At Last, Runners Are Plentiful at Tech

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BLACKSBURG—It has not been long since the best back around these parts belonged to a chicken.

Face it, Virginia Tech, for a long time, if ever, has not been blessed with an outstanding backfield. Even in the Jerry Claiborne era, when you needed to tie a handkerchief around your face to keep out the dust, the Tech running game was not very exciting because, well, the backs weren't very exciting.

Kenny Edwards, who played toward the end of the Claiborne era, would have been a good back but he got injured. Other than Edwards the backfields of recent Tech vintage have been slow, slower and slowest.

Times, however, have changed. Tech, now, has more good backs than a flock of chickens. And the competition is such that if you miss a practice, you might miss the season.

Last year Tech's best back was J. B. Barber. Barber, in fact, was counted on so heavily that he could miss practice every day (because of an injury) and still play on Saturday. That may not be true this season.

Barber, of course, is still first string. Apparently, he has fully recovered from a spring knee operation. Still, the line behind him is a long one. And it is pushing hard.

Phil Rogers, the sophomore from Gate City who is destined for superstar-dom, is the other runningback. And he is likely to remain same.

"He's special," says offensive coordinator Dan Henning. "I have never worked with a running back who has shown so much potential at a comparable stage. He can be very good. In fact, he is very good."

"I keep seeing James Barber as the strong agressive running back who helped us win the four games we won here in 1973," Henning says. "I think he'll come back to become the same runner. He has his quickness back."

What pleases Henning, however, is the competition. There used to be a frown when Henning had to call on his second-unit running backs. Now, he never changes his expression.

Greg Toal, who is fighting for a fullback spot, is probably the fastest of the Tech fullbacks in the 40-yard dash.

"He has the ability to get started and go at full speed within two steps," Henning says. "He's durable, he doesn't make mistakes and he's consistent."

"Alex Hill (the transfer from Ferrum) has shown flashes of quickness and the type of ability that Rogers showed in the spring. He's had a pulled muscle, so he's a little behind in evaluation. He'll play either side, fullback or halfback."

"Paul Adams is a vicious runner, but his weakness now is learning to catch the ball the way we want him to."

Adams, last year, put at least two opposing linebackers in the hospital. "His wanting to go full out at all times sometimes hampers in his ability to stay coordinated with the other backs," says Henning. "He needs to try to get in the end zone instead of looking people up and trying to kill them."

Billy King, the former Radford back who transferred from Maryland, is another candidate. "We haven't gotten to look at him too much," says Henning, "but he definitely has some potential."

Henning is working with at least seven varsity backs and at least three incoming freshmen, including George Heath, the player of the year in Tennes-