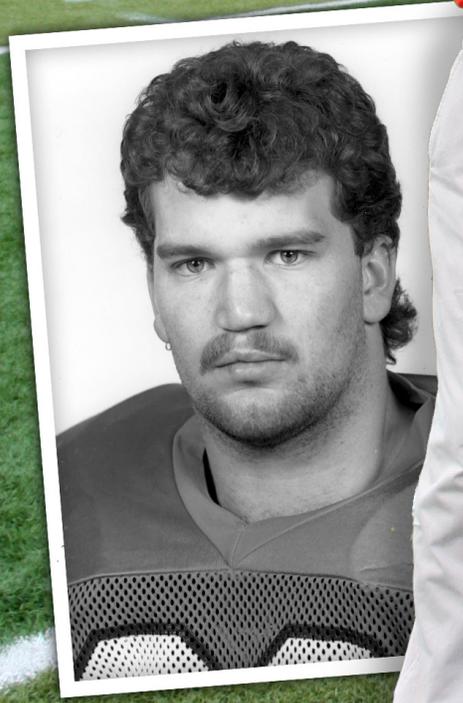


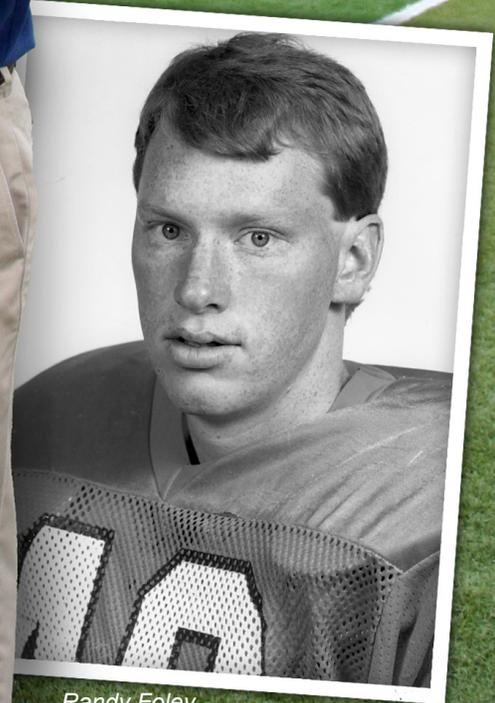
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20 YEARS AGO...



David Sweeney



Randy Foley

Sweeney and Foley on the Virginia sideline

Photo Courtesy Brian Hoffman



Twenty years ago the Virginia Cavaliers did something no one in the Commonwealth ever dreamed possible as they rose to the top of the college football world passing the likes of Michigan, Oklahoma, Florida and Nebraska to earn the number one ranking in the nation.

Never before, and not since, has a team from the state made it all the way to the top.

“Going into the year there wasn’t a lot of hype surrounding the team and really most of the people were just wondering if we were going to beat Clemson,” says former Cavalier defensive back and special teams stalwart Randy Foley, who is now the Mayor of Salem.

Foley was a redshirt junior on that 1990 team that was loaded with talented, homegrown in-state players like David Sweeney, Foley’s good buddy and fellow Salem Spartan. Sweeney was a redshirt sophomore in 1990 playing fullback on the offensive side of the ball with the likes

of Shawn Moore, Terry Kirby, Herman Moore, Mark Cooke, Nikki Fisher and Aaron Mundy.

That team also featured locals David Ware of William Fleming and William Byrd’s Charles Keiningham along with current Tennessee Volunteers head coach Derek Dooley and a big time national prospect in defensive end Chris Slade, who later went on to play nine seasons in the NFL.

“I think that is one of the reasons we were so successful,” says Foley. “I believe Kirby and Slade were listed in the top five players in the nation coming out of high school back then.”

Despite that rich talent and the fact that Virginia had won 10 games and earned a share of the ACC title the previous year, there still wasn’t any reason for these players to even remotely think about attaining a number one ranking. After all, the schedule makers had placed the Cavs’ Achilles heel, Clemson, as the second

opponent of the season. Virginia had lost 29 straight games to the Tigers dating back to 1955, but on September 8, 1990 the Cavaliers set their unlikely march to number one in motion with a 20-7 win over Clemson at Scott Stadium.

“For me that was the greatest experience I had at UVA up to that point in my career,” says Sweeney. “The crowd was unbelievable that game and to beat Clemson and their benchmark program was a big deal.”

“That game really propelled us onto greatness,” says Foley. “Even though it was early in the year that was the most important win we had.”

After disposing of Clemson, the Cavs went on a tear averaging nearly 60 points a game in their next three wins over Navy, Duke and William and Mary, and after shutting out N.C. State 31-0 they were ranked number one when the new polls came out on October 16, 1990.



“There was a lot more energy in the practices and the campus was buzzing, but I specifically remember reading something in Sports Illustrated about us and that really let me know it was a big deal,” says Foley.

Back then both Virginia and Virginia Tech filled their schedules with in-state and regional opponents, so even though the Cavaliers were unbeaten and steamrolling the opposition, they still needed some help to leapfrog the so-called “Big Boys” of college football.

As luck would have it, 1990 was an extremely rough year for number one teams.

Preseason number one Miami lost to BYU in the second week of the season. That setback allowed Notre Dame to move to the top of the rankings for a couple of weeks, but the Irish also would tumble after they were upset by Stanford. Michigan then assumed the top spot, but just for a week as the Wolverines lost to rival Michigan State 28-27 on October 13, 1990. That outcome coupled with Oklahoma’s loss to Texas on that same weekend propelled the Cavs into the number one spot in the polls.

“You could tell things were big because the media coverage really started to ramp up,” says Sweeney. “Being a glorified lineman, all of my interviews were with local reporters, so I knew something was going on when I had people wanting to talk to me that I had never heard of before.”

Things got even bigger the following week, but only by 1990 standards. When the Cavs rolled into Winston-Salem to play Wake Forest the Rev. Jesse Jackson, whose son Yusef was a reserve linebacker for the Cavaliers, cheered on the Cavs from his front row seat at Groves Stadium, but he was about the only celebrity in attendance.

ABC Sports did do an interview with emerging Heisman candidate Shawn Moore after the game for its college football scoreboard show that aired that same afternoon, but there were no satellite trucks lined up in the parking lot to deliver live reports on the game and ESPN was nowhere in sight.

In 1990, there was no such thing as Game Day and contractually all ESPN could do back then was carry one or two Big Ten and SEC games every Saturday. The World Wide Web didn’t exist 20 years ago

The game jerseys Foley and Sweeney wore in the Sugar Bowl game against Tennessee.



either and most TV stations actually signed off the air at midnight, but even without the around the clock coverage, chat rooms and internet access the hype in Charlottesville was starting to reach epic proportions.

“They talk about national championships at Florida and Texas all the time, but to be somewhere where it was unexpected and never crossed anyone’s mind was very different,” says Foley. “We were on cloud nine and certainly very excited.”

The Cavs’ fairytale stayed alive into the last month of the season as they made it out of October with their ranking intact. Next up on November 3 was a battle with fellow ACC unbeaten Georgia Tech. The nationally televised game on CBS turned out to be one of the most exciting contests of the entire college football season, but for Virginia it also was the beginning of the end.

Virginia lost to the eventual national champs from Georgia Tech 41-38 inside what was for that day known as “Scott Sisson Stadium.” The Georgia Tech place kicker hit a 37-yard field goal with eight seconds left in regulation to shatter the glass slipper Virginia had worn so well for first seven weeks of the season.

“I have the game on tape, but I still haven’t watched it all the way through,”

says Sweeney. “The Georgia Tech game was very painful, and I really believe had we won that game, the rest of the season would have turned out much differently than it did.”

The Cavs lost three of their final four regular season games, including a humiliating setback to the Hokies in Blacksburg in front of several stunned Sugar Bowl officials. Their starting quarterback Shawn Moore dislocated the thumb on his throwing hand on Senior Day, the team came up short in its Sugar Bowl battle with Tennessee by a single point and eventually finished ranked 15th and 23rd in the final polls of the season with an 8 and 4 record.

“To be so high in that season, it really turned into a low and was very disappointing. But for me and many of the other guys to have that kind of experience was amazing,” says Foley. “Looking back on it, now 20 years removed, being a part of something like that, even for a short time, really was incredible.”

Both Foley and Sweeney have fond memories of their playing days in Charlottesville and especially the ones they had in Salem, even though both men took unconventional paths through Salem Stadium.

Foley began his football career playing sandlot ball for East Salem before showcasing his speed at Andrew Lewis Middle School. He also was a serious basketball player at the time and actually decided not to play football his 9th and 10th grade years at the high school.

“I became a big basketball guy in middle school and just decided not to play football anymore, but in the end, I really missed it,” says Foley.

Sweeney missed his 9th and 10th grade years, as well, but for much different reasons. His dad worked for the railroad and the family moved from the Blue Ridge area of Botetourt County to Bluefield when David was in 9th grade. As a result, he began his high school football career playing for the legendary Glynn Carlock at Graham High School before moving to Salem for his final two years.

“I was fortunate enough to play for two really good high school coaches in Coach Carlock and Coach Willis White,” says Sweeney. “I didn’t want to move down here to Salem at the time because I was doing well at Graham and I had a good group of friends, but it turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to me.”

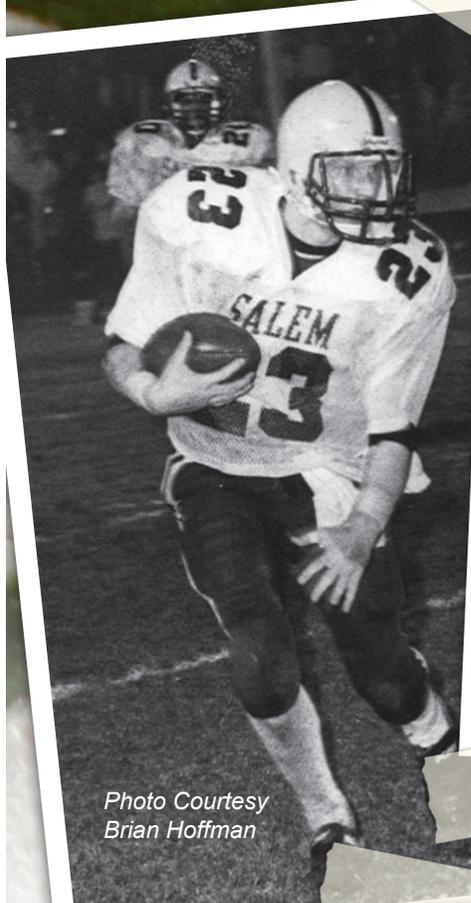


Photo Courtesy
Brian Hoffman

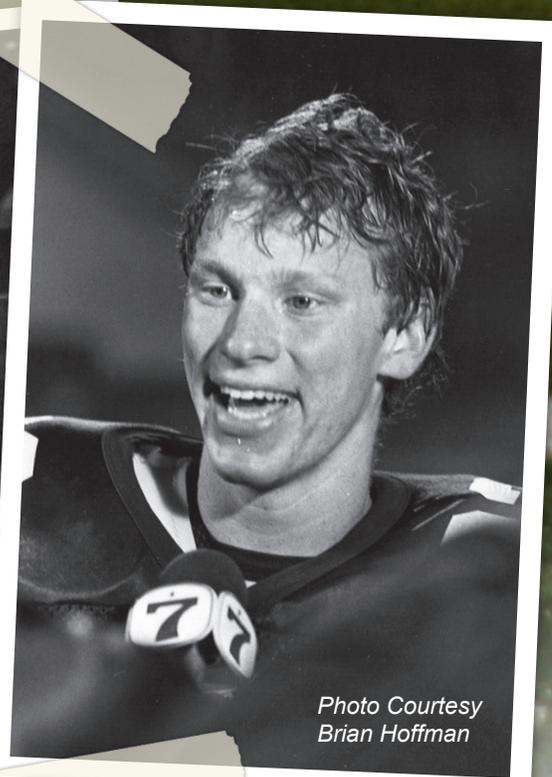


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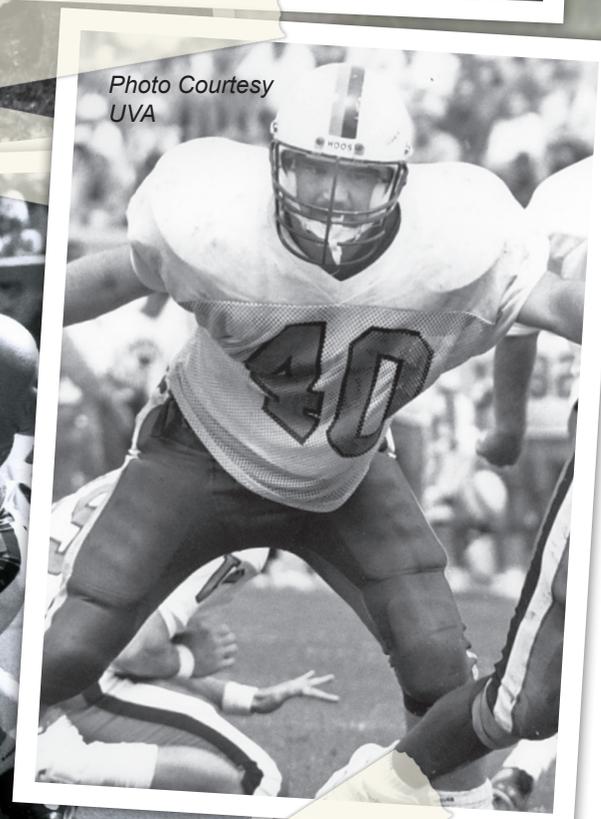


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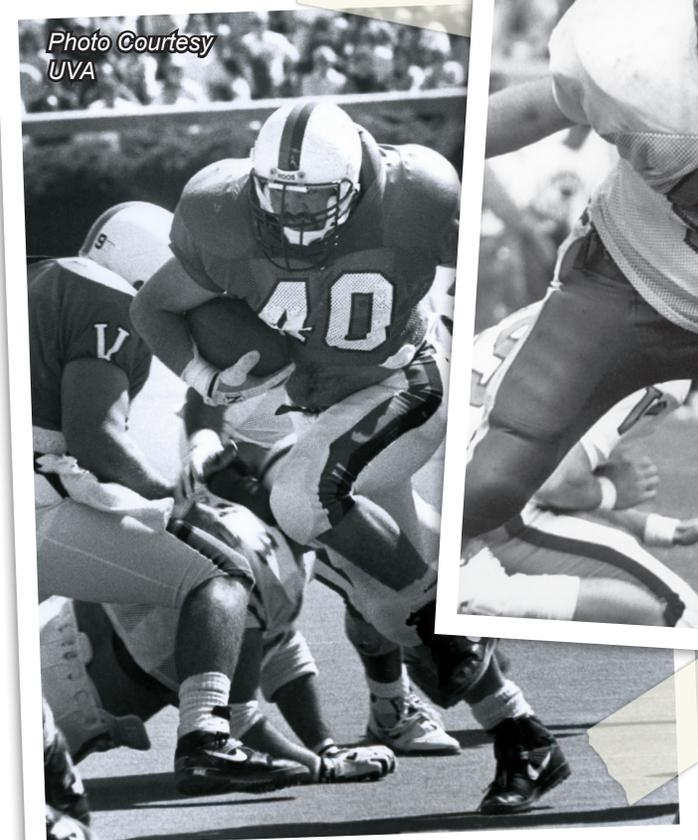


Photo Courtesy
UVA

Both were key members of Salem's march to the Group AAA championship game in 1986 that the Spartans lost to Hampton 14-0. Because they played at the highest level possible in the state, college recruiters who may not have seen them got an eyeful of their talents.

"By the grace of God I was at Salem High School and the success of the team my senior year in 1986 no doubt contributed to the attention I received from Virginia," says Foley.

"No offense to Graham, but if I had finished out there, I would have gone on to play at Emory and Henry with my buddies and would never have played at UVA," says Sweeney.

Both men credit the coaching staff at Salem for molding them into college calibre players and they also have a great deal of admiration for former Virginia assistant coach Danny Wilmer who saw their potential and recruited them.

"Coach Wilmer looked at the intangibles instead of just the numbers," says Sweeney. "Too many times the recruiters are worried about how much weight you can lift or how high you can jump, but Coach Wilmer looked at more than just what you could put down on paper."

"Coach Wilmer understood that coming from a winning program was important," says Foley. "He recruited guys who knew how to win and were familiar with winning."

Sweeney and Foley shake their heads when they look back on their gridiron accomplishments and describe them as out of body experiences or something you watch in a movie, but no matter how it feels today, the 1990 season is a memory and an accomplishment no one can ever take away from them.

"We had great leadership on that team and great camaraderie," says Foley. "It was a very fun and interesting year not only because we made it to number 1, but because of the collection of guys and personalities on the team."

A team that for three weeks knew exactly "Hoo was Number One."

- MS

BEHIND THE SCENES

Salem's Director of Secondary Education had a unique view of Virginia's rise to the top of the polls in 1990. Curtis Hicks was a freshman linebacker, who was being redshirted and held out of game action by the coaches that season.

"When I was being recruited by Virginia, I don't think in my wildest dreams that I ever imagined they would be number one in the nation," he says.

Hicks was a highly recruited all-state linebacker out of Allegheny high school in Low Moor who had plenty of college options before selecting the Cavaliers. He was courted by Penn State, Tennessee, Virginia Tech, West Virginia and Wake Forest before deciding to take his skills to Charlottesville.

"I went to Virginia because I felt like it was the best school with the best football program I could go to locally," he says. "They were ranked in the top 10 my senior year in high school and it was an honor to be recruited by a program like that."

Hicks was part of a star-studded freshman class at Virginia that featured future NFL players Charles Way, Keith Lyle and Mike Frederick. The coaching staff decided to redshirt a number of recruits from that group during the 1990 season, including Hicks.

"When you're being redshirted you practice every day and the only things you miss are the position meetings," says Hicks. "Your responsibility during those meeting times is to get in the weight room and get bigger and stronger. Once practice starts your job is to emulate the opposition and give your teammates a good look as far as what they are going to face on Saturdays."

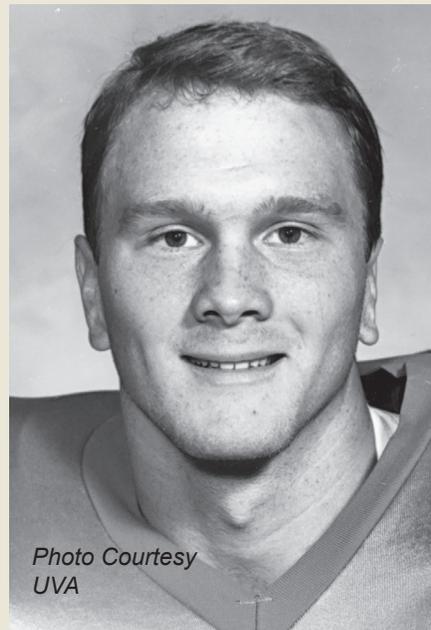
Hicks embraced his first year role on the team and did his best to suit up and perform as the opposition's best linebacker each and every week.

"Every day I practiced against Shawn Moore and Herman Moore and I learned a lot, but it was a bit surreal at the time, especially when we kept rising in the polls," he says. "I never felt like the guys

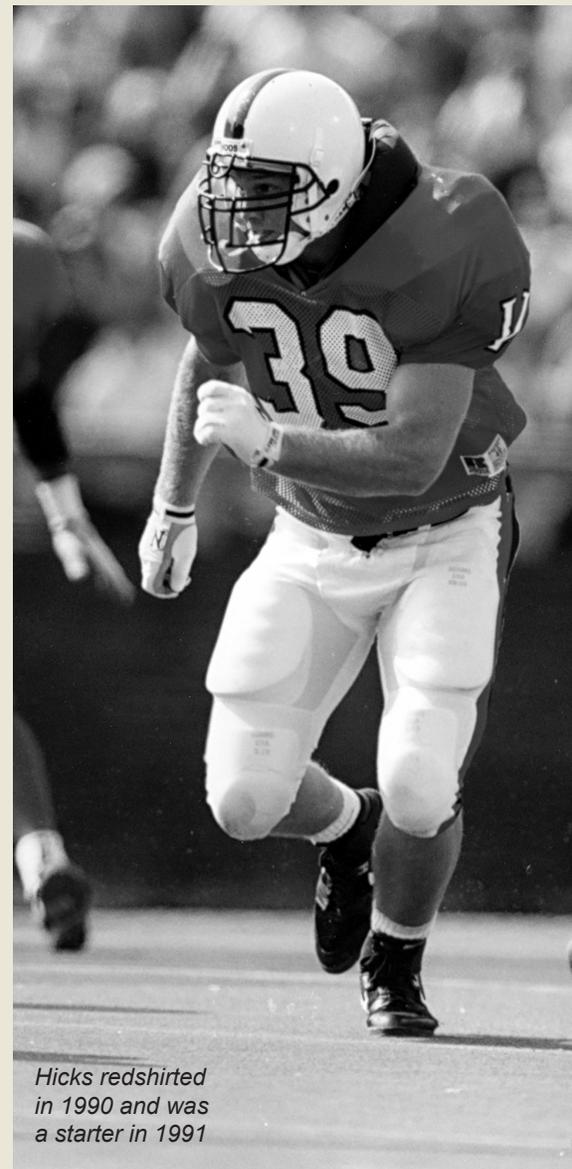
who were redshirted or the freshmen were looked down upon, in fact it was the exact opposite. Those guys were always encouraging to me and coaching me up."

Hicks would benefit from that experience and become a starting linebacker for the Cavaliers the following season, but in 1990 his job was to practice hard, travel with the team and soak in as much of the moment as he could.

"The combination of not having any real responsibility toward the game plan, yet being a part of it each week was really neat," he says. *-MS*



*Photo Courtesy
UVA*



*Hicks redshirted
in 1990 and was
a starter in 1991*



Curtis Hicks