Optimism Abounds as Drills Begin

By BILL CATE
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College football, 1973, begins today with the same hopes and optimism of seasons 1972, 1971, 1970 etc. And, hopefully, not the same results.

Virginia Tech has its press day today, VMI opens practice today and Virginia begins with a press day Saturday. Everything ends Nov. 17. Coaches Charlie Coffey, Don Lawrence and Bob Thalman are optimistic. That's nothing new.

Actually, however, things are looking up.

Tech has put together two good recruiting years, Virginia, for a change, has some experience and some depth, and VMI has more players with more experience.

Tech has 56 freshmen and two junior college transfer coming in and Coffey plans to take an early look at these prospects.

"We experimented all spring," Coffey says, "and I don't expect to do much experimenting this fall. I'm going to give the freshmen an early shot at making the team, then after about a week we'll begin to work on our game plan for William & Mary."

Coffey says Tech's spring practice was the best he has ever been involved in. "They left here in shape," he says, "I'll be very disappointed if they don't return the same way."

Coffey, like Lawrence and Thalman, has a few questions. One, of course, is at quarterback where Bruce Arians and Ricky Popp are in a battle. Arians is No. 1 now, but it could change.

"Somebody has to settle it fast," Coffey says, "I'm not going to spend all fall looking for a quarterback. However, it won't be a situation like last year when Don Strock played almost all the time. We'll use two quarterbacks, and both Arians and Popp are better runners than Strock. They'll add a new dimension to our running game."

Coffey says Eddie Joyce Jr., the all-stater from Andrew Lewis, "has a chance. Anytime you play the game of football, everybody has a chance. He'll have to learn the system quickly. I'd say a lot of it is up to him."

Tech has sort of a pleasant problem in its backfield.

Alex Hill, the transfer from Ferrum, is supposed to be very good. So is sophomore Phil Rogers, senior J.B. Barber and a couple others. Who will start is a good question at this time.

Virginia Coach Don Lawrence has "stressed a positive mental attitude within his staff and squad throughout the summer." When coaches start talking like that, you never know what to expect.

"Except for one year (1968 when the Cavaliers were 7-3) we're fighting 20 years of negativities," says Lawrence. "The problem at Virginia is that everybody has been waiting for something bad to happen."

In years past, that wait has not been a long one.

"Our kids get negative stuff and no matter how hard you train your mind, you get to believe it," he said. "So that's why we've done everything possible this summer with our positive mental attitude campaign."

"Now if someone says something negative about our program and the kids don't stand up and defend it right then, they know they'll be hypocrites because they'll have that positive flow coming in all the time."

"I think it's the key to the season. If the kids believe they can win, and not just give with the chatter, I think we're going to win. We have the people."

Lawrence says there are other tangible factors.

"When I first came to Virginia," he says, "our offensive line averaged 6-1 and 208 pounds. This fall it will average 6-3/4 and 238 pounds and it will be faster. It's like that throughout the entire squad. I'm not saying we have the best material in the ACC, but we're a heck of a lot better than we've been in the past."

Virginia's quarterback situation is still a question.

"I hope Scott Gardner (a sophomore) is our first-string quarterback," Lawrence says. If he is we're going to be a better football team because Harrison Davis can be a pro wide receiver. With that in mind, we're going to give Scott every opportunity to be our quarterback. However, Davis is the best bet for our second-team quarterback."

VMI has 118 out for practice. Head coach Bob Thalman says they're bigger and faster than any recent VMI team.

"We need some help at fullback," Thalman said. "And on defense we need some help, at linebacker and defensive secondary."

Thalman says his squad has grown up.

"Last year we were a freshman-sophomore team," he says. "This year we'll be a sophomore-junior team. Seventeen of our 22 starters will be sophomores and juniors."

Optimism, of course, is the key word at VMI. What will it be in November?