Coffey Proves Tech Can Recruit Blacks

In the town of Blacksburg, where Virginia Tech is, I'll bet you there are not 10 black families. There is no social life in town for the black athlete. We had nothing to offer him. The Big 10 schools, on the other hand, had everything to offer the black athlete. Full social life, wonderful facilities. The only black athlete we were able to recruit was one who lived near Blacksburg. And he came because he could go home.

Jerry Claiborne, 1971.

BLACKSBURG—James William Barber stretched out on his bed in the Virginia Tech athletic dorm. Soul music blared harshly across the room.

J. B. Barber, J. B. for James Barber, is a black football player. Come next fall, there will be 19 blacks on the Tech football roster. Twelve of those will be freshmen. Two will be junior college transfers. Three will be sophomores. When Jerry Claiborne was fired as head coach at Virginia Tech, there were only two black football players—John Dobkins, who will be a senior, and J. B. Barber, a rising junior.

Obviously, blacks have been recruited to play football at Virginia Tech, leaving some doubt as to the validity of the idea that they could not be sold on the program.

“I think Coach Claiborne sold himself on the idea that he couldn't get blacks up here,” Barber said. “He sold the idea that blacks wouldn't come. So, blacks didn't come.”

Barber says he signed at Tech “because I saw an opportunity. I thought I could start. After I got here, things didn't work out like I expected until Coach (Charlie) Coffey got the job.

“Coach Coffey goes out of his way to influence football players, whether they are black or white, to come here. Coach Coffey believes there is something he can do to make the blacks want to come here. If he can't sell them one way, he'll sell them another.”

‘You Have To Be Truthful’

How does Coffey sell the black athlete?

“You have to be truthful,” Barber says. “If you don't have the social life, you have to sell the black athlete on his opportunity to play. I think all of us want to play football. We want to start. That is a good selling point, just getting the opportunity.”

Barber is first to admit the social life for blacks at Tech is somewhat short of fantastic.

“Sometimes we sit around on the weekend wondering what we're going to do,” he says, “but we end up going to some guy's apartment and have a party. We're going to have a party. You know, black people are going to jam wherever they are.

“Your social life is what you make it. That's the way it is up here. You are going to go get something or it's going to come to you. At a college in a metropolitan area it'll come to you. Up here, you have to go get it. And it's here to be gotten.

“There used to be a black fraternity here, but it's kind of dissolving now. There's not too much fraternity action among the blacks and whites. I don't have much communication with the whites. I'm over here in this dorm (the athletic dorm) and I usually don't see any whites (with the exception of the athletes) except during class. I get along great with the white football players, we're like one big family.”

Barber says it's getting better all the time. “I hear that 500 blacks have been accepted for admission next year,” he says. “That has to help.”

Barber Good Recruiter

Barber may be Tech's best recruiter of black athletes. The Tech coaches tell the black prospect of his football opportunities, then turn him over to Barber and friends. J. B. usually comes through, but he missed with one, Cleo Johnson from Ferrum Junior College, whom he thought he had.

“I though Cleo was set on coming,” J. B. says, “but I think the social aspect got him. I fixed him up with some dates and took him to some parties, but he really liked the social life in Atlanta so he went to Georgia Tech. He was looking for a lot more social life than we have here.”

Barber says there are about 55 black girls in school at Tech. “There really isn't any problem,” Barber says. “I can promise you there isn't. If you can't find a girlfriend on campus, you can find one in Radford or Roanoke.”

How does Tech approach the recruiting of a black player?

“The best way to approach it,” says chief recruiter Chuck Rohe, “is to have the black prospect talk to our black players and go out with them. Then they have to make the evaluation.”

“There is no way I, as a white coach, can make an evaluation as to what kind of social life a black will have. We can sell him on the school and on the football program. Then we let out black players sell him on the social aspect. Obviously, they've done a great job.”