BLACKSBURG—Lester Karlin could hide behind a fishing pole. He'd get lost on a park bench. He looks as if he's sitting in the dressing room waiting for the midget wrestling match to begin. Put two large bricks in his pocket and he might make the indicator needle on the scales move.

But you'd think Karlin was Dick Butkus, the way they talk about him at Virginia Tech. It's hard to understand, They say he's faster than Gale Sayers, quicker than Raymond Berry. He can handle more blocking dummies than John Mackey. This guy must be an All-American. Or at least Superman.

Karlin is what we used to refer to as "the water boy." Don't smile when you say that. The term now is "manager." And when you speak to Karlin about his job, that of being head manager of the Virginia Tech football team, speak in hushed, reverent tones.

How serious can you get about being a football manager? Very serious. I mean as a kid you probably read or grew up to be Johnny Unitas, Arnold Palmer or Mickey Mantle. Not Karlin. When he was a kid, back at Norview High in Norfolk, Karlin dreamed of being head football manager at Virginia Tech.

An Honor Student Now

But his grades were so poor in high school he couldn't qualify for Tech. He went to Danville Community College for two years, graduated with honors, transferred to Tech where he now maintains a 3.0 average.

Karlin came to Tech as a "water boy" in the real sense of the word. He was the last man on a six-man managerial staff. He got to do the things like sweep the floor and look for left-handed monkey wrenches. But by mid-season, he did such an outstanding job that he was given the responsibilities, if not the title, of the head manager.

"It was after the Tulsa game," he says seriously, "I remember Coach (Carl) Ellis talking to me while we were in the truck." Karlin learns fast. One day last spring, during spring practice, defensive line coach Tommy Brasher was not particularly pleased with the speed in which Karlin was getting the football back to the line of scrimmage after an incomplete pass.

It was not that Karlin wasn't hustling—he was going at full speed—but it does take a few seconds to run 50 or so yards. Karlin solved the problem, however. Before each play, Karlin asked the coach what pass pattern they were running. He just ran beside the primary receiver. If the receiver dropped the pass, Karlin picked it up, hustled back to the line of scrimmage, saving several seconds.

Traveling Medicine Show

As you can tell, Karlin isn't your average manager. He looks like a traveling medicine show. You can smell the liniment. You know ole Dr. Karlin's rare herbs are going to fix you right up. You ought to see him when he walks on the field. He's got a clipboard in one hand, tape cutters in the other. There's a pencil stuck behind each ear. Shoe strings wound around him. Helmet clips in his front pocket, a screw driver and a pair of pliers in his back pocket. Hell, Karlin isn't going to manage, he's going to operate. Dr. Kildare never had as much equipment.

Karlin's job isn't a just a job. It's his life. He makes speeches about being a manager. He sends letters to opposing managers, asking how many towels they'll need, how many bars of soap. He probably feels he is as important to Tech football as, say, Don Strock or J.B. Barber. Many agree.

"He's the cream of the crop," says Tech assistant Carl Ellis who is in charge of the managers. "Just like Strock and Barber are great players, Karlin is a great manager. If he played football, he'd be an All-American."

Karlin would never make light of his job. When you ask him if he ever gets tired carrying that water—yuh, yuh—he looks you right in the eye.

"I get tired, but you just keep on going," he says. "When a dummy falls over during a drill, you don't walk over to the dummy, you sprint over and straighten it up."

Karlin is so valuable at Tech that he's on full scholarship. No football player gets more. Ellis has convinced Karlin to go on to graduate school, on scholarship of course, and remain as the football manager. The Tech coaches would be happy to see Karlin get his doctorate on scholarship.

"He Never Hides"

"He never hides," says Ellis. "You can always find him. You tell him something and it's done."

Karlin also rides herd on the players. He suggests strongly that they attend class. He knows where they should be during every period. He knows when they have tests. He has been heard many times saying, "You'd better make a B on that test today."

He's also the team favorite. If the table is full, one of the players stands up because Lester is to have a seat. He's invited to all the parties.

"He is available for consultation," Ellis says. "It doesn't matter whether the players want it or not."