TDs Replace Baskets

Cager Trice Out to Satisfy Curiosity on Gridiron

By BILL MILLSAPS

After a four-year vacation from the sport of football, Tom Trice has finally been overwhelmed by his own curiosity. A two-time all-state end at E.C. Glass High School in Lynchburg, Trice played only one sport—basketball—at Virginia Tech for four years, starting the last two years at forward for the Gobblers.

Early this spring, Virginia Tech football coach Charlie Coffey asked the 6-5, 220-pounder to come out for the football team, see if he could help the Hokies in his fifth and final year of college football eligibility.

"If I had not said OK," said Trice, "I would have always wondered whether I could have played or not. I had to satisfy my curiosity."

Trice may still be wondering whether he will play, but the Tech coaches aren't. After Trice caught two passes for 43 yards in the Hokies' spring game last Saturday, offensive coordinator Wally English said, "He's the biggest and strongest tight end we have. He has all the physical tools to be great. He has very good hands. I think he's had a great spring."

Despite the fact he's come very fast in his first exposure to the game since November of 1967 (E.C. Glass vs. Andrew Lewis), Trice is still the No. 3 tight end behind Nick Colobro and Mike Burnop, two rising seniors who had fine seasons last fall.

Still, he's been impressive enough to draw the attention of several pro scouts, who have no prejudice against size, speed and good hands, no matter how long they have been away from the game of football.

There have been handicaps for Trice in his return to the sport. He was a practice teacher this spring at Auburn High School in Christiansburg, and he didn't finish his daily duties there until 3:15 p.m. By that time, the squad was already meeting with members of the Tech Coach staff, and Trice, a real rookie, needed to attend those meetings.

Trice rushed over to Christiansburg to the Tech Coliseum, hurriedly dressed in time to make the workouts at 4 o'clock and went out "to learn the hard way, by making mistakes."

"Coach Coffey and his staff have been very patient with me. Sometimes, if I don't understand something, or I'm having trouble doing something, they'll stay out after practice and teach me."

Trice said he didn't play football when he matriculated at Tech in 1968 "because I didn't like coach (Jerry) Claiborne's system. He was one of the finest men I knew personally, but I just didn't want to get into a system like that, where they almost never threw the ball. When the change was made, and coach Coffey brought the passing"

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game here, I got interested in playing again.”

Trice said the most difficult aspect of his return to the game was “trying to learn the system and learning how to block,” the latter being a prime responsibility of a tight end.

“In high school, if you hit ’em hard and knocked them down, they stayed down. Here, if you hit a guy hard and put him down, he’s likely to get right back up and make a tackle. I had to learn to stay with my man.”

“It’s been real difficult learning the techniques. But the coaches have been understanding.”

Those coaches haven’t made Trice any promises, but the fifth-year rookie believes he will play. “Coach Coffey told me that we will use several tight ends in a game. When we are inside either 10-yard line, we’ll use two tight ends. As long as I’m No. 3 or better, I’ll get to play.”

Trice said he also has to learn “how to synchronize my pass routes with what (Don) Strock throws. If you’re a step off where you’re supposed to be, the ball with be right on the money, where you should have been. One of his passes was intercepted Saturday because I ran my route incorrectly. He’s just too good for me. I haven’t practiced with him but twice. I need to spend some time catching him.”

Trice does not plan to just wear a uniform and take up locker space in the Tech dressing room next fall. “I know I can participate and do ADEQUATELY,” he said, “but my goal is to do well, to help this team win. It’s a challenge to me,” and, considering his native ability and competitive temperament, Trice should be able to meet it.