Only 10 per cent of our alumni are participating. What I'm telling you is I've got 90 per cent of 35,000 alumni in and around the state to convince and sell.

--Charlie Coffey

Mr. Hard Sell

To those among us who subscribe to the daily chronicles, it's clear by now that if Charlie Coffey isn't sincere in his efforts to construct a legitimate football program at Virginia Tech, then he certainly must be running for governor.

He arrived in the state more than three years ago, bent on occupying the head coaching vacancy at Tech, his exterior that of a professor, his speech laced with molasses and mottoes, and his psyche brimming with a grand design to escalate the image of college football in the state of Virginia in general, and at Virginia Tech in particular.

And there are those among us who, when Coffey began to splash the name of Virginia Tech about, largely in connection with such meccas as Arkansas, from whence he came, Alabama and Nebraska, thought that the man wasn't really a coach at all. More likely he was sent here, a rookie from J. Walter Thompson, on a bid, a really bad one. If people could be made to believe Virginia Tech football could be revived, or indeed if it could be made to breathe in the ozone of such a dream, then this man could sell anything.

A one-time used car salesman, Coffey arrived truly on an errand of urgency. Or was it a mission of mercy? Whatever, he came with a bucket of paint and there are those in our midst who would swear that if the University of Tennessee adopted the color orange first, then it was Charlie Coffey who sold it to them.

On his cheerleaders, he put hot pants and sweaters with more stretch than Playtex. He persuaded people to occupy the stands at Lane Stadium, heretofore a collection of empty seats, the thought tank where phrases like the Silent Majority were coined.

Coffey created such a fervor among the football populace of this state suddenly there was more to this game than marching bands and majorettes. And it was generally agreed that if Charlie Coffey hadn't been born a football coach, then surely he would have been a Fuller Brush man.

Unfortunately for him, and his disciples, seasons of 4-7 and 6-4 did nothing to inspire the conservatives straddling the fence, waiting for him to fall off. It was difficult for many, or most, to believe that Virginia Tech would, or even could, establish a rapport with national imagemakers. In light of the circumstances, the conception that Charlie Coffey will attain a level of his choosing is a difficult one to grasp.

Still, he looks wondrously at the non-believers, the wait-and-see gang, and nods.

"The biggest weakness we have," he says, "is that although some press people are totally convinced and want to help us get there, we don't have enough of that. We have some but not enough. A lot of them have got that wait-and-see attitude. That's a conservative approach, wait and see. But I know, based on experience — this is my 18th year of coaching — we're headed down the path of success."

"To those people that say that we won't get there, well, I'll tell you what. I will. We will, in spite of what everyone else says. We have enough support. We're not lacking in support in any fashion."

"There's no doubt that a big-time football program can be had right here."

Noble words, of course, but it is said that action speaks louder than words and Tech has made considerably less noise than a rusty cash register. The campaign to lift Tech out of the sod and beyond the end zone has been expensive, some say lavish, and it is also said that the bank has been broken.

"Let me tell you," Coffey says, "this football program has made money. I call it a large sum of money. It isn't a large sum of money compared to others but we're going to make a lot more. It's written in my contract that under certain conditions the funds be cut for football. They can always be increased to keep up with other major university programs."

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Charlie Coffey Sells Tech

Continued

that we're striving to mimic, dupe,icate or whatever.

"When we came here the first year, we used up some reserve money no question about that. But that year, with a 4-7 football team, we had an average home attendance of 25,000 for five games. That's the largest attendance in any one season in the history of the state of Virginia in college football.

"The year before we started, the most money that had ever been given to the scholarship fund, student aid in other words, was $167,000. The second year here we had an average attendance of 31,000 for five home games and a 6-4-1 season. The scholarship money went up to $310,000 or $324,000 or whatever. The most season tickets that had ever been sold before we got here was 3,100 or something. The first year, before we'd ever played a game, we sold 4,100 and something. The second year here, it went up to 8,100. Right now we've sold over 9,000. The Golden Hokie booth—when we formed that, some people said you can't fill that in five years—well, we've got 38 on the waiting list, people waiting to give us $1,000 a year to get in that booth that we couldn't fill.

"All of this progress, only 10 per cent of our alumni are participating. What I'm telling you is I've got 90 per cent of 35,000 alumni in and around the state to convince and sell. Those who are working are doing one super job. But a lot of those others that are laying there taking that wait-and-see attitude, what are they going to do when we get it done? It's going to be unreal. If you can raise over $400,000 with a 4-1-1 team, what're you going to do with a bowl team?"

Still it's an established fact that Virginia Tech is competing for attention in a region populated already by the North Carolinans, the Alabamians, et al. Coffey, however, treads into their midst armed with a fistful of fight songs.

"I've got by far better facilities than North Carolina," he claims. "I've got by far a bigger and better state to recruit in. I've got many opportunities on my schedule to play nationally prominent teams in the future that'll help recruit.

"All right, we're going to be playing in the Astrodome, we're going to be playing in the Dallas Cowboys' new stadium, at Legion Field, in Tuscaloosa, in the new stadium in Kentucky.

"But the big thing is my state. North Carolina would have trouble competing without Virginia people.

There is, though, the delicate matter of catching up to teams such as Alabama, which buried Tech in Tuscaloosa last fall, 52-13.

"Okay," he responds, "we did take a licking at Alabama. But here's where I'd like to play those kind of people. If you recall, two seasons ago we took a licking in the Astrodome, too. Houston still had a fine team last year and we tied them, or they tied us. I can't wait to go play Alabama again. Not meaning that I'm going down there and blow them off the field. But I mean the next time we're going to be better prepared, we're going to be better motivated and determined and therefore we're going to do a better job.

There is, though, the prevalent belief that Charlie Coffey cannot be expected to perform miracles at Virginia Tech. He reminds, however, that neither was Frank Broyles asked to serve a similar function at Arkansas, nor was Nebraska always a national champion.

"At Arkansas we went from a 4-5-1 team to a 9-1 team," Coffey says. "We weren't worth killing the year before. The next year we were behind 15-0 at the half against Ole Miss on a State. We went on to win and we ended the season playing Georgia in the Sugar Bowl on New Year's Day and shutting them out.

"It was done in Nebraska. I was offered an assistant coaching job when Jennings was the head coach there. I didn't take it because they had only had an average attendance of about 15,000 and they hadn't won more than four games in any one year for about six or eight years. I didn't want to go. I went to Southeast Louisiana State, which you've probably never heard of.

"Well, Bob Devaney comes along in a x number of years hence and builds national champions, the average attendance is 76,000, they've got back-to-back national championships and I could go on and on. Well, it was done at Nebraska.

"Now the next thing people say is you can't do it in Virginia because there are five schools. That's the most asinine remark I ever heard in my life. First of all, there are enough football players if two schools did a great job they would have adequate talent. There's five schools in Tennessee. How about Arkansas? Well, I hear people say 'Coffey thinks he oughta do things this way because it was done that way in Arkansas.' I don't. But there are five schools in Arkansas. I guarantee you those Arkansas state universities have just as big aspirations as I do. But Arkansas out-recruits them.

"The problem is that there are some people in the state of Virginia who don't have enough respect for the state of Virginia in athletics. There are an awful lot of people making their living in Virginia, whether they're doctors, lawyers, high school coaches, sports writers, announcers, that are supporting other schools, steering and guiding our talent in other directions, bad-mouthing, not just my program, but saying it can't be done in Virginia. Well, I tell you it was done in the State of Arkansas and we have three times as many people and our facilities make theirs look like a junior college.

"There's no excuse, none whatsoever, not to have a fine program in the state of Virginia." And if Charlie Coffey can't do it, if money can't buy a quarterback with an arm like a rifle, if talk can't recruit a fullback with the range of a 747, then he should at least be permitted to turn to game of different dimensions and politics.