

Angus protégé:

# On Football's Center Stage

From heifers to Hokies, Jake Grove gives his best.

Story & photos by **Becky Mills**

**A**fter growing up showing Angus heifers, Jake Grove was an old hand at competing in front of an audience and performing under pressure. But not this kind of audience, nor this kind of pressure.

The scene was Grove's September 2000 college football debut. "Our first game was with Georgia Tech," the Virginia Tech center says. "I've never been so scared in my life."

When asked if he was nervous because the Georgia Tech team was big and bad, or because the Virginia Tech stadium was packed with a bazillion people, Jake said, "Because they were big and bad and wanted to kill me in front of a bazillion people."

Jake heard thunder but thought it was a sound effect. Turns out, it was the real thing, and the game was cancelled.

"I think it was because I was praying so hard in the locker room. If I had played that game, I'm convinced I would have died," he says.

Virginia Tech's next game was with the University of Akron (UA), and Jake's nerves settled a bit. "They weren't quite as good or big. I played OK."

During the rest of the year, Jake recalls, "I didn't start or wow anybody, but I was solid."

That changed, or at least the part about not starting or wowing anybody. By the time the 23-year-old, 6-foot (ft.)-3-inch (in.), 300-pound (lb.) lineman played his last college football game for the Virginia Tech Hokies in 2003, he was an All-American times five. The Football Writers Association of America, the American Football Coaches Association (AFCA), *Sporting News*, the Walter Camp Football Foundation and The Associated Press (AP) all named him to their first teams, making him a unanimous All-American.

He was also awarded the Dave Rimington Trophy for the best center in college football, and he was a semifinalist for the Lombardi Award.

## Earning his way

He's paid his dues. Jake spent two very long, very frustrating years between his high school graduation in 1998 and the time he stepped onto the Virginia Tech game field.

In the summer of 1998, he played in a high school all-star game and hurt his knee. By the time he found out it wasn't serious, Virginia Tech had already put him on medical leave for the season, so he stayed home and coached the eighth-grade team at his high school, Jefferson Forest. He enrolled in Tech in January 1999, but the Tech team had an abundance of talented offensive linemen. He was redshirted for the following season. That meant he practiced with the team but couldn't play.

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► Jake Grove's work ethic has him looking toward an NFL career.



► Association Regional Manager Chuck Grove taught his son, Jake (above), to always give 100%, whether he was showing heifers or playing football.

“Those two years were a struggle,” he admits.

He was also homesick and wanted to go back to his home and farm in Forest, Va. “I thought my parents would kill me if I did. That was a motivation to stay,” Jake jokes.

He already had plenty of practice in perseverance when it didn't seem a reward was in site. It began before his college career.

When he started recreational league football in the fourth grade, he says, “I was probably the worst one on the team. I didn't know what we were trying to accomplish.”

He figured it out.

By the tenth grade, Jake earned a starting position as defensive tackle, even though he was only 5 ft. 11 in. and weighed 160 lb. “I had to have a lot of hustle or I would have gotten killed.”

During his junior year in high school, Jake says he didn't play well and didn't enjoy playing. But even though he thought about quitting, he kept toiling away in the weight room four times a week.

“When we'd go to cattle shows, we'd have to join Gold's Gym so Jake could lift weights wherever we were,” says his father, Chuck Grove, regional manager for the American Angus Association.

During that time, Jake learned valuable lessons in juggling football, school, cattle, work and life in general. “It was tough to get up on Saturdays and work with the cattle after a game on Friday night,” he recalls. “My Dad did a lot. He helped me out with clipping and tying them up when I couldn't be there. I couldn't have done it without him.”

And even though he wasn't pleased with his performance during his junior year, Jake apparently made an impression on others. In the spring of that year, Virginia Tech head coach Frank Beamer and offensive coordinator coach Rickey Bustle came to look at a teammate of Jake's.

“Coach Ed Landis, my high school coach, asked me to talk to them,” he says. At the time, he was 6 ft. 1 in. and 210 lb. “I

put on three sweatshirts and boots with a 2-inch heel so I'd look bigger.”

Later that spring, Beamer offered him a scholarship. Grove did not take the summer off to celebrate. “That summer was one of my toughest times,” he says. “I ran from 6 a.m. to 7 a.m., then helped my grandfather all day. Then I'd lift weights from 7 to 9 p.m.”

His grandfather, Angus breeder Whitney Grove, doesn't exactly have a desk job, either. Besides his cattle, he puts up 1,000 square bales of hay a year and has had as many as four gardens.

“One day we did nothing but dig potatoes,” Jake says. “He'd give them to everybody in Forest.”

Jake says his grandfather, now 81, is still going strong, but he adds, “He has cut back. He's down to three gardens now.”

### Patience pays

Jake's self-discipline paid. During his senior year he was named to First-Team All-Region and All-District in both defense and offense, as well as First-Team All-State in defense.

But then came the two drought years when he didn't get to play at all. “When I came to Tech, I never thought I'd play,” Jake says. “I was undersized, and I felt like I was a borderline scholarship guy. But I was going to do the best I could. Coach Beamer took a chance on me, and I was going to do everything I could to get playing time. It wasn't in my hands from there.”

Beamer got a return on his investment. In 2001 Tech lost a lot of good linemen, and Jake started every game but one as a guard. That was despite playing with a broken hand.

In 2002 he moved back to center. “That's the year I started playing well, and people started recognizing me. Before that, people hoped I'd play well. After that, they expected me to play well.”

The accolades really started coming before the 2003 season when *Sporting News* named him to its All-American team. “It was great and a big honor, but I wanted to be there at the end of the year.”

He was, and more. Making the five All-American teams put him in the class with only two other Virginia Tech players in the school's history.

### Will football continue?

Needless to say, National Football League (NFL) scouts are salivating. They'll get their chance to snag him on April 24-25 during the annual NFL draft.



► Jake and Chuck hold the Rimington Trophy. It is awarded to the best center in college football.

The bets are on Jake's landing a nice contract. But don't expect the attitude and bad behavior that seem to characterize some NFL players.

"I see people like that on TV — very arrogant," Jake says. "I don't want to be like that. What I do is special, but that doesn't make me special."

Jake's fiancée, Katie Ammon, says, "Jake is so humble. He comes from a family that is humble. His parents and grandparents have taught him to take success with humility and that is a blessing."

They taught him other traits as well. "We taught him to be honest and have integrity," his mom, Ruth, says. "We've expected those things from him and tried to set a good example."

They succeeded. Beamer says, "He's aggressive, he's tough, he's nasty. But off the field he's a good student, a good citizen. He's everything you want a kid to be."

Mike Gentry, Virginia Tech assistant athletic director for strength and conditioning, says, "Jake comes from a fine family and embodies what we want this program to be."

Bill Powell, family friend and retired regional manager for the American Angus Association, says, "Jake is the kind of kid you want your son or daughter to be with. He really is a great kid."

Ammon also gives Jake credit for his ways. "It is a part of his character. It comes from him as well."

Besides keeping his humility and integrity, there is another thing you can

count on if Grove signs with the NFL. He'll give a pro career his very best effort for as long as it takes.

Chuck says, "We never put pressure on him to play. But the thing we tried to instill in Jake and his sister, Rachel, is to do the best you can."

"When we showed cattle we didn't do a lot of winning, but the cattle were broke," he continues. "Whether you come home from a cattle show or a football game, know you did your best."

Powell says Jake and Rachel always gave 100% to whatever they did. "Jake's grandparents were always a good influence

on those kids. They had a good work ethic from the beginning."

"Jake is a self-starter and a blue-collar guy who has made himself into a great player," Gentry says. "The best things about him are his toughness and work ethic. There is no question the hard work he did on the farm as a boy helped develop the fine man he is today."

"I hope I get drafted — by anybody," Jake says. "I'd love to start from Day 1, but I'm willing to do whatever I have to do to play."



► Jake's fiancée, Katie Ammon, says Jake's family taught him to take success with humility.



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