

MAKING THE GRADE

With 37 Letterwinners and 15 Starters Returning, VMI Football Will Look to Capitalize on its Improvement of the Past Two Years

With stability achieved the past two years, the VMI football program looks to rev up its motors to make a run at new heights in 2004.

The Keydets have won 12 games over the past two years - the most over a two-year period since the 1976 and 1977 seasons. With a 6-6 mark in 2003, VMI also secured back-to-back non-losing seasons after a string of 20 consecutive losing campaigns.

Coach Cal McCombs, now in his sixth season, will lead the Keydets in their second Big South season after a 79-year run in the Southern Conference. VMI returns 37 letterwinners from last year's squad including 15 starters.

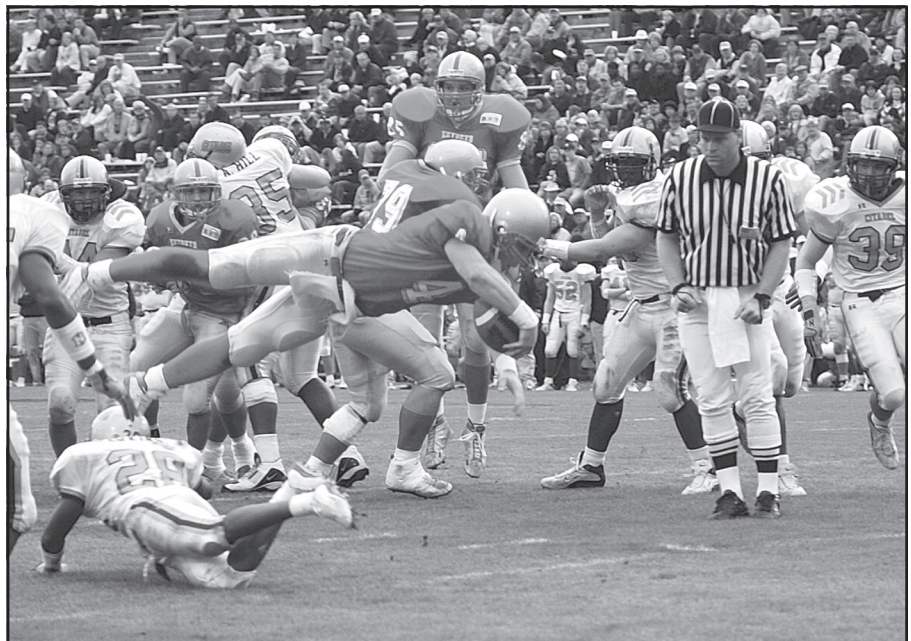
A 6-6 record is certainly noteworthy considering VMI's football travails in the 80's and 90's, but McCombs and the returning members from last year's team felt a bit unfulfilled considering the high expectations entering last fall.

"I was excited about a lot of young players winning six ballgames last year, but looking back, there were four football games where there was a play here or there where we could have won all of them could have given us 10 wins, or splitting them would have given us eight wins," said McCombs. "Even though it was a good year for our team, it was a disappointing year because we felt we had the opportunity to win more games."

The 2004 VMI Football team would like to avoid the question - what if?

Seven starters return from last year's record setting offense which set new school season marks in points (359), touchdowns scored (44), and total offense (4,681). The 2003 Keydet offense also ranked 35th nationally in total offense.

Headlining the group are junior running back **Sean Mizzer (Prince Frederick, Md.)** and sophomore quarterback **Jonathan Wilson (Natural Bridge, Va.)**. Mizzer was a first team All-Big South selection who finished third in the league and 28th nationally in rushing with 1,244 yards. He had seven 100-yard games on the season to push his career total to ten, and became only the sixth player to go over 200 yards in a game when he gained 206 yards against Davidson. Wilson, a second team All-Big South pick, led the Big South in passing yards/game with 188.3 per contest and had a passing efficiency rating of 128.86. He completed 168 passes out of 296 tries for 2,290 yards and 12 touchdowns and generated 189.69 yards per



Sophomore quarterback Jonathan Wilson (Natural Bridge, Va.) will try to put the Keydets over the top after a solid freshman campaign.

game total offense. Wilson threw for a career-high 306 yards against Austin Peay with two scores and had six 200-yard games on the year.

The backfield will also return promising sophomore Colby Hollingsworth (Dallas, Texas) and letterman **Abey Malave-Lopez (Woodbridge, Va.)**, who returned to school after a year's absence.

"I feel good about our quarterback situation, said McCombs. "Last year, we went with a quarterback who had never taken a snap, and Jonathan Wilson developed with the maturity and confidence you want to see. You combine that with two quality backs that I don't think VMI has had at the same time for many years, Mizzer and Hollingsworth, and receivers who can make plays, and it could be a very exciting situation again with our skill people."

Junior wide receiver **Zohn Burden (Virginia Beach, Va.)**, a second team All-Big South selection, leads the receiving corps. Burden led the team in catches with 36 for 599 yards and tied for the team lead in touchdowns with three. Burden showed his big play capability when he caught five passes for 124 yards and a touchdown against Norfolk State. He became the 16th player in school history to go over 500 yards receiving in a season.

Other lettermen returning to the receiving corps are junior receiver **Gary Price (Woodbridge, Va.)**, senior **John Puvogel (Manassas, Va.)**, and junior **Kirk Monteleone (Wheeling, W.Va.)**. Price has been a run-and-catch threat as a slotback the past two seasons while Puvogel returned to form last year as a wideout after missing all of 2002 rehabbing from a knee injury.

Junior center **Matt Dowler (6-3, 260, Parkersburg, W.Va.)**, junior guard **Alex Correll (6-3, 290, Charlotte, N.C.)**, and junior tackle **Jeremy Ward (6-4, 300, Grundy, Va.)** are all returning starters to an offensive line group that returns just six lettermen. To help with depth, junior tight end **Donnie Johnston (6-7, 260, Mechanicsville, Va.)** has been converted from tight end to tackle full-time. Other returning lettermen are junior guard **Brian Duncan (6-3, 290, Culpeper, Va.)** and junior **Robert Oaks (6-4, 285, Provo, Utah)**. Both players have starting experience in their careers and could step in at anytime.

VMI's freshman signee recruiting class included seven offensive linemen to help develop depth at this critical position.

"Since we've been here, we've felt pretty good about our skill people, but the biggest problem

that we've had is depth with the big guys, said McCombs. "In our total recruiting class, we have about a dozen players that are over 250 pounds. We need to concentrate on developing more linemen in the future."

On the other side of the ball, the defensive unit lost four starters but only six lettermen from last year's team. The group will be both young and experienced with just two seniors among the seven returning defensive starters.

Junior free safety **Robert Mason (Charlotte, N.C.)** leads the unit and was a second-team All-Big South pick last season. Mason was third on the team in tackles with 89, had six pass break-ups, and showed a knack for the big play when he blocked two kicks and returned them to the opponents' endzone. Starting strong safety **Marcus Barnes (Elizabethtown, Ky.)**, who attained the team's highest weight testing marks in off-season conditioning, returns as a starter, but the Keydet secondary must replace graduated cornerbacks Musa Sarki and Micheal Kirk to solidify the unit. Senior free safety **Kamau Hull (Athens, Ga.)** and junior **Maury Pauling (Hampton, Va.)** have ample starting experience and will provide depth in the secondary, while returning lettermen **Grant Harris (Powhatan, Va.)** and **Jamaal Walton (Virginia Beach, Va.)** will get hard looks at the vacated corner positions.

The linebacking corps returns junior starters **Todd Baldwin (94 tackles, W.Des Moines, Iowa)** and **Justin Huggard (75 tackles, Staunton, Va.)**. Senior **Adam Brankamp (Columbus, Ohio)**

returns to school after a two-year absence and will likely start at one linebacker slot while depth at LB will come from juniors **Mike Maleski (Virginia Beach, Va.)** and **Brad Miller (Roanoke, Va.)**.

The defensive line returns starting sophomore nose tackle **Jack Herzog (Bel Air, Md.)** and sophomore end **Eric Hall (Marion, Va., nine tackles for loss)**, along with senior end **Sean Moore (Hedgesville, W.Va.)**. Other lettermen with starting experience on the front are sophomore tackle **Steel Nardozzi (Colonial Heights, Va.)** and sophomore end **Charlie Liesfield (Richmond, Va.)**. Junior **Adrian Cmerek (Clarksville, Md.)** will return to the D-Line after working some at fullback in the spring.

VMI must replace record-setting placekicker Matt Sharpe (17-24 FG's), but second team All-Conference punter sophomore **Adam Peters (Roanoke, Va.)** returns to the kicking game. Peters averaged 40.6 yards as a freshman and had nine punts over 50 yards and 16 inside the opponents 20-yard line. He will attempt to absorb both punting and placekicking duties in the coming season.

"The biggest question marks I see coming in this season are our cornerbacks and our placekicking game," said McCombs. "But, I'm excited that this team has a lot of experience coming back, and yet, we're still young. There are not a lot of returning guys that are in the last year of their eligibility."

The Keydets return to an 11-game schedule in 2004 and play state I-AA rivals Richmond, William & Mary, and James Madison in the same season for

the first time since 1994. In addition to the challenging Big South schedule, VMI will face I-A Ohio University in the season opener. Scheduling conflicts prevented VMI from facing long-time military rival The Citadel for the first time since 1956, but the series will resume in 2005.

As for the prospects for the coming season, McCombs sizes it up this way. "We have to match the confidence level with our experience level, whether it's handling a punt, not turning the ball over, getting that tough first down late in the game, or just getting our offense and defense to the point where they can make those 5-6 plays in a ball game that can make a difference. We'll need to do that to be successful."

2004 VMI Football Key Notes

- 12 wins over the last two years; most since 1976-77.
- Back-to-back non-losing seasons after 20 straight losing seasons.
- Set school record for points the last two seasons.
- 2nd year in Big South Conference.
- New offensive coordinator - Will McCombs.
- New offensive line coach Chris Malone (from UMass).
- New linebackers coach Will Holthouser (from Elon, also coached at VMI from 1986-89).
- 37 returning letterwinners.
- 15 returning starters.
- Only six defensive letterwinners lost but unit must replace LB Derik Screen (357 career tackles, 5th all-time).
- VMI will play Richmond, William & Mary, and James Madison in the same season for the first time since 1994.
- First meeting with Ohio University in season opener.
- Will not play The Citadel for the first time since 1956, but series will resume in 2005.



Junior linebacker Todd Baldwin (W. Des Moines, Iowa) and all-conference free safety Robert Mason (Gastonia, N.C.) will lead the VMI defense.