Claiborne's Choice
Hard To Understand

There is, to the best of my knowledge, one question that Jerry Claiborne never has answered.

What was there about Don Strock as a quarterback that he didn't like? Why did he red-shirt Strock one year, play him only sparingly in a second?

Every time the marvelous Virginia Tech passer completes another toss, Charlie Coffey should send a special "thank you" note to Claiborne, now the coach at Maryland.

If Claiborne, who has fanatical respect for his fellow coaches for his coaching ability, had seen Strock's potential, Don would now be playing in the pros, not with the Gobblers.

It is only because Claiborne red-shirted Strock four seasons back that Don is now playing for Tech. His class graduated last year and he is a fifth-year senior.

In the two years that Strock was eligible to play under Claiborne, Tech's total offense leaders were Terry Smoot, a halfback who gained 940 yards in 1969, and quarterback Gil Schwabe, who netted 773 yards in 1970.

Strock Proves Ability

Once Strock got a chance to play under Coffey, he rewrote the Tech record book. Last year, as a junior, he had a total offense figure of 2,404, almost 1,000 more yards than any Tech player had gained.

This year, in only four games, Strock has gained 1,154 yards, or far more than Smoot gained in Strock's red-shirt year or Schwabe netted in Strock's sophomore season.

As a regular, Strock was the No. 2 passer and No. 3 in total offense last year, and he led the nation in both categories for almost the entire season. After the remarkable 527-yard game against Houston, the 6-5 Pennsylvanian has now taken the national lead in both categories.

It wasn't that Tech didn't need some offense in either '69 or '70. The Gobblers lost their first five games each season and eventually Claiborne lost his job. Although Tech was 4-7 a year ago, the 249 points the Hokies scored was more than they got in any season of the Claiborne decade.

In '69, Tech had senior quarterback Al Kincaid. But he was hurt most of the year and never was much of a passer. Claiborne also used Bob German and Schwabe.

Yet, when Coffey took over as coach last year, he immediately replaced German, who was still around, with Strock. The wisdom of that move has been proved many times over.

Granted Strock has improved with maturity. He is far better now than he was last year, and he was good enough then.

But how could Claiborne and his staff overlooked the potential in a young man who quite likely is the top passer in the nation today?

There have been suggestions that Strock was not Claiborne's kind of quarterback. He is basically a dropback passer, although he can throw on the move, and he is at least an average runner.

Strock always had the size. He always had the major league arm. It seems passing strange that Tech did not model its offense for Strock's ability, rather than try to conform him to what the coaches preferred.

Physically Above All

The other top passers this year, Florida State's Gary Huff, Washington's Sonny Sixkiller and Arkansas' Joe Ferguson, all have good arms, but none has Strock's physique.

There is no question that he will go very high, perhaps even No. 1, in the pro draft. He would have gone high a year ago, too. The pros, totally lacking in prejudice, like everything about him.

Bill Yeoman, the Houston coach, likened Strock to John Brodie, one of the all-time passing greats.

Oklahoma State assistant coach Doug Cathey, whose 19th rated Cowboys will help Tech celebrate Homecoming Saturday, said of Strock after the Houston game, "He's the best dropback passer I've ever seen."

Of course, when Sonny Jurgensen was at Duke, he didn't pass much either. But he did start and Duke won a lot of games.

There simply seems to be no logical explanation as to why Strock was not given an earlier opportunity. The most incredible thing is that, had Claiborne remained at Tech, the nation's greatest passer probably never would have gotten an opportunity to do his thing.