Football Isn't Everything—Shirley

By BOB McLELLAND
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It might have taken a little time, but Tom Shirley says he now has things in their proper perspective and everything is coming up rosy.

There was a time when Shirley said he spent too much time thinking about football. There was even a time when he gave serious thought to quitting Virginia Tech.

But that's all in the past and the Roanoke native claims it is hard to believe he had such thoughts.

"Man, I'd never think of doing something like that now," he said. "I couldn't be more satisfied and happy. These guys up here are the greatest and I'm really looking forward to the season—I wished it was starting today."

Shirley is being boosted as a prime All-American linebacker. He has all the tools—the size (6-2, 225), quickness, agility and desire. He is just a junior and unless the unexpected happens, the Patrick Henry High grad will enjoy a great college career and may be a top draft choice for the pros.

"I don't know what happened to me during the spring of my freshman year," Shirley said. "I just didn't know what to do. But I really think I was giving too much time and thought to football.

"I know now you have to develop other interests in life. You have to learn to relax and think about other things. I still give football all my attention during practice and in squad meetings.

"But I'm not thinking about football the rest of the time. I like to read a lot—I really do. I enjoy westerns and mysteries. I also have taken up golf.

"We aren't any good ... in fact we don't keep score. We just get out there and hack it around. But it's a lot of fun."

Shirley came to Tech regarded as a true "blue chipper." He had a big freshman season but then came his moments of discontent. Last fall, he was the Gobblers' middle linebacker and had attracted much attention until he was sidelined by injuries midway in the season.

Last spring, he was moved to outside linebacker and he has really taken to his new post.

"I have a lot more freedom," he said.

"Playing in the middle was fine but I didn't have much freedom—just plug up the inside holes. Now I can move around more and play much more relaxed. I can play with more abandon. It's a lot more fun."

Shirley has found college football much different from the football in high school.

"In high school, you had four or five boys doing most of the work and actual leading," he explained. "But here it's different. You do your job and the other 10 do theirs and you don't worry about it. Heck, most of the other 10 might be doing their jobs better than you are doing yours."

Experience has helped Shirley become a better player. He admits he finds himself much more confident and secure. He has learned to read offensive formations much quicker and thus eliminate many false moves that tend to cut down on his efficiency.

The All-American talk has left Shirley a bit puzzled. He is not letting any of it interfere with his play. In fact, he's trying to eliminate it from his thinking.

"I honestly don't pay much attention to it," he said. "I do know that many things I have read are all wrong—about 50 per cent of it at least. There is enough pressure on me just trying to do my job and helping the team to win."

"Thinking about any honors would just be added pressure and I certainly don't want any of that."

Shirley is something of a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. He is tough on the playing field. He enjoys nothing better than hitting opponents. He plays the game full speed and with all the strength he can muster from his well-developed body.

But off the field, he is completely different. He wears glasses, is mild mannered and can dish out enough yes, sirs and no, sirs in a minute to last an hour.

"I don't know how I got that way," Shirley smiled. "Maybe it's all part of growing up. But I still think it's all simply a matter of putting things in their proper perspective. There is a time and place for everything.

"I love football as much as anything in the world but I'm smart enough to know that too much of anything is bad."

This new attitude and determination should only mean good times for the Gobbler football family during the next two years and some uncomfortable moments for the opposition.

It also could mean some All-American honors for Tom Shirley—even if he isn't thinking about it.

VPI At a Glance

Coach—Charlie Coffey (2 years, 10-11-1).
Returning Starters—14.
Returning Lettermen—24.
Promising Sophomores—Phil Rogers (RB), Alex Hill (RB), Steve Philbrick (OG), Chuck Perdue (TE).
All-Star Candidates—Tom Shirley (LB), Ricky Scales (WR), Phil Rogers (RB).
Schedule—Sept. 8, William & Mary; 15—at Kentucky; 22—at West Virginia; 29—at SMU; Oct. 6—South Carolina; 12—at Houston (Friday); 20—Virginia; 27—at Alabama; Nov. 3—at Memphis State; 17—Virginia.
Predicted record: 7-4.