

# NEW HORIZONS

**Coming off the most wins in a season since 1981, VMI Football starts a new chapter in the Big South Conference.**

**N**ow that VMI has tasted victory again in the feast called I-AA college football, can the Keydets move winning from appetizer to main course?

The uniforms have been washed, folded, and stored since last year's mud-filled 23-21 battle over The Citadel in the season ending Military Classic of the South in Charlotte, but the memories of 2002 still burn brightly in the hearts of VMI football faithful. VMI posted six wins – the most since 1981, and landed six players on All-Southern Conference teams in VMI's last year in the league.

Head coach Cal McCombs, named Coach of the Year by the league coaches, doesn't underestimate the importance of 2002 and what it meant to the program.

"The bottom line was very important from the standpoint that we did win some games and went out on a high note in the Southern Conference, and it was very important to the mindset to our program – both to our players and our fans," said McCombs. "We've got to keep doing what we're doing and get better every year and continue to make progress. Winning six ball games was important to us, but I want to get to the point where we are winning more than six games a year."

The glow of 2002 becomes irrelevant when VMI kicks off the '03 campaign August 30 at Navy.

Change abounds with VMI football in 2003. The Keydets will have a new football home in the Big South Conference after a 79-year run in the SoCon. On paper, the Keydets must replace 15 starters and will field a much younger version than the previous year. Two new assistant coaches join the staff. But experience does return in 36 lettermen, including many seasoned sophomores who turned in remarkable freshman debut seasons.

"Anytime you lose guys that we lost last year you really miss 'em, but I see some seniors that have all-conference potential, and we had some freshman players last year that really played a lot of football," said McCombs. "Even though they are just sophomores, they are seasoned sophomores because they got a lot of playing time."

Offensively, the Keydets thrived under new offensive coordinator Jeff Durden's multiple set and set a new school mark for points with 340 in 2002. Seven starters are gone from that unit, but 19 lettermen return on the offensive side including a proven stable of skill positions and linemen.

The big question mark in spring drills was finding a replacement for record setting quarterback Joey Gibson. That answer will not come until August camp, with the battle



Senior slotback T.J. Snelling (Chester, Va.) and lineman Greg Sturz (Fairfax, Va.) return from last year's record-setting offense.

between juniors **Josh Lyles (Hampton, Va.)** and **David Poldiak (Summerville, Pa.)**, sophomore **Kirk Monteleone (Wheeling, W.Va.)**, and redshirt freshman **Jonathan Wilson (Lexington, Va.)**.

Lyles and Poldiak have the most game experience and made starts in 2001 when Gibson was sidelined with injury. Lyles had the most consistency of any quarterback in spring drills, and Poldiak took a redshirt year in 2002 after completing 56% of his passes in limited duty in 2001. Monteleone was a record setting quarterback in high school and returns to the quarterback position after helping out at wideout last year. Wilson opened eyes with a strong spring game and led QB's in rushing and total yards during the spring.

The QB who takes the opening snap in Annapolis will have earned the role after an intense competition that carries over from spring to August camp.

"We were hoping someone would take that position and run with it in the spring, and we had four young men going for it, but we felt it best to take 10-12 practices and make a decision in fall camp," said McCombs.

A strong supporting cast of backs and receivers returns in 2003. The Keydets must replace leading rusher John Bell (522 yards) and big-play slotback Kevin Solomon (993 all-purpose yards),

but six lettermen return to the offensive backfield including senior **T.J. Snelling (Chester, Va.)**, a multi-talented back who thrived in VMI's multiple set last year with five rushing TD's and three TD receptions. Sophomore **Sean Mizzer (Prince Frederick, Md.)**, who was a freshman sensation with 510 rushing yards and five TD's, also returns. Other returning lettermen included sophomore **Gary Price (Woodbridge, Va.)**, who was named SoCon Freshman of the Week for his play against Wofford, junior **Brian Malast (Whiting, N.J.)**, and senior **R.C. Simmons (Winchester, Va.)**.

Perhaps the biggest impact will be made by sophomore slotback **Titus Green (LaPlata, Md.)**, who sat out 2002 while taking an academic redshirt year. Green was named 2001 SoCon Freshman of the Year and set a school mark for kick return yards (634) while leading freshman receivers with 20 receptions.

Three receivers with substantial experience return to the corps, including junior **Greg Carlson (Purcellville, Va.)** (27 catches, 433 yards) and junior **John Puvogel (Manassas, Va.)**, who took a medical redshirt last year rehabbing from a torn ACL. Sophomore **Zohn Burden (Virginia Beach, Va.)** (11 catches, 165 yards, 1 TD) displayed much promise as a freshman wideout and could help fill the big-play void created by graduated Pedro Garcia (46 catches, 803 yards, 7 TD's.) Sophomore tight end **Donnie Johnston (Mechanicsville, Va.)** provides versatility with

his excellent blocking and sure hands.

The offensive line lost starting center Keith Graham and guard Skip Carleton to graduation, but senior tackle **Sam Brown (6-4, 290, Peterstown, W.Va.)** returns to a starting role along with junior guard **Greg Sturz (6-5, 280, Fairfax, Va.)**. Sophomore center **Matt Dowler (6-3, 260, Parkersburg, W.Va.)** is poised to take over the starting center job. The line could also receive a boost if senior tackle **Craig Howard (6-4, 315, Farmville, Va.)** regains his eligibility pending summer school work.

"I think we have a chance to have the best offensive line since we've been here. We lost Keith Graham and Skip Carelton, but we have solid people coming back and Sam Brown is one I think to watch this year," remarked McCombs. "With the people we have returning, I think we have the chance to be as good if not better than last year. On offense overall, we lost some big performers, but everywhere you look on offense, there are some skills players that have performed well and are ready to see more action."

Defensively, the Keydets have switched to a 4-3 package but will still employ elements of the 3-4 alignment used in years past.

"We just felt we needed to be a stronger football team against the run," McCombs said. "By being able to play both an eight man front and a seven man front will help us this year. We'll substitute to get a little bit more speed when people try to spread us out."

The Keydets must come up with quick answers for the defensive line, where graduation claimed all three starters last year including four year-starter and all-conference tackle Matt Kluk.

"That's the area we know where we need to come through, says McCombs. "Vicheal Foxx has

the potential to be one of the best defensive linemen VMI has ever had. Along with our punting game, that is the biggest concern we have and we may have to play some freshman there."

**Vicheal Foxx (6-4, 280, Jr., Ruther Glen, Va.)** is a returning letterman and a spot starter at tackle the last two seasons. He played in all but one of 12 games last year and logged 37 tackles including five for loss. Sophomore **Steel Narzozzi (6-2, 240)**, a walk-on from the Richmond area last year, showed promise in spring practice and could see playing time along with some freshman signees.

The Keydets also lost their starting linebacking duo of all-conference back Chris Walsh and Anthony Sturgill to graduation, but big-play performer **Derik Screen (Lynchburg, Va.)** will move from outside to inside linebacker to fill the void. Screen is VMI's most prolific defender with all-conference potential, and is looking to bounce back after a neck stinger sidelined him for four games. Despite the injury, Screen still managed to rack up 55 tackles including 11 for loss and five quarterback sacks. As a sophomore in 2001, Screen put up eye-popping numbers with 106 stops and 22 tackles for loss that ranked sixth in the nation.

Sophomore **Todd Baldwin (6-2, 225, So.)** and **Adrian Cmerek (Clarksville, Md.)** will join Screen in the two-deep picture at inside linebacker and both players come into the season after seeing substantial action as freshman. Baldwin had 38 tackles in reserve and special teams duty in 2002, and Cmerek, who missed spring drills while playing lacrosse, had an impact on special teams last year and is ready for more snaps.

Sophomore **Justin Huggard (Staunton, Va.)**, who filled in well at outside linebacker last

season when Screen was sidelined with injury, should start at the will backer slot in the new 4-3 alignment. Senior and three-year letterman **David Casteel (Cincinnati, Ohio)** and junior special teams standout **Tripp Smith (Suwanee, Ga.)** should provide quality depth at will as well.

The secondary is deep, talented, and returns six lettermen. Leading the group is senior All-SoCon cornerback **Musa Sarki (Hampton, Va.)**, who rated statistically as the top defensive back in the league last year with 18 passes defended. Sarki picked off six passes in 2002, the most by a VMI defender in 17 years. Sophomore free safety **Robert Mason (Gastonia, N.C.)** led the team in tackles with 80 last season after being thrust into the starting mix when junior **Kamau Hull (Athens, Ga.)** had his season ended with a torn ACL in the fourth game of the year. Hull returns healthy this fall and will give the Keydets quality depth with starting experience. Other returning lettermen and at cornerback include **Michael Kirk (Rock Hill, S.C.)** and **Ron Vaughns (Winston-Salem, N.C.)** who both have starting experience on their resumes. Sophomore **Maury Pauling (Hampton, Va.)** and **Marcus Barnes (Elizabethtown, Ky.)** will see more action at strong safety. Pauling is moving back to his more natural position after playing at outside linebacker last year.

McCombs is optimistic about his defensive unit overall.

"I really feel great about our secondary," he says. "When you look at our corners with Kirk and Sarki and our seniors that have played a lot of football, and that gives you a good feeling. We've got some good backs and some depth. We've moved Derik Screen inside so we can get him to the ball. Todd Baldwin and Justin Huggard both played well last year so we feel good about our speed and experience there."

The punting game poses perhaps the biggest question mark as no clear cut favorite emerged in spring drills. A huge void was created when All-American punter Brent Barth wrapped up a stellar collegiate career by averaging a SoCon record 47.4 yards last year. "You can't replace a Brent Barth with him averaging over 47 yards and all the hidden yardage for four years, but one of the candidates needs to come through, remarked McCombs.

Senior placekicker **Matt Sharpe (Chesterfield, Va.)** is one possibility at punter, while redshirt freshman Justin **Major (Virginia Beach, Va.)**, who worked out with the baseball team in the spring, is another possibility. The Keydets also signed heralded prospect **Adam Peters**, an AP Group AAA punter from Roanoke, Va.

Sharpe, a consistent performer at placekicker, will return to that role and should have improved range as he continues to develop leg strength. Sharpe is 10 of 14 for his career in field goals and converted a school record 37 PAT's last year.

A completely altered schedule awaits the Keydets in 2003. VMI will be facing five teams for the first time and will play four Big South games in their inaugural season, although state-foe Liberty and Charleston Southern both played the Keydets recently. Four in-state teams (William & Mary, Norfolk State, Liberty, Richmond) are most on the slate since 1985, and the Keydets will play their first I-A game since 1997 at Navy.

VMI improved its turnover ratio from a SoCon worst -13 in 2001 to +4 last year. If the Keydets can continue to secure the ball and find quick and worthy answers at quarterback, defensive line, and punting, the prospects for a promising 2003 campaign should be within reach.



Senior linebacker Derik Screen (Lynchburg, Va.) has racked up nine quarterback sacks over the last two seasons.