Building a Top Ten Football Winner Takes Time

There are many things in this world which are not easily explained, indeed which may not be explained at all by any natural process, but one of the most inexplicable of these is the average football fan's touchstone, almost childlike belief that a new and different coach is all that is needed to bring instant success to a faltering program.

In rare cases miracles happen, as witness the amazing transformation wrought by Lou Holtz, who in one year brought N.C. State from a 3-4 season to an 8-3-1 record. But more often, the idea that a new coach is an instant cure-all for losing seasons is a snare and a delusion.

Whether building or re-building, the process is almost always a long, slow proposition, especially when big-time football is concerned. It has often taken years of effort, even at schools with a past tradition of football excellence.

This difficult truth is just now beginning to be apparent to the more enthusiastic supporters of the Virginia Tech football program, who have endured for some time now the frustrations attendant upon the attempt to build a national football power.

Some years ago Tech obtained the services of Jerry Claiborne as head football coach when the Hokies decided to go after national rankings in the sport. Claiborne was hired to bring Tech out of the Southern Conference wilderness into the promised land of the top ten, or at the very least the top 20, and he did make progress. But his attack was conservative, and when his teams failed to arrive at the pinnacle, Claiborne was fired and the Tech administration hired Charles Coffey.

The departure of Claiborne was supposed to signal the coming of a magician in Coffey who would, convert a Mooyah attack into a sparkling offense, and an instant winner was supposed to emerge.

Under Coffey, the attack sparked well enough, but Tech still came out on the short end of the score with some "ordinary" opponents, and has met with mixed results when venturing into the ranks of "national" competition. Especially disappointing was showing when the Hokies faced national power Alabama. No one in his right mind expected a Tech win, but few Tech fans were satisfied with a tie game. The reasoning, however, with the promise of better things to come.

Now Coffey has been tarnished at the outset and the Tech faithful are stung. Some are voicing the first bitter sentiments heard since Coffey's arrival at Blacksburg, and if the obvious weaknesses in the Hokie armor are not corrected soon, more defects could bring a real alarm in uptown.

Coffey, possibly out of his own frustration, or perhaps in the attempt to fire up his club and at the same time to obtain more alumni support, read the Tech reaction and is not a fan of that "system's" loss, and was quoted as threatening to "get rid of those players who are not wholehearted in what Football is all about.

The irony is that Coffey now finds himself with problems largely of his own making. He arrived with a bang — remember Explosion 72? — and simply promised much more than anyone could reasonably expect to deliver. Coffey's background at Tennessee and Arkansas led him to mount publicity programs designed to convince everyone within sight or hearing that Tech had arrived as a national power, and many Tech fans began to believe the billboards.

It is true that large signs proclaiming that "This is Big Orange Country" are a part of the roadside scenery in Tennessee, and that similar signs about Razorbacks are seen often in Arkansas, but there is one major difference. In both instances the true rankings and bowl trips came before the slogans, not after.

Slogans are nice, but solid, quarterback-wise, records get headlines, and most fans say that what can be seen "systems" provides sportswriters with copy. But it is usually poor judgment to feel that backfield or defensive gentlemens fill the positions from tackle to tackle who determine who wins and who loses the vast majority of football games.

Coffey is adding to Tech's stature, even though his teams may lose some games they might have won. He knows, from his years at Tennessee and Arkansas, what big-time football is made of. Given time, and support, he will get the job accomplished, although it will probably be several seasons before the Hokies are ready to challenge for the top national rankings. He has already produced a bumer crop of recruits, and though the headlines have centered on his freshmen quarterbacks and running backs, there are a number of potential standouts among the first-year linemen.

The key word, however, is "potential." It takes time, and much battle experience, for most freshmen to mature into the stable, capable performers necessary to compete with the nation's better college teams. But a number of Tech first-year linemen do have this potential.

They will be of little help this season, freshmen linemen are simply too erratic to be trusted with major responsibilities. But Tech fans can take heart from the fact that freshmen DO grow up, and juniors and seniors take possession of the billboards.

Until then, unfortunately for Tech fans, there are likely to be a few long afternoons in Fighting Gobbler Country.

However, there may also be a few pleasant surprises as well. Tech does have an offensive offense, and the Gobbler is known to be a resourceful, wily bird.