Has Tech's hour Strock?

BY DAN RICHARDS

BLACKSBURG — Virginia Tech plays its first three home football games this fall against teams from the great American Southwest (SMU, Houston and Oklahoma St.), and it looks as if gobbler strategy against the (and their other eight) opponents will be a twist of an old saying. Laying it right on, it looks as if Tech will try to head 'em off with the past — and that the hour has Strock.

That's the impression one got Saturday as quarterback Don Strock came within a tummy full of football of doing the advertised and beating himself in the Gobblers' annual Orange - White football game.

Strock, who came out throwing last fall on the first play from scrimmage and didn't stop until he had finished second among the nation's passers, pitched 16 of 23 first half completions Saturday to lead the Orange side to a 17-10 lead at intermission. The 6-5 senior from Pennsylvania then switched to a white jersey and in the dying seconds all but erased the Orange lead.

The Orange were holding a 24-17 edge in the last minute and apparently driving to another score when linebacker Kent Henry picked off a Rick Popp pass and returned it to the Orange 48-yard line. Strock, most of whose earlier passes had been of the short variety, then lofted a "bomb" which found sophomore wide receiver Rich Haeberl about 10 yards behind the secondary. It went for a touchdown with just 25 seconds left on the clock.

The Whites went for a game-winning two points and Strock fired a neat little jump pass right into the gut of tight end Rick Law. But Law, another of Tech's many lean and hungry soph's, hadn't gotten his hands up in time — the ball popped to the turf and the Orange team won, 24-23.

But the 4,500 or so fans at Lane Stadium had little to be unhappy about and head coach Charlie Coffey, who will begin his second year with the Gobblers against Virginia on Sept. 16 at Charlottesville, didn't seem to be grumbling either.

Of course Strock is in good form, but we have more running power. Regular running back James Barbour didn't even play — he was injured. We had a rugged spring practice with no less than 33 players missing 220 man hours. This sounds like a lot, but it is less than either last spring or last fall. We are learning how to take injuries better — our boys are in better shape."

Coffey seemed to be particularly pleased with his linebackers, a position which plagued him during last fall's 4-7 campaign. "I really think we have found a gem in Tom Shirley (Roanoke sophomore)." This may rate as an understatement. Shirley was in the middle of everything much of the day, sent senior running back Jim Polito to the bench in the first quarter with a broken nose and recovered a key fumble.

About Henry, a rising junior, Coffey quipped: "I bet one of my assistants that he would intercept at least one pass today. He waited until 42 seconds were left to do it, though."

Strock was only touched once during the contest, but Coffey said: "We could have rushed harder, but we were working especially hard on protecting the passer. The comment and Strock's record speak for themselves. Coffey knows where his bread is buttered on defense and that an injury to Strock would be a fatal blow.

Getting back to the better conditioning of his team, Coffey added that defensive tackle John Spenklee had played (and played well) with a dislocated shoulder. And he also praised receivers such as the acrobatic Ricky Scales, who made the play of the day with a diving grab at the sidelines in the final period. Tom Trice, a basketballer for three years, also made two fingertip catches on down-the-middle patterns.

Coffey will work more this fall on his defense. He has added help in assistant coach Bill Clay a former Arkansas player (like Coffey himself) who came over to Blacksburg this year after being defensive coordinator at Virginia. Coffey said Saturday: "Our defensive unit may have seven or eight sophomore starters this fall. It is said that you lose one game for each soph you start and if that's true, we may have some problems."

Coffey has a five-year contract. Like all coaches, his ultimate goal is to win 'em all. It would look as if his real goal for a second season would be to lift Tech over the .500 mark and it would seem as if this is well within reach. If VP1 goes 6-5 this year, it would be hard for any true fan of the Gobblers to do much squawking. Anything more than 6-5 would just be some extra sugar in their Coffey.