By Bill Millsaps

Charles E. "Charlie" Coffey tomorrow begins his third season as Virginia Tech's football coach, and it is now possible to begin making some accurate judgments on the fruits of his labors.

The Hokies open at 1:30 p.m. tomorrow in Lane Stadium against William & Mary. Of the first 44 players on Tech's two-deep chart on both offense and defense, 33 were recruited by Coffey and his staff. That means Tech will, for the first time, rise or fall on the strengths and weaknesses of players Coffey picked to do the job.

The Hokies were 4-7 in 1971 and 6-4-1 last year. Considering the difficulty of this year's schedule, another 6-4-1 mark would mean the Hokies are very close to the nationally prominent program all their boosters really want.

"I know we've got a tough schedule," said Coffey in a phone conversation yesterday, "but it's not my nature to lay groundwork for failures. We play William & Mary Saturday, and the next week, we'll start working like crazy for the next game."

SINCE COFFEY came to Blacksburg, he has been a highly visible personality. For the most part, he has been skillful in using the media to his advantage, and in the process, he has managed to arouse the ire of many non-Tech fans.

"I would imagine there's more people wanting us to fail than those who want us to succeed," said Coffey.

"A lot of people call me a showboat. We did some of the things we did just to get attention. I'll admit that. I'm proud to admit that. We wanted to help our recruiting and we did.

"But since last spring, I've been working for the most part just at coaching football. I've accomplished through showmanship and gimmicks what I set out to do, which was get people to thinking about Virginia Tech."

Coffey said that, if necessary, he would still go to extremes to promote Tech football. "I won't lie and I won't cheat and I won't steal," he said, "but if I have to do a handstand to get a good player or turn a flip to get a guy to join the Golden Hokie Club (which requires a $1,000 contribution to the Tech Student Aid Association), I'll do it."

Since taking over at Tech, Coffey said he has noticed several significant changes.

"I was told when I came here," he said, "that the financial support for the program had been withdrawn and that I could not recruit here. I have not found that to be true.

"We are not lacking for support. We've had it since I got here. Anything we've needed, I've gotten. I've never been afraid to ask for help. And if I don't get it the first time I ask, I'll ask again...and again. It's my job to see that we get what we need.

"IF THEY TELL ME we can't afford something, it's my job to see that we can afford it, either through donations or gifts or by putting a better, more entertaining team on the field so that we can get the money we need through increased gate receipts."

Coffey said that his first Tech team was generally "very, very slow and very, very short. It wasn't a well-conditioned team, either. We never could get the first group in shape.

"Now, we're taller and faster and I believe in much better condition. I hope we're a better football team."

The Tech coach reiterated that he has no set timetable for his football program. "It's not a three or a four or a five-year proposition," he said. "It's a unified total approach. You have to make the pieces of the puzzle fit and the success takes care of itself. I believe that I know that's the way to do it. When you win, you've arrived, and you haven't arrived until you win."

That last statement leaves no room for alibis or excuses about tough schedules or insufficient talent. It leaves room only for winning, and this year, for the first time, Charlie Coffey will have to do it with "his" people.