Tech: 'A Potentially Fine Team'

By STEVE CLARK

Virginia Tech lost 6,127 yards passing when quarterback Don Strock finished up his college days in Blacksburg.

But even with all those yards missing, Coach Charlie Coffey believes Tech is just inches away from being a pretty fair country football team.

"We've got a lot of physical talent," said Coffey, beginning his third season as Tech's coach.

"We've got good size and good overall speed. I think we have the ingredients for a potentially fine football team." But Coffey knows the difference between potential and actual, and he isn't about to predict an improvement on the 6-4-1 record which Strock led the Gobblers to last fall.

OBVIOUS WORRY

Coffey's obvious worry is finding a quarterback to replace Strock. That's not an easy job. After all, Strock broke every passing record at Tech during his three-year career with 440 completions out of 829 attempts (a percentage of .530) for 6,127 yards and 29 touchdowns. Last season alone, Strock was the leading passer in the nation with 228-of-427 for 3,243 yards and 16 touchdowns.

Since spring practice, there has been a two-man race for Strock's job. For awhile, it looked like junior Bruce Arians. Strock's understudy the past two seasons, had it locked up. But then sophomore Rick Popp popped into the picture, and with the season just four days off, Coffey still is trying to decide who will start.

BATTLE CLOSE

"I'm one-quarterback man and I don't plan to change that," said Coffey. "But this quarterback battle has got us stumped. It's real close."

One thing for sure, the Gobblers are not going to stop passing just because Strock has departed.

"We're still going to throw the football, although we hope to be more balanced on offense," said Coffey.

When the Gobblers elect to run the ball, there are some excellent runners to carry it — senior James Barber, last year's leading rusher with 186 carries, 624 yards, and 13 touchdowns, and sophomore speedster Phil Rogers, the star of the spring game.

And when it's time to pass, Tech has one of the finest receivers in the country in junior Ricky Scales, an All-American candidate who caught 43 passes for 826 yards and 7 TDs last year.

Coffey is hoping for an improved Tech defense, which will be green in spots. But two returning seniors, linebacker Tommy Shirley and safetyman Jerry Scharnus, are the kind of players coaches like to build a defense around.

One other big shoe to fill — literally — is in the placekicking department. Dave Strock, Don's brother, handled that area more than adequately last year — 73 points. But Coffey believes he has an outstanding successor in little (5-7, 165) Wayne Latimer, the sophomore from Richmond's Meadowbrook High School who kicked seven field goals (four over 30 yards) in the spring game.

Tech fans will have to learn a lot of new names this season. As Coffey said: "We're inexperienced in some key areas."

But the new faces are talented and hold a lot of promise. Don Strock and some other stars from last year's team may be gone, but the Gobblers aren't throwing in the towel.

The schedule:

Virginia: Aug. 8 – William & Mary; 15 – at Kentucky; 22 – at West Virginia; 29 – at SMU; Set. 6 – South Carolina; 12 – at Houston (Friday night!); 20 – Virginia; 27 – at Alabama. Nov. 3 – at Memphis State; 10 – Florida State; 17 – VMI.