Tech QB battle no ‘newysy’ item

Rick Popp say he knows what people would like to read.

"They'd like to read that Bruce and I were enemies," said the spunky little young-ster from Akron, Ohio, who is waging a battle royal with Bruce Arians for the No. 1 quarterback position at Virginia Tech.

"They'd like to read that we were after each other... that we were lining up the rest of our teammates on our side so it would help us win the position. They'd like to read that we keep trying to cut each other up and will do anything to make the other look bad."

But, Popp claims, the sporting public will not likely read such things because they just aren't true. However, Popp does admit some overzealous sports writer might manufacture such a story just to stimulate readership.

"Sure it's going to be a big battle," Popp said. "We are really going after each other. I want the job and I know Bruce does. But we realize we need each other. We can help each other and the tough but clean competition for the job will make us both much better players."

There are those who claim Rick is injury-prone and this has him concerned.

"I don't understand it," he said. "I never got hurt before. Then I hurt my shoulder last spring and Bruce really looked good in the spring game. Then this summer I got a staph infection on my arm and after that cleared up I broke my hand in a slow pitch softball game, of all things."

Rick still has his left hand in a cast. It should be removed within a week. Until then, Rick can't take snaps from center but he can do most of the other quarterback drills.

"I know Bruce has the lead because of the way he played in the spring game," Popp said. "But, to me, this is an entirely new start."

Ask Popp to compare the plusses and minuses of Arians and himself and you get this reply:

"Bruce has the advantage in size (Arians is 6-1, 190 to Rick's 6-0, 175). But I think I'm quicker and the better runner. He has played some varsity ball and I haven't. But I learned a lot last year. I made all the trips and I really studied Don (Strock, the graduated Gobbler who led the nation in passing and total offense). I know there is nothing like experience but I feel I'm ready and can do the job."

Rick has his own ideas about the qualities of a top quarterback. He says the No. 1 requirement is self confidence. Talent is only No. 2. Rick certainly doesn't come up lacking in the confidence department.

He also thinks the No. 1 job of the quarterback is to move the offense.

"I don't give a damn about the passing and total offensive records, Rick said. "If we can have a great year as a team I don't care about any personal records or acclaim."

"Just look at the Southern California quarterback. No one knows his name. But he led them to the national championship. That means much more to me and if you would ask Don, he'd be so hot. And he'd make all of his records for the honor of having led Tech to a big bowl game."

Popp knows what it means to be somewhat overlooked but still quarterback a winner. He led his high school team to an 18-1 record in two years of varsity ball and to many post-season honors. But he never set any personal records.

"I don't remember running but one or two times," he said. "And I didn't set any passing records. All I did was try to keep the offense moving and to do the right thing at the right time. I hope I can do the same thing here at Tech."

Popp, like he mentioned before concerning stories people would like to read, is a bit leery of sports writers.

He says he never reads the sports pages—especially during the season. He thinks too many writers don't paint a true picture of their subjects. He thinks too many try to be overly cute and approach a story with a preconceived idea as to how it should be written.

"A lot of writers take advantage of an athlete," he said. "They know how they want to write the story and then they try to put words in the athlete's mouth. They want the story to be funny and all that, instead of being factual."

Maybe it's this experience that has Popp planning for a career as a "journalist."

"I think it would be interesting," Popp said. "I love sports and that would keep me closely associated with them. But I'd never write a story to make it good reading at the expense of being true or to misrepresent an athlete."

Popp realizes that head coach Charlie Coffey and offensive coordinator Dan Henning are two who want a No. 1 quarterback. Neither has a history of allowing two to share the job.

"I agree with this," Popp said. "You can have only one man running the show. And I know when the time comes, they will pick one of us. It will be his job until he messes up or until the other really does something sensational."

"But I do feel that the No. 2 man will play a lot more than Bruce did last year as Don's sub."

And so the battle for the No. 1 position will begin in earnest today. Tech opens its season Sept. 3 at home to William and Mary. The decision on who has the job might not be made—or announced—until just before kickoff.

Until then, Rick and Bruce will be waging all-out war against each other to win the position. But it will be a hard, clean battle and not one of sensationalism— even if such a thing would make good reading.