Arians: The Shoe Doesn't Fit

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BLACKSBURG—The pastoral calm descending on the Virginia Tech campus signals that a week remains until classes begin, but only hours before some young men report for football practice.

The sound you hear comes from across the orange carpet, from among the blue lockers, from the sound system itself, the incongruous offering of hard rock, a retreat for football players after practice.

Across the corridor in the trainers room sits Bruce Arians, quarterback, waiting to be taped—and indeed reshaped into the image of his predecessor.

Gone is Don Strock, he of the golden arm, the nation's total offense leader with 3,170 yards and passing leader with 3,243 yards in 1972. Without Strock, friends of Tech would admit, is a terribly dismal way to begin a season.

"The most experienced quarterback I could put out there," confessed coach Charlie Coffey, "would be Bruce Arians, who played about one quarter of football."

Four, to be precise, coach, but Arians it seems to be as Saturday approaches bearing William and Mary, the same team that smoked Tech out of the Tobacco Bowl last fall, 17-16.

"That'll never happen again," predicts Arians. "Last year we weren't mentally ready for William and Mary. We'd just played SMU, Oklahoma State and Houston. The guys thought they had the week off."

Arians' statement is, you may have observed, coated with confidence, an unusual attitude for a quarterback who appeared in four quarters a year ago, albeit scoring twice and passing for two others; the same man who is heir to a large set of shoes.

"I know someone's going to be sitting in the stands saying 'Well, Strock could have done that.' I don't like to compare myself to Don. He was a perfect passer. But I think I'm a better all-around quarterback."

Arians, of course, will have ample opportunity to demonstrate his worth, beginning Saturday in Lane Stadium. The man in charge of molding Arians, as he did Strock and Gary Huff at Florida State, is Dan Henning, the offensive tactician returned from a stay with the Houston Oilers.

"He's taught me everything I know about the passing game," says Arians, who hopes it's enough to carry Tech past the likes of Alabama, SMU, Houston, Oklahoma State, and, yes, even William and Mary.

Not bad objectives for a player who came to Tech a linebacker, recruited by former coach Jerry Claiborne.

"One day when we were freshmen," he recalls, "they came up and asked who played quarterback in high school. Then they asked us to throw the ball. I've been a quarterback ever since."

Presently he stands over center with a sense of cool and a feeling of superiority, which he developed somehow straddling a bench.

"I was never sorry I had to play behind Don," Arians says. "He taught me more and he gave me a winning attitude. I'm not a great passer yet. I haven't proved it, but I know I can throw the ball. And now, I'm glad Don's gone and I'm here."

So, too, is William and Mary, a low-water mark on Arians' schedule.

"Last year we didn't think we could beat the big teams," he says. "But we did and then we lost the little ones. This year I think we can go anywhere we want to go. If we win the first seven, we can with the eighth one—that's Alabama. And that's realistic."

A perfect way to start a season.