

Atlantic Coast Conference Football Kickoff

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Wake Forest Demon Deacons

Coach Jake Dickert

Langston Hardy

Gio Lopez

Davaughn Patterson

Press Conference



program. The first one, it starts with: Where have you been? Starting fast is important in our program, and the last 365 days we did just that. We had the best first season in Wake Forest football history and tied for the third-best season of all time. All this was capped off by a great Duke's Mayo Bowl championship game, beating an SEC opponent, and from an amazing home crowd right here in Charlotte.

Our team had a cumulative GPA of 3.34, which is the highest our football program has ever seen, but most importantly, we built a culture. In our players' words, it was built on connection. It was built on competition and ultimate consistency.

But most importantly, we stuck to our plan. How we did it was always more important than what we did, and we did it with tremendously good people.

From there the question is: Where are we now?

Our season preparation began in January, and it was with a simple understanding that good is the enemy of great. We didn't set out to chase last year's results. We set our course on capturing the same process. The identity of this 2026 team needs to be forged, and every next level of our lives demands a new version of ourselves, and it's the same with football.

Hunger to me is the decision to step back into the dark each and every day and earn the right to believe in yourself again. The spotlight found last year's team, and this year's team needs to be humble enough to turn the lights out and get back in the dark. So that's exactly what we did.

Our program has 60 returners, over 50 new additions, and one of the best staff retention rates in the country, and we're excited to take the next step in our journey.

Most importantly, from a coach's standpoint, you better answer this question: Where are we going? For this team it's quite simple. We have a new team. We believe in the same standard. It's no secret our program is once again built in the dark.

THE MODERATOR: Wake Forest has joined us for the next 30 minutes. Head Coach Jake Dickert will offer a welcome. Coach.

JAKE DICKERT: Good afternoon, everybody. It's really exciting to be here at my second ACC Football Media Days, which means the greatest game on the planet, college football, is right around the corner.

I want to start by thanking Commissioner Phillips. Jim has been a tremendous advocate for our league, our 17 member institutions, and most importantly to me, he's been an advocate for all of college football. Our game is in a pivotal place, and we need strong leaders to protect what's great about our game for everybody.

I want to thank the media in attendance today. This is such an amazing platform to share the stories of our players and their journeys and continue to keep our players the main focus of this game.

I'm excited to have the opportunity to welcome a new president to Wake Forest University. I look forward to working with Dr. Peter Rodriguez hand in hand to elevate our football program and take our university to new heights.

With that, once again, I'm humbled and honored to represent Wake Forest football program, our tremendous student-athletes, our amazing coaching staff and support staff, our faculty, our alumni, and everyone that supports the old gold and black.

I think after every year I go through the same detailed process, and I ask three very distinct questions about our



Built in the dark to us is a style of play that no one wants to face and a process that few can handle. On our team we have 105 different players, 105 different personalities, skill sets, and backgrounds. But we share one mentality, and that is built in the dark.

Our job is to see standard through the same lens, and our players live and breathe that each and every day. At Wake Forest we don't believe in building robots. We invest daily into the best version of each individual and teach them that everyone's role on our team is vitally important.

In a world full of instant results, our program believes in the power of development. We understand the importance of coaching, mentoring and leading, and have a group of young men that come every day into our building wanting to grow and get better.

The adversities of our 2026 season are coming. We're training to be a tough football team. Toughness to us is who you are at your breaking point, and this game demands that we raise that level each and every day. I'm excited to stand with these three players that we have that represent what built in the dark is all about.

Davaughn Patterson is a defensive back from Jacksonville, Florida. Vaughn is one of the fiercest competitors you could ever imagine. His leadership capability has grown in our time together, and I'm excited to watch him have another great season.

Langston Hardy, a defensive end, also from Jacksonville, Florida. Langston kind of took the ACC by storm last year as one of the best pass rushers in our league, and he's excited for the opportunity to do that once again.

Finally, we're joined by Gio Lopez from Madison, Alabama. Gio is one of the most experienced quarterbacks in the country. I've been impressed with Gio's ability not just on the field, but his willingness to come into our football team and lead from the front.

These three men represent our program, and they represent their teammates. We have a deeper roster with many competitive battles that need to be played out during fall camp. I look forward to continuing to work with our leadership team to build the best version of this team on a weekly basis and attack the challenge of the most competitive league in the country in the ACC.

Lastly, to all Demon Deacons, this is the time. Since 2016, we are one of only six ACC programs with 70 or more wins. There has never been a better time to invest in Wake Forest football, and I can't wait to see everybody out in Allegacy Financial Stadium September 3rd when we

take on Akron.

With that, I'll open it up to any questions.

Q. You were speaking on built in the dark. Having a 9-4 season right out of the gate in your first season at Wake Forest, what were some of those fine details that you look back on and say those are necessary as you move forward and continue to build in the dark?

JAKE DICKERT: Well, I would say this. The one thing I've told the team that I can't recreate is last year's hunger. Those kids were sick of losing. They were sponges. They soaked up everything that they possibly could to go out there and competitively play in this league.

There was a bunch of highs and lows, but the biggest thing that we need to be is be humble to the process. Take the habits, the energy, the connection of that football team, the way they showed up each and every day and prepared to go out there and win, right? Belief is powerful in our program. Last year we were selling belief of concept. Now we're telling our guys belief of action, and it's driven through these guys.

So every young man that came into our program, they followed these three that have a tremendous amount of respect within our program. They carry themselves a certain way, they act a certain way, and they approach their business a certain way. That's built in the dark.

Everyone says, you know, Coach, you won too fast. There's no such thing in this game. It's allowed us to recruit better, retain better, right, provide our team more resources. We're excited about the future of Wake Forest football.

Q. What in your mind is the biggest challenge from year one to year two? You've talked a little bit about that, but what's the biggest challenge in your mind?

JAKE DICKERT: I think as coaches, sustaining success is always hard because at some level deep down in everybody they go out, well, this was easy. No, it wasn't. Look at the history of Wake Forest football.

It was a special season, but to have the humility, to have the humbleness to say, man, you know, we got to approach every game with a certain type of attitude. The best part about this team, I believe, once again, is that we can win in a lot of different ways. We've retained a tremendous depth of experience on the defensive side of the ball.

The best part about that group is they're so hungry to say



we can be better, we can do more. I think that's been my point to Gio. Don't come in here and do it alone, right? We need your best. The quarterback is a vital position, but we're going to go out there and win and lose as a team. And the adversities of the season are right in front of us.

I think we have a very connected football team, and we got to use that to our advantage.

Q. Last year in preseason polls Wake was expected to finish second to last in the conference. You guys ended up putting together an incredible season. How do you handle the outside noise, and how do you stop your players from being affected by the outside noise?

JAKE DICKERT: Yeah, talked about it a little bit. You got to be humble enough to turn the lights out. It's been a big kind of theme in our program ever since we came back in January. You got to take the things that you did well, you got to apply them, but you got to be really mature about wanting to be better.

Vaughn didn't come back and say, Coach, my goal is to be the same I was last year. He's hungry. He attacks every single day, and that's the men that we get to work with in our program. We've got to leverage that, and we've got to leverage those opportunities.

The schedule is tougher, let's be honest. But at the end of the day, it's about what we can control, and I think that's what I love about this league.

Q. You've been at universities that historically haven't had the funding and all the things that some of the other competitors or rivals to those schools have had. How are you able to, in this changing landscape where money matters more and more by the year, build teams that are able to have the most-ever wins for a first-year head coach at Wake Forest and things like that in these types of situations?

JAKE DICKERT: Well, at D3 I sold raffle tickets to get into fall camp, so I don't know if that's what you're referring to. My quest up every level of college football, every place has challenges, right?

The big thing that I think at Wake Forest we know where we are. There's this corporation of football going on, but, you know, if we think and act like Miami, we're not going to be successful, right? If we believe in action that we're going to be Clemson and their roster-building, it's just not going to be successful.

There's a perfect lane of Wake Forest football. We need to push. We need to advance. We need to realize that

football is a tremendous investment, and we're always going to do it a certain way. I think that's the role that I accept.

Once again, there are no excuses. I think that's really important. That's our mindset. That's our mentality. Let's maximize the tremendous investment that has been made in our players and program, and let's go out there and win football games.

Q. Jake, last year at this thing we asked you what the power spread offense looked like because we didn't really know, and you said Demond Claiborne would get the ball 40 times a game. What does the evolution look like this year, and how much of that do you know right now, and how much of that has to be fleshed out in the next month before you get to the opener?

JAKE DICKERT: I want to say this, I'm really proud of our offensive coaching staff because there's an ideal to the way that we want to operate, right? We were humble enough to say we need to operate the way our players last year can be successful, and that was through Robby's strengths and Demond's strengths and our offensive line.

Now bringing in Gio allows us to take a really big step closer to our ideal, but once again, we got to be humble enough as coaches to put this team in the best situation. The best part about Gio is he's very comfortable in this offense. I got to study the best version of Gio Lopez when I hired Rob Ezell from South Alabama. I believe in the best version of Gio Lopez, period. We can recreate that.

But we're still shuffling the pieces up front, right? We got to be humble enough to keep him upright and protected. And also to Gio's credit, he's going to play with a great defense, and we're going to win as a team.

So I'm excited about having all of that blend together and how tough fall camp needs to be so on Game 1 we know exactly who we are.

Last year it probably took us a little bit too long to truly identify who we are on offense, so that's going to be the challenge of coaches. I'm excited to work with our coaches and players to do that through fall camp.

Q. One of the talented transfers you brought in this offseason was Braylon Johnson. What have you seen out of him so far, and how does he fit into the defense?

JAKE DICKERT: Well, Braylon was here last season. I think the best part about our whole defensive back field and our 4-2-5 scheme is we take a bunch of talented athletes, we find the best place that they can be.



What Braylon has allowed us to do is to move him to the star position so we can move Vaughn into that strong safety position and get him more in the action, which his skill set is going to thrive on.

Proud of all of our guys. Proud of our team. Proud of our All-American kicker that's returning that we're going to leverage, and we're excited for this season to get kicked off.

Thank you, guys, for everything that you do, and Go Deacs!

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. We'll spend time with Langston Hardy.

Q. Langston, you kind of really established yourself as a fairly elite edge threat. What's the next step in your personal progression, and what makes this defense capable of taking another leap forward this season?

LANGSTON HARDY: I think the same thing kind of Coach Dickert hit on. I think the fact that we were able to retain so many star players on this defense, and I think really at the end of the season after the bowl game we were kind of all sitting in the locker room looking at each other and realized, like, how good of a group we're going to have coming back next year.

I think, like, being able to build off of guys like Davaughn Patterson and Gabe Kirschke coming back and really just focus on the minor details of our games and how we can help the overall team and how it's going to help us have better results out on Saturdays.

Q. Speaking about that continuity, all the members of the front four are returning as well. How has your relationship with all of them grown and developed over the years?

LANGSTON HARDY: Yeah, definitely tremendous. I think the biggest thing is, like, we always talk about how connection is our edge. So being able to be out there with those guys, obviously we're working out every day of the week, on Saturdays, getting extra work, but also hanging out with each other outside the facility. You know, just building those relationships, knowing, you know, going to get food here, going to church on Sundays, different things like that.

It just really allows us to have that better form of communication out there where I can look to my right and see Dallas or see Zach and be like, okay, we're going to run this stunt, just by the way I look at him. It's that type of

connection that's something that's going to help us make a lot of plays this season.

Q. Langston, you missed the spring with an injury. How tough was that for you? How much did you get to see out of the younger guys, such as your own little brother kind of at the front four?

LANGSTON HARDY: Yeah, I think obviously it was tough. I had a lot of conversations with Coach. Just having the -- dealing with injuries, of course, is obviously hard for all players. I would say my situation was a minor injury, but being able to see it kind of from a different lens and taking more of a coach and a leadership type role for my team throughout the spring, I was really able to sit back and see how these guys work and see what works best for them, how they like to be led, how they like to be coached.

Then obviously it was really important for guys like my brother, like you mentioned, to really step up and see, like, you know, anything can happen during a season. Someone can go down. You got to be ready to step up and take the next step. The fact that he was able to show so much growth throughout this offseason, something as a teammate and as a brother, it was great to see.

Q. Family ties obviously run deep for you guys. How has that impacted your on-and-off-field performances?

LANGSTON HARDY: Yeah, it's definitely huge. Having a dad who played at the highest level in this game, some people -- obviously everyone always asks me about it and says it can be a little bit of a challenge obviously being compared to and things like that, but I never really saw it as that. Mainly just as an opportunity to learn and grow as a player.

Obviously him being my dad, too, he's always looking at the minor details of my game. So if I'm talking to my coaches during the day and we're talking about things with my hands or different things like that, obviously we're focused on those things in the facility, and I come home and talk to him, and he's telling me about something totally else different about my game that maybe I wouldn't always notice.

I definitely take the -- don't take the opportunity for granted and try and talk to him as much as I can and just make sure I'm as ready as I can be for my team on Saturdays.

Q. A couple of seasons ago at UConn you had three and a half sacks. Last season at Wake Forest you had seven sacks. You doubled that. What were some of the fine-tune details that you realized about your game from 2024 to 2025 that allowed you to double your



sack total and kind of move forward into something more special this season?

LANGSTON HARDY: The biggest part is definitely teammates. I think I got to be around a lot of different guys with a lot of different personalities, a lot of different pass rush varieties, different things like that.

Being able to just have conversations throughout the days and seeing how this guy likes to work and the way this guy likes to work in this situation, it allowed me to play off of him, and then I can tell -- for instance, like Gabe, I can tell him my strengths. This play, if I'm going to go high, he can counter inside and we can condense the pocket together.

It's really just allowed me to be able to be more free and be more like myself. I would like to say I'm a versatile player. I like to try and always keep offensive tackles guessing. So the fact that I'm able to do that and all the guys out there with me have the same motto, same mindset, it really allowed us to all flourish in this defense.

Coach Hazelton does a great job keeping us very multiple. I feel like it's hard for offenses to know what's coming. We give a lot of different looks, send different blitzes from all different areas.

I think it really just helped me be able to be a versatile player in the defense, and I just made the plays that were there for me to make.

THE MODERATOR: Langston, thank you. We'll spend five minutes with Gio Lopez.

Q. Gio, you're coming from a program that had a lot of hype going into the season. Despite not having much production going into it, into a program that is not necessarily getting the hype after what's described as one of the quietest nine-win seasons in ACC history, pretty much, how is that juxtaposition, and do you like that underdog role, or is it more like we're coming for our respect?

GIO LOPEZ: I think it's more of a respect thing. To worry about where I came from and that doesn't factor into how I feel towards Wake Forest. I think the thought process towards that is we're underdogs, but we're not worried about the rat poison of the social media, what's the expectation. We just have to show up and be 1-0. If we can do that, then we'll be perfectly fine.

Q. Talk about the biggest change you've had to make in changing offenses, coming to Wake from UNC, what the biggest adjustment has been for you.

GIO LOPEZ: Honestly, the adjustment was pretty smooth for me. The offensive coordinator at Wake Forest was at South Alabama with me. The adjustment was being comfortable not having to feel so antsy about learning it ever so fast. I had the time to learn it, but I already knew it, so I was able to articulate what I wanted to the new transfers or to the new guys that came in.

So being able to be -- from day one, being able to communicate the offense to other guys was a big factor instead of me being so worried about learning it for myself.

Q. Going from where you were at South Alabama to North Carolina now to Wake Forest, what has been that experience for you through the transfer portal being re-recruited a bunch of times? What have you learned and maybe what advice you would give to another student-athlete that's going through it?

GIO LOPEZ: I'm thankful for it, the journey I've went on. I have no regrets. I've learned a lot from every school I've been at.

If I had to give a younger guy some rules about transfer portal, some game, I would say just go somewhere you feel comfortable and where you feel truly wanted. If you feel like you're just a number somewhere or you're chasing financial gain, then that's maybe your thing, but for me playing for Coach Dickert has been a really positive light and just knowing that he knows me more than just I'm more than No. 3. It's more than just a jersey number. He knows me as a person. He knows my family. He knows the way I operate and stuff like that. I say go somewhere you feel truly comfortable as a person.

Q. As Coach said, almost half of your teammates are newcomers and almost half are returners. How has it been for you to come in and be that leader that this team needs?

GIO LOPEZ: I think for me just trying to be a leader was showing up and being the first guy in, last guy out, but also showing up early and at first being just a leader by example.

You can't ask for respect or have a vocal voice if you're not doing the right things. So making sure I'm doing all the right things. Then with me doing that, in February and March being able to be a little more vocal because they know I'm doing the right thing. What I'm saying is how I live, how I operate. So I think that was kind of the thought process towards all that.

Q. When you got to Wake, did you sense the confidence from the guys that were returning that had



nine wins that doesn't happen very often?

GIO LOPEZ: Yeah, I sensed the confidence. Our defense, you can tell they're very confident in themselves. Even the guys that were new that came in, you can tell that this was a really -- everyone was bought into the program. So I think just from that aspect, I think our team is very -- doing very well with that aspect, yeah.

THE MODERATOR: Would you rather run, or would you rather throw?

GIO LOPEZ: I'd rather throw (smiling).

THE MODERATOR: Thank you. We'll finish up our time with Davaughn Patterson.

Q. Davaughn, you're kind of known for your versatility, so how much pride do you take being that chess piece that Coach Dickert gets to solve whatever problem he wants to solve?

DAVAUGHN PATTERSON: That's one of my main personal goals. I like to learn as many positions on the field as I can, learn the defense as much as I can so that I can go out and play different positions because that's really the most fun aspect of the game for me.

Just being able to move around the field freely, go up play D-line, blitz from over here, maybe drop in coverage from back there. Just the switch-up, that's what I enjoy the most is being able to do different things and impact the game from different positions on the field.

Q. You played through an injury through the most of last year, I believe. Can you shed a little bit of light on what it was like playing through that, and what did you learn kind of playing through that sort of adversity?

DAVAUGHN PATTERSON: Yeah, so I played through a sports hernia in each groin throughout most of the year. So just learning about myself, just how strong I am mentally. That's really what it was, just a mental battle. My body was hurting, but just mentally I wanted to be there for my teammates. I didn't want to let my team down. It was always just bigger than me.

If I could play through it, I'm going to try my hardest to play through it and ignore the pain, ignore any other factors because I wanted to do it for my team, and I wanted to show up, and I didn't want to let my teammates down.

That's what kind of drove me throughout most of the season to go out there and continue to play.

Q. Tell us a little bit about the new change at Wake Forest. Before it was a team that a lot of teams would just check off, okay, we got this game. Now the new mentality is you don't know what you're going to get because Wake comes to play, they're not coming to just get ran over. Tell us about the mindset.

DAVAUGHN PATTERSON: Yeah, I think that (audio interruption) the mindset. Our team motto, built in the dark, just we know that a lot of people are going to overlook Wake Forest, but just us coming up -- I mean coming to work out together every single day in the offseason, in the winter, in the spring, it's creating a mentality.

Yeah, just creating a mentality for the team and just that we work hard. We're going to work hard. We're going to show up every single day. We're going to show up every single practice, every snap, day by day, and we're going to give it all that we can.

That competitive drive within each one of our teammates is, like, everybody on our team is so competitive. Like, dude, whether we're doing sprints, whether we're racing with the sleds, it's just a healthy, healthy competitive competition that just keeps us going. I think that's what's going to help us go far this season.

Q. Davaughn, a lot of people talk about your physicality and your physical tools that make you like what a Vic Beasley used to be in playing all these different positions and whatnot. Can you talk about the mental preparation aspect that allows you to do things like line up at defensive end at one end and play two high safety in the next? What goes into it from the mental standpoint?

DAVAUGHN PATTERSON: I would have to say, first off, it starts with our coaching staff. Coach Haze and Coach Banks, they put a lot of time in into making things as easy and as simple for us to understand as possible, and a lot of time in the film room just going over the play calls, going over situational awareness and things like that to prepare you for those moments in a game to where you feel confident in yourself and you just go out there and make the plays that you have to make.

It definitely starts in the film room, and I would definitely have to give high praise to our coaching staff.

Q. You were here at Wake Forest before Coach Dickert came in, so you experienced that transition firsthand. What are some of the things that he showed you right away that felt different in a positive way?

DAVAUGHN PATTERSON: I'll always go back to that first



Zoom call with Coach Dickert. Just his genuine -- you could feel how genuine he was as a person. He truly meant everything that he said in that Zoom call.

Then just getting around him in person just his energy, it drags you in no matter who you are. You just gravitate towards him with his energy and how genuine he cares about you.

You can tell Coach Dickert really wants to see you win. He really wants the best for each and every person on the team and on the staff. It was easy for us to follow in line and follow Coach Dickert's vision.

THE MODERATOR: Wake Forest, thank you.

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