THE "FLAMING SOPHOMORES" make their debut at Virginia Tech Saturday.

It's the 1972 season opener against William & Mary, the state neighbor who upset Tech in a Richmond mud battle last year and, no less than seven of the swift sophomores that sparked in the Spring Game will start for the Hokies this week.

Because Charlie Coffey's coaching staff arrived late to start recruiting in his first season back in 1971, the first group of recruits (now juniors) weren't as impressive as the second (now the sophs) and the third (now freshmen). But the cream should start coming to the top in this third year of the Coffey clan.

Tech, although being taken lightly by national publications, now has speed in the important skilled areas like the secondary, running backs and receivers. There's still a bit of a depth and size problem in the defensive front and Coffey wouldn't mind having a few more linebackers and, of course, another quarterback like Don Strock. But, despite still being a bit away from the kind of congregation Coffey plans to assemble, Tech is more solid — and definitely making progress.

The new starters destined to be unveiled Saturday include running backs like "Phantom Phil" Rogers, quarterback Rick Popp, offensive guard Steve Philbrick, receiver Skip Creasey, defensive end Doug Thacker, defensive tackle Larry Herndon, defensive back Morris Blueford and receiver Billy Hardee.

There's quality among these brazen sophomores and it should start to emerge for real Saturday like it did for fun in the spring game.

Sprinkled among the bright newcomers are a solid nucleus of veterans. There's hard-hitting linebackers Tom Shirley (junior), Charlie Martin (junior) and Kent Henry (senior), second-year John Bell (junior), Lynn McCoy (junior) and Jerry Schrums (senior), and linemen Billy Linson (senior), Brent Bledsoe (junior) and Don Strock (junior), on the defense.

Offensively, there's experience at running back in James Barber (senior), flanker Rick Scales (junior), senior tackles Pete Horoszko and Tom Reynolds, and center Rod Sedwick (senior).

It's a good blend of promising youths and leadership possessing veterans. It's getting mighty close to the type of football team Tech needs and wants to play in the bigtime.

Southwest Virginia and Upper East Tennessee fans are happy to see three ex-Mountain Empire stars in the starting lineup and another four on the all-important second units. Soph Paul Adams, who got some valuable experience as a freshman last season, is pushing Barber for a running back spot, Tom Turner is on Bledsoe's heels for the defensive tackle starting spot. Ron Davis is the number two monster man, and David Halsey, the number one holder for field goal kicker Wayne Latimer, is running second unit at three defensive positions. In other words, Halsey could spell Schrums, Blueford or Bell at any time.

Tech's running backs are outstanding. In addition to Barber and Rogers, Adams, Randy McCaa and Alex Mill are top notch. It's the same in the receiver corps where Schrums is among the best in the country and the secondary is definitely improved.

The keys to the season could be at quarterback, where Popp and junior Bruce Arians are battling for the job, and in the defensive line. If these two areas are steady, Tech could be tough.

"You know," says Coffey, "the day of reckoning is coming. It's not going to be long until we know whether I can get the job done or whether I can't." Sounds like the man is about ready to lay it on the line.

Coffey thinks he can do it. Tech fans think he can do it. I think he can do it. And it's pretty obvious that, most importantly, Tech is now starting to get the players who think they can do it. It's Coffey's third year — and number three often has become the charm.