Will VPI Turn Over New Leaf?

By BILL BRILL
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Ask any football coach the most hated word in his vocabulary and he'll answer, "Turnover."
The turnover — a fumble or a pass interception — is a part of football, but for reasons that coaches can not explain, it has plagued virtually every team this year.

Nobody seems immune, from the best of the pros to the worst of the collegians.

No team, it would seem, is able to hold on to the football.
The Baltimore Colts lost their third game in four starts Sunday because they lost three fourth quarter fumbles to San Diego.

Ken Brown, a Cleveland Browns back, personally lost four fumbles is a 31-7 loss to Kansas City.

Florida State, unbeaten, was trounced by arch-rival Florida, 42-13. Although the Seminoles won the statistics battle by a mile, they also had a whopping 10 turnovers, six lost fumbles and four pass interceptions.

That brings us to the Fumble Bowl, which will be played Saturday in Blacksburg between Virginia Tech and Oklahoma State.

It is not that these are two inept teams. Oklahoma State, the slim favorite, is 3-1 and the only loss was by a single point, 24-23, to Arkansas. In that one, OSU tried for the tying point midway in the fourth quarter and the boot hit the crossbar.

Tech is only 1-3-1, but rapidly improving. The Hokies pushed Florida State before losing, 27-15, then handed SMU a 13-10 loss. Last week, against strong Houston, Tech tied 27-27 because Don Strock had the second best passing day in collegiate history.

However, neither team has had much success holding the elusive football.

Tech has fumbled 24 times in four games and lost 13 of them. Strock has had nine passes intercepted, so Tech has had 22 turnovers. Strangely, 19 of Tech’s fumbles have come in the last two games, neither of which was a loss.

Fumbles did cost the Hokies a victory against Houston. One Houston TD was set up by a fumble at the Tech 20, and twice the Gobblers bobbed the ball away inside the Cougar five.

Some of the biggest, if unplanned, plays came after fumbles which didn’t hurt.

Houston set up its first score when the punter dropped the center snap, had to run and made a first down.

Later, the Cougars got the tying TD after safety man Brian Willingham fumbled a punt. The Tech players overran Willingham, who picked up the ball and ran it back 33 yards.

Tech was saved a possible embarrassment last second loss when Nick Colobro picked up J.B. Barber’s fumble after the last kickoff. Barber was trying to fall on the ball at the Tech 10, but Colobro picked it up and ran it back to the 47. It was Barber’s sixth fumble of the game.

Tech is not alone in losing fumbles. Oklahoma State has bobbed the ball 16 times in four games and lost 11. The Cowboys, No. 2 in the nation in rushing (Tech is No. 2 in passing), lost five fumbles against Missouri but won, 17-16, on a desperation fourth down TD pass by quarterback Brent Blackman.

The play, which covered 54 yards, came with OSU needing 27 yards for a first down and Missouri in a prevent defense.

There is a logical reason for the OSU fumbles. The Cowboys play the Wishbone offense, the running attack made famous by Texas and Oklahoma. In the Wishbone, like the Houston veer-T, there are many fakes, handoffs and pitchouts.

It is a finesse offense, keyed by a clever quarterback (Blackman is), but one that often produces fumbles.

The Wishbone, like the veer, is a big play offense. You can stop it twice and the third time the team will break a long gainer. Executed perfectly, it is a difficult offense to stop and the Cowboys are averaging 381 yards on the ground. Oklahoma’s Wishbone has been good for 499 yards per game rushing, but the Sooners also are prone to fumble.

Although each team is working hard to prevent fumbles, it is unlikely that none will occur Saturday in Lane Stadium.

But the turnovers have only enhanced Tech’s reputation as an exciting team. Nobody knows what the Gobblers will do next, including their own coaches.

The Fumble Bowl will be interesting.