one show up on campus, he's never been in a three-point stance in his life. You have to be able to get him on the sled, in the nutrition bar, build that physical and mental toughness over time. Sometimes that's on the scout team going against Aycen Stevens at practice, whatever it may be.

We believe in the position. We believe in the development of the position. When you talk about Iowa, as well, it's because again those tight ends in those systems are being used as true tight ends and not just wideouts.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. We'll have you switch positions with Kemari. We'll take questions for Kemari Copeland.

Q. What has Coach Franklin challenged this team to improve most?

KEMARI COPELAND: He's challenged us on the details. Every day he's harping on the details, winter workouts, touching cones, spring ball. He's been harping us on details. That's how you win games.

If we all lock in and do details in the game, that's how you

win games. That's how you lose games, too. He's been harping on us on that.

Q. It's not often you get your former head coach back on the team the next year, now being a defensive coordinator. Can you talk about your relationship with Coach Pry.

KEMARI COPELAND: Yeah, so my relationship with Coach Pry is really good. He was actually the only head coach I was at ju-co before here, the only head coach to come see me at ju-co. Our relationship is really good.

When he left, it kind of hurt. When I seen that he was coming back, it was huge. I had a chance to go to the NFL. He was actually a huge reason I came back.

He's had top 10, top five defenses when he was a defensive coordinator. I know that we'll be really good this year.

Q. What has stood out to you about the transfers, Williams and Jones?

KEMARI COPELAND: Yeah, we got a lot of good transfers. Samuel Okunlola came from Colorado. He's a dog. Really good pass-rusher. Mylachi Williams came from Penn State. He's a dog, really good pass-rusher as well. Randy Adirika came from Penn State. Really good pass-rusher. Really good in the run. We got a lot of people, a lot of good additions that will help us out this year, so...

Q. Since you had a chance to go somewhere else, go to the NFL, talk about the pitch that Coach Franklin made to you that convinced you to stay.

KEMARI COPELAND: Yeah, it was a couple things. One thing was, like, I could come back and raise my draft stock potentially. I could have fell to fifth, sixth round. I could have came back and try to raise it.

Also my weight. Coach Franklin has been harping on me to gain weight. I was 280. I've gotten up to 300. The most I weighed is 305. Things of that nature.

I think there were a lot of things last year I left on the table, whether that be my pass-rush. There were some games I was running down the middle of a guy, not working a move. I felt like there were a lot of things I left on the table.

Last year we ran more of a three down defense. This year a four down. Things of that nature. I think I can show a lot more to the scouts.

Q. And graduate?

KEMARI COPELAND: And graduate, too (smiling). That was the main thing. That was an important thing (laughter).

Q. You've been through this transitional period -- a new coach, athletic director, soon a new university president. This reestablished Virginia Tech team, the merch says it all, you have been a leader through this, what is the team saying right now? Is the team confidence like Virginia Tech is really back?

KEMARI COPELAND: Yeah, Coach has been harping on us all year, you seen the Virginia Tech team last year -- the Virginia Tech team there was before. We want to get back to that old Virginia Tech defense. We want to get back to the old Virginia Tech. We going to work as hard as we can.

Coach Franklin harping on us on stacking days, what can I do tomorrow to watch film, lift weights as hard as I can, be intentional about that. We've been focused on stacking days.

If we look forward to UVA, whatever, winning championships, that doesn't matter. We're trying to focus on stacking days, doing what we can to be the best team possible. We've been focusing on the next play, the next day.

Q. You grew up in a military and sports family. How is it that that military background has helped you in the classroom and on the field?

KEMARI COPELAND: Helped me out a lot. I know my pop's watching this. My dad has been in the military for I believe it was 27 years. They've always harping on us to work hard. Anything you ever want, my dad worked real hard to put us in the position we are now.

I remember days when I was eight, nine years old, he had us running in Mount Trashmore, doing a lot of stuff on the track. I didn't understand then. I understand now, anything you want you have to work for it. It's paying dividends now. Shout-out to you, boss (smiling).

THE MODERATOR: You and Tyson can switch spots. We'll take questions for Tyson Flowers.

Q. You played under your father at Southwest Christian. Can you talk about the mentorship he gave you and how he helped you become a leader and the man you are today.

TYSON FLOWERS: Yeah, so I played for my dad in eighth grade, coached my middle school team, all throughout high school. That's an experience, I wouldn't trade that for the world. That's something we talked about my whole life.

I think it's important just as a young man growing up having a dad around. I think that makes a big difference. Him helping me develop as a young man and as a football player is unparalleled.

I loved it. There's definitely ups and downs that came with it. I think I remember my first fall camp, he told me, You're not allowed to ask any more questions. He would bench me at times when I was younger.

As I got older, understood how to go about my business more and more, those are some of the best memories of my life. I loved every minute of it.

Q. Speaking of development, how have you seen Quentin Reddish develop and grow?

TYSON FLOWERS: I think Q's really special. His size, his length, his speed, how he can move, his athletic ability at his size, that blows my mind.

I think one of the first things I realized when I got to Virginia Tech and started being on the field with Q is, like, he's so smart for how young he was when I first got here. He's obviously going into year three now. He's so smart.

I think for me, it's nice because the more time we've spent together on the field, I feel like we see the field the same exact way. That gives me a lot of comfort, him a lot of comfort on the field, that we see the field the same way. It makes our jobs a lot easier.

Yeah, he's put on some size, got some size back this off-season. He's running and rolling, hitting really fast speeds on the GPS. Obviously still super smart, super smart football player.

I'm excited for what he's going to be able to do this year, getting a full year under his belt.

Q. There's typically a saying that says it's a marathon, not a sprint. Coach said it is a sprint and we feel like we've won that sprint in the off-season. How do you funnel that into success?

TYSON FLOWERS: I think that's a day-by-day process. It's not something you achieve, and now we've won the sprint for the off-season, now we're going to go win 12 games. I don't think that's how that works.



I think it's a good start. I think Coach Franklin would be the first to tell you, too, this is only the beginning. We still have to finish out the summer, right? That's a day-by-day process where you have to come in every day and focus, how can I dominate in the weight room today? How can I dominate on the field today? How can I dominate in the film room today? How can I dominate on the football today? There's so many aspects of your game you have to work on.

It's something you have to commit to every single day. It not something you'll ever achieve. I think that will just trickle into camp, right? Can we dominate camp practice number one? Can we dominate camp practice number two? You have to focus on what you can control. All you can control is the present moment. I think if you can focus on being as present as possible, I think the rest of the things later on in the season things will fall into place.

I think that's just a battle to stay present and to win every single day.

Q. From Fort Worth to Houston when you were at Rice to now Blacksburg, how has Virginia become home and what this Hokie Nation has meant to you?

TYSON FLOWERS: I loved my time at Rice. I don't think I would trade it for the world. I loved Coach Bloomgren and Coach Smith and those guys that I played for. I developed so much just as a young man and a football player. I feel like I owe a lot of that to them. I'm so appreciative of them. They mean the world to me. I wouldn't trade that for the world.

That being said, Houston is for some people, the big city is for some people. I don't know if that's for me.

Both my parents played at Arkansas. My mom coached at Arkansas for a little bit. I lived there. The first thing I remember, Coach Goove [phonetic] picked me and my dad from the airport when we were visiting here. Fayetteville is bigger than Blacksburg, but it reminded me a lot of Fayetteville. I love the slower pace of Blacksburg, Virginia Tech. In Arkansas, there's no other pro teams around, so everyone loves the Hogs. Same here, there's no pro teams or big teams around Blacksburg. Everyone loves the Hokies.

Just the excitement that the fans and supporters, everyone around Blacksburg has for Virginia Tech.

TYSON FLOWERS: That makes you feel so good. It makes it feel like home, even when you're so far away. The acceptance you get from the supporter here at Tech is

unparalleled.

It's what makes Virginia Tech unique. I've loved my time here and I wouldn't trade it for the world either.

THE MODERATOR: If you will switch places with Marcellous.

Q. As a former D-II athlete, talk about your experience at Central Missouri, how it helped you develop into the player you are now? What was the initial transition like?

MARCELLOUS HAWKINS: I think Central Missouri, I was focused every day on getting better, knowing one day my time will come. I feel like God gives all His soldiers different battles so they're ready whenever their time comes, when it's their time to perform.

I had a great time at Central Missouri. I'm super excited for the future at Virginia Tech.

Q. You've gone through injury, adversity. You just spoke about your faith. How do you lean on that faith daily, and how have you navigated through the things that are out of your control?

MARCELLOUS HAWKINS: Yeah, the things that's out of my control, I just leave that up to the Lord, just control what I can control, just working hard every day, trying to give my best effort to every day, not really looking too far ahead, just staying in the present.

Q. On one of the websites, we found you listed cooking as one of your interests. What is your go-to when it comes to fixing a meal?

MARCELLOUS HAWKINS: When it comes to fixing a meal, I think I cook the best ramen noodles. I'm real good at putting things into the microwave. That's really all I got (laughter).

Q. How important is it for you to play for a coach who, number one, did an exceptional job cleaning up a mess at Penn State, and succeeded on the field, has a proven track record of winning not only at Vanderbilt but what he did at Penn State, and this guy tends to produce a lot of pro players?

MARCELLOUS HAWKINS: It's exciting, man. Just him coming in with the excitement he has every day, just getting us to just stay excited about what we have ahead. He did a lot of great things in the past. I'm ready to get things rolling with him for the new Virginia Tech.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks for the time, Virginia Tech.
Good luck this season.

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