DON STROCK: His Star Might Have Risen Sooner

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Two years ago, he was just another football player who hadn't made it, a BMC0 (B) discouraged athlete who considered passing up his final year of eligibility.

Once upon a time, Don Strock was anything but a household name.

Today, all that has changed. In a state which can embrace none of the splendor of a Nebraska or a Southern Cal, he is a superstar. On a campus indulging itself in a quest for football's Holy Grail, he is a hero of majestic proportions. In the fickle world of athletics, he is a celebrity, a role he has learned to accept.

"Sometimes last year I'd feel like a strange person in a zoo," he was saying. "People would point to me and stuff like that. At first it made me uneasy. Now I take it in stride."

With one flare of his right arm last Sept. 18, Strock emerged from the anonymity of a depth chart. It was the first play of a new season for Virginia Tech, and Lane Stadium fans — conditions not to years of infantry maneuvers — rose from their seats, stunned and delighted.

That play, a 39-yard pass completion from Strock to roommate Ed Tennis, set the tone for a season of dizzying accomplishments. And when the last whistle had blown, Strock had thrown the ball 358 times, completing 195 for 2,277 yards, ending the year as the nation's No. 2-ranked passer and shattering numerous Tech records as well as a team's conservative image.

You ask where Don Strock was hiding until he hit center stage, and the answer is rather simple. He was camouflaged by circumstance, by a style of play in which his skills were like gift-wrapping on yesterday's garbage. It is not a unique situation in college football.

"I think there's lots of good athletes on this squad who've never even played," says Tech's Nick Colebro.

The same could have happened to Strock, whose talents were concealed from all but this teammate (“He ran the B-team when I was a freshman,” says Mike Burnam. "I know he was good") until Charlie Coffey took over as head coach last spring, bringing with him passing-game guru Dan Heming to mold the offense.

And for Don Strock, a classic drop-back quarterback, that is when everything opened up—not that he was ever shocked by the results.

"If we'd ever had a drop-back system before, I think I couldn't have been as good sooner," he says. "When you're not playing, you don't feel like part of the team, but, no, I never doubted my ability. When I came here, I wanted to play. I thought I was the best quarterback they had."

That was five years ago, and in the transition from No. 3 out of four quarterbacks for the frosh (“and the fourth guy was bust”) to redshirt B-teamer (“a lot of getting beat up to one of the three starting pitchers” — “after that, if I didn't play last year I probably wouldn't come back”) to stardom—"he says he hasn’t really changed. More confident, yes, but changed, no."

Sit and listen to him—this lazy, pleasant young man—and you would agree, for he is deeply ingrained in team consciousness, and while he knows that a pro career awaits, first on the agenda is improving VPI’s 4-7 record of 1971.

"If I consider some of the best names I played last year came when we threw the least," he says. "If all I was looking for was recognition, I’d be firing passes all over the place, but if you win, you get the recognition. I think the other guys realize I’m part of the team."

"Without question. "I remember last year a couple of times coach Heming told us Don was supposed to go someplace or other to get a trophy," says Nick Colebro, "but he’d rather stay and party with us than go pick up trophies."

"Yes, that is part of Don Strock, too the probably would not be displeased to be called a collegiate Joe Namath," and he does not deny it.

"I think football during the season," he says, "but not all the time. You gotta live."

And the pace is not slow. "I take a lot of chances in the field and off, that’s the type of person I am, I guess. I like a good time. I like being with the guys sometimes, and I like to party. The coaches here—I’m not saying they’re liberal. They expect 100 percent. But as far as night life is concerned, whatever you do, you’re on your own."

Don Strock’s social life once was centered on Fort Pitt, Pa., where a red-blooded teen-ager from tiny Warwicke—35 miles west of Philadelphia—would go on weekends to whistle it up. Then, Don tagged along with older brother Dave, who had preceded him as the star athlete at Owen J. Roberts High.

Today, after a military service hitch, Dave is VPI’s placekicker and a married man, and he has relinquished family eminence in matters athletic and social to Don.

So, too, have Don Strock’s horizons widened.

Last spring, he was a student-teacher in Arlington, sharing a seven-bedroom, two-kitchen house with six other players.

"I taught a fashion and merchandising class with 22 girls in it," he says with a smile, "My girl (See Summer, Page 16)
(a VPI coed named Pam) can't believe I never dated any of 'em. There were some nice girls, but my supervisor was an old lady. She told me to watch out.”

This summer, conditions were better. For his distributive education major (a media-oriented business course), Strock worked in the receiving department of an A&P in, of all heavenly places, Wildwood, N.J. “I'd say, it was a pretty wild summer,” he notes. “A lot of fun.”

Two aspects made the job ever nicer. One, Strock didn’t even have to arrange it—defensive tackle Jim Lawlor took care of the details last spring while Don was in Daytona Beach—and two, upon submitting an approved term paper he will receive five hours credit.

There are students who would sneer at such a set-up, who might say it was an example of another dumb athlete getting another break. Don Strock has heard such talk on the VPI campus, and he has not been spared that legion’s most commonly used epithet. Jock.

“I don’t especially go for that word,” he says. “I’d like to bring a few of those people down here Aug. 23 and show them what it’s like. Then they can eat some of our steak.”

Since Aug. 23—actually, he arrived three days earlier—Strock has been preparing for his final year. Dan Henning has moved on, but the offense has been taught and learned well, and there is much hope for a big season.

The focus will be on No. 15, Don Strock, for whom determination—he once practiced basketball seven hours a day until he could beat his brother—has as much meaning as joie de vivre. Those who expected an emotional alteration from him don't consider what he went through to arrive at his present status.

“Some people say, ‘Look at him, he thinks he’s really cool,’ but that’s not it,” he said. “I didn't play for three years here. I worked hard, but you keep getting your chances put off every year and you get kinda down. Then finally it happens, and I don’t know why people expect you to change.”

Don Strock, whose existence is ever so much brighter now, smiled. “I guess,” he said, “everything just fell into place.”