"Forget Last Year,'
Tech's McKinney Asks

BLACKSBURG—George McKinney is a natural on the football field, but he wouldn’t be out of place sitting on a wooded hillside, leaning back against a big oak tree, smoking a corn cob pipe. Of course he’d need somebody with him, somebody to lend him some tobacco.

Like many college coaches with Southern upbringing, George McKinney has that down-home flavor. He wouldn’t fit in at Harvard or Yale, probably not even at Virginia or Duke.

You look at George, the Virginia Tech defensive coordinator, those big horn-rimmed glasses staring at you, the sleeve on his short-sleeved shirt rolled up about two turns, and you want to say, “Where did you hide the pitchfork, George?” I mean you can smell the grits cooking in the kitchen. You can hear Loretta Lynn belting out a line of “Coal Miner’s Daughter.” There’s probably a red bandanna in the pants George took off last night.

Instead of players, George calls them “folks.” He speaks in the usual Southern colloquial like “the hay’s in the barn” and “we’ve got to put it together.”

George has another good ole Southern trait. He doesn’t get embarrassed easily. He’s like that Tennessee moonshiner who gets caught with the goods. He just wants to pay the fine and make a better batch.

If George McKinney, recognized as an outstanding young defensive coach, was ever going to be embarrassed it would have been last year. Let’s face it. At Virginia Tech last season, George was coaching a defense that thought it was on offense. The quarterback sneak was a sure long gainer. The forward pass was a disaster. George’s only chance was a fumble.

“Embarrassed just doesn’t fit,” says McKinney. “It isn’t the right word. Frustrated, yes. Embarrassed, no.” McKinney doesn’t say it publicly, but he probably feels embarrassment would be justified if he had great athletes whom he coached to the heights of mediocrity. Tech simply did not have that kind of athlete, on defense, last year.

You know what they were saying about the Tech defense last year. You know, about the trademark in Blacksburg of great defensive teams.

After the Tech defense wilted in game after game, the constant remark was “let Charlie (Coffey) coach the offense and bring (Jerry) Claiborne back to coach the defense.” That may have been funny. It was also unreasonable. If Tech’s defense had been that sound during Claiborne’s last two years, McKinney, Coffey or any of the other Tech coaches of the new regime would have been here in the first place.

"Forget about last year,” McKinney says, acknowledging the fact that he will be watched closely this year, this year of “Explosion ’72.” As he knows, if “Explosion ’72” is going to be anything more than a back-yard sparkler, his defense will have to do considerably more than it did last year.

The slogan “Explosion ’72” is in no way intended to suggest that we are in for a season of running up and down the football field. That is fine for the offense, McKinney believes, but he would prefer his defense not be that active.

“There’s not much you can do about it when you just don’t have it,” McKinney says. “You just hope for a fumble.”

McKinney says the thing you don’t do is to go out to the practice field and stomp, cuss and kick. “That doesn’t accomplish anything,” he says. “It just ruins any confidence they might have. If we would have bow-beaten them down, we might have lost some games we won and some others we were close in might have been runaways.”

Although McKinney doesn’t feel any extreme pressures this year — “the real pressure comes when you’ve been here four or five years and haven’t accomplished anything” -- he realizes more will be expected of the Tech defense this year.

“I expect more, too,” he says. “I think we have a chance to be a good defensive team. Now, I’m not making any prediction on how many games we’ll win, I’m just saying we’ll be better.”

The reason Tech should be better on defense is because the sophomores, particularly the defensive ends and linebackers, are superior to those who played the positions last year. There is, as always, another factor.

The defensive staff is improved, for no other reason than because McKinney is coaching the secondary where he has had his greatest successes. The McKinney-coached defensive secondary at Tennessee produced two All-Americans, 28 pass interceptions one year, 30 the next.

“I’m probably a better secondary coach than I am a linebacker coach,” he says, “because that’s where I’ve had most of my experience.”

What kind of football coach is George McKinney?

“What does that mean?” he asks.

I mean are you worth a damn?

“I’m a good football coach. Now, how about a cigarette? Let’s go to lunch. They’ve got some black-eyed peas down at the Hardie House.”