Sophs Easterling, Shirley Stiffen Gobbler Defense

There's some new blood in Virginia Tech's defense and it's upped the pulse beat of at least one Gobbler coach.

"We didn't have any newcomers like (Rich) Easterling and (Tom) Shirley on defense last year," raved Tech's defensive coordinator George McKinney recently.

Both are sophomore linebackers trying to fight their way this spring into a defense that Tech must tidy up if it is to improve last year's 4-7 grid mark.

Easterling, working at outside linebacker during the drills that culminate in Tech's "Spring" game Saturday, is a 6-foot-2, 214-pounder from Collegiate.

"Rich has really swelled out physically. And he's got 4.8 speed for the 40. The other day he showed it, running back to tip a pass that would have been a completion," said McKinney.

ROANOKE PLAYER

Shirley, from Roanoke, also has the good size (6-2, 222) Tech is striving for; and 4.9 speed to go along with it.

"Our linebackers are going to the ball better. We're better there than we were last year," said McKinney. "And up front we're better at the pass rush. We're getting the techniques down. It's making our secondary look better, too."

Other new faces pushing hard for spots on the defense (a defense that gave up almost four TDs a game last year) are a couple of Richmond-area products: end Larry Bearekman from Meadowbrook and Hopewell's Mike Cunningham.

In the secondary the Gobbler are looking at sophs Howard Keyes (brother of Leroy) and John Bell. Both are converted offensive players.

'GOOD SPEED'

"Keyes (an ex-running back) was brought over, so he's nine days behind the others," said McKinney. "Bell (from Norfolk) is an ex-receiver with good speed."

Among the returnees on defense, McKinney cited the work of John Spreinkle and Bill Ellenbogen, both tackles.

"They complement each other, John with his quickness and Bill with his strength," added McKinney, who also hopes for some help from 245-pound sophomore Andre Tennessee.

But some Tech watchers still rate the defensive line a trouble spot and it's highly conceivable that an incoming frosh like Bob Seal could be tapped.

The 6-foot-4, 220-pounder is one of three prize Maryland recruits (the Gobblers have recruited 49 frosh and so far lost only four because of academic problems and four more who went elsewhere).

"Bob's got 4.6 speed and nobody's got any better around here," said McKinney.

QUICKNESS OF TWO

Offensively, no rising sophomores have cracked the No. 1 unit, but the quickness of a couple of second-year men, Ricky Scales and Tom Galloway is liked along with that of Richmonder Craig Valentine, a hardnosed senior. "As far as receiving goes, I don't think we'll feel the loss of Jimmy Quinn. We've got faster kids, but it remains to be seen whether we'll have better pass catchers," he added.

Their polishing will be a key for Tech's offense revolved around Don Strock, one of the nation's top passers. A senior, Don looks even better to some this spring.

Last Thursday Tech canceled practice because of 11 injuries and included on the limp list were breakaway back James Barber, fullbacks John Dobbins and Doug Coyner.

The running game, not a previous strongpoint, could well have incoming frosh and a transfer student next fall in Tennessean Sandy Johnson (4.5), transferee Maurice Bobbitt (9.6 for the 100) and fullback Don Testaman from Halifax.

The Gobblers, who are experimenting with the Veer offense, lost three first stringers on the offensive line; and one of those fighting for an opening in Richmonder Steve MaGuigan, a senior and second-team guard.

Basketballer Tom Trice, out of football for four years, is giving tight end a whirl, but student-teaching is putting him behind schedule.

Another Richmonder, sophomore Wayne Latimer of Meadowbrook, has won the field-goal kicking job and is pressing for the PAT post.