Early Bird Gobblers Making Time

By Bill Millsaps

The opening session of Virginia Tech's pre-season football practice has been postponed after coach Charlie Coffey learned the Hokies would be in violation of NCAA rules if they began the drills as scheduled this morning.

Coffey said yesterday he and members of his staff had misinterpreted an NCAA rule relating to the earliest permissible start of fall practice. The Tech coach added that the drills will are now scheduled to start Monday morning.

Article 3, Bylaw 3-1-A of the NCAA Manual states:

A member institution may elect any one of the following for its first pre-season practice in football in any year and shall not commence practice prior to the date so elected:

(1) the 19th day before its first scheduled intercollegiate game (Tech opens its season against William and Mary September 8 or;
(2) the 22nd day before the next-to-last Saturday in September;
(3) that date which will permit a maximum of 29 "practice opportunities" prior to its first scheduled intercollegiate game; in determining the number of practice opportunities, Sundays will be excluded from the counting but otherwise there shall be counted (1) one for each day beginning with the opening of classes; (2) one for each day classes are not in session in the week of the first intercollegiate game; (3) two for every other day in the pre-season practice period.

Coffey said he and his assistants chose option No. 1 in determining the start of their practices, and the Tech coach added that "we thought that the Sunday exclusion contained in (3) also applied to (1). So we counted back from September 8, excluding Sundays, and came up with Friday, August 17, as the start of practice."

Tech's players reported to Blacksburg Wednesday night, and yesterday morning went through a picture-taking session with fans and press. This morning, they were to have begun the supervised, three-day conditioning drills (in shorts and helmets) that are required by NCAA rules before contact work can begin.

Yesterday morning, Coffey said he received calls from friends "in the coaching business" questioning whether Tech was within the rules with an August 17 practice start. "They told me that the Sunday exclusion was applicable to (3), not to (1). They said we had to count Sundays and that we couldn't start before August 20. We checked with Warren Brown at the NCAA's office in Kansas City and found out we had been wrong.

"Thank goodness for friends. If we had not found out about it when we did and it came out later, it could have been embarrassing for us."

Coffey said he had told his players that "they were on their own until Monday morning. We've locked up all the playbooks in the athletic director's office. There won't be any meetings or workouts with coaches around. I guess my staff and I will do some more work breaking down (analyzing) game films."