Receiver Reel: One of a Bunch

By BILL MILLSAPS

In all the hoo-ha over the considerable accomplishments Don Strock has wrought with his passing arm, a group of 12 players on the Virginia Tech football team have almost been forgotten.

Strock has been getting — and deserving — all manner of national attention for his accurate right arm. The 12 Hokies who have caught passes from Strock (and made it possible for him to lead the nation in passing and total offense) are getting yardage and touchdowns ... but very little publicity.

Nobody knows it better or likes it less than Tech coach Charlie Coffey, who realizes what those receivers mean to Strock and the Hokies. “Our receivers have to be very underrated,” said the Tech boss, whose team plays William & Mary at City Stadium tomorrow afternoon in the 44th annual Tobacco Festival game.

Maybe if Strock showed favoritism to one or two pass-catchers, a Hokie would show up high on the national receiving

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lists. But Tech's air game is so diversified, with so many players able to catch the football and advance it in a hurry, that it won't happen. Six hokies have caught 11 passes or more — Donnie Reel (23 for 460 yards), J.B. Barber (23 for 206 yards), Mike Burnop (20 for 270), Rick Scales (16 for 303), Kit Utz (12 for 157) and Craig Valentine (11 for 213).

That is a large and talented group of people for W&M's defense to cover, and that is exactly what Coffey and his offensive coaches had in mind when they installed their offense two years ago.

The Indians, however, should have the most trouble with Reel, a skinny 5-11, 155-pounder who, said Coffey, "is making big plays for us almost weekly."

A senior from Charlotte, Reel has "a fine knowledge of secondary play," said Coffey. "He studies his opponents in:

the secondary very carefully, both before and during a game. When they start making adjustments, he starts making adjustments.

"You see that by his size he doesn't have a whole lot going for him physically, but he is doing a fine job for us."

Given the chance to talk about himself and his role as a receiver, Reel talked instead about Strock. "He reads defenses real well, and he seems to know where the receivers are most of the time. He'll lead you to an open area."

Reel said his assignment on each pass play "depends on my pass route and on the coverage." He said the Hokies had been seeing a lot of zones, and that most of the teams they have played this season have "given us the 12 to 15 yard pass. Nobody likes to get beat deep."

As long as Tech can keep winning (one ratings publication makes them a 20-point choice over W&M), Reel said he would be quite happy catching passes and receiving little publicity. "I just want to do my job and for us to win. I'm not that much concerned about getting attention."

The atmosphere in Blacksburg is quite a bit different now than it was the week after a shocking, season-opening loss to Virginia. "People down here were sort of wondering what was going on," said Reel. "They were asking, 'What happened to Explosion 72?'"

The questions have been answered. Tech is now 3-2-1, and it is the first time since 1968 that the Hokies have been over .500. "At first we had our little doubts that we could win," said Reel. "In fact, we didn't think we could win. We've got confidence now.

"We have the potential to win the rest of our games. We're going to have to perform and execute the way the coaches want us to."

And, above all, keep catching passes.