Tech Defense: Who Knows?

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BLACKSBURG — "We've got the people who can prevent the big play. We might not stop a team cold, but we will stop them from making that big play."

Virginia Tech defensive coordinator George McKinney will be one of the most concerned people in Lane Stadium Saturday when the Gobblers open against William and Mary.

The battle to replace Don Strock and the emergence of running backs like Tech hasn't seen in recent years have stolen most of the preseason publicity for Tech, but McKinney has been busy on the other side of the field with a defense that might be the best in years, or it might be a long year in Blacksburg.

"We're green and inexperienced up front. We're going to get a baptism against William and Mary," explained McKinney. "I definitely think they're going to try to establish something by running inside. That's a good place for us to start. We've got to play our best to beat them."

While McKinney, who is in his third year as defensive coordinator, is worried about his interior line, he is relaxed and confident about his secondary.

"We've got more speed, more depth and even more savvy than we had last year or two years ago. We can stop the long gain because we have the people who won't be giving up because of lack of speed or ability. We won't give up that big play that will really put us out of the ball game."

But even before it gets started, Tech's defense has already run into an injury problem. Howard Keyes, who came on strong to win a starting spot at corner back midway through last season, will miss the opener because of a neck injury.

"Keyes will not be in the game because he hurt his neck in a scrimmage about a week ago," said McKinney. "It doesn't seem to be serious but when you have neck injuries, you've got to be certain. He still has a stiff neck so you can't ask a guy to come up and make tackles with a neck like that."

"Lynn McCoy, who has been on the second team, has been moved over to right corner. He's been at left corner but he's been working at right corner for a week now and is doing a good job."

Jerry Scharnus at safety is an important man in McKinney's plans. "Scharnus is a real sound safety man. He has two years of experience and is one of the best around."

Johnny Bell and fleet-footed Morris Blueford will be the other starters in Tech's secondary.

But the problem will be that interior front line where experience is a rare commodity. With Doug Thacker at left end, Larry Herndon at left tackle, Jack Booth at right linebacker, Brent Bledsoe at right tackle and Billy Linson at right end, the Gobblers have almost an entirely new line.

"Out of those five, none have started a ball game before Saturday. Some of them are young kids. Our people are going to have to find themselves real quick to be able to keep William and Mary's of-
fense from just moving up and down the field.

“You’ve got to win the battle inside. If you can’t win that then you don’t stand a chance of stopping the other aspects like the passing game,” McKinney explained.

Because the Gobblers do lack experience and aren’t too big in the interior line, they plan to try to keep the opposing offense off balance.

“We hope to be able to have some stunts to give them a mixture instead of just sitting there trying to whip them all the time. We’ll be depending on quickness more than size.”

The linebackers will have to make up for the inexperienced linemen early in the season but McKinney has confidence they’ll be able to do it.

“Tommy Shirley is a great linebacker. As a matter of fact, he’s an All-American candidate. We’ve got Dennis Dobson and Kent Henry who have both been starting for two years so linebacker is probably our strongest spot.”

But with inexperience here, speed there, size over there and quickness back here, even McKinney can’t be sure of what his new defensive team will do Saturday.

“There weren’t many teams that slowed William and Mary down last year. They moved the ball on everyone they played. They’ve got size and the experience to go with it. It will be a real challenge for our people. We just won’t know until the game starts how well we will do.”