By JENNINGS CULLEY

"He's a little guy who doesn't know he's little."

That's one coach's appraisal of Virginia Tech's Doug Thacker and Tech assistant Tommy Brasher admits the guy just doesn't fit the mold of a college defensive end.

But Brasher — and the Hokies' sagging defense — would gladly take a few more like Thacker who are strangers to the pattern.

Thacker, a sophomore from Roanoke, stands 6-1 and after topping off a big training meal with ice cream and cake just might nudge the scales all the way up to 185 pounds.

His teammates call him "Sparrow" because of his bird legs.

"But there are a lot of guys with better physical assets who play a whole lot less," says Brasher, Tech's linebacker coach.

'A COMPETITOR'

Thacker is one of those guys coaches admiringly label "a competitor." He's aggressive, spirited, quick afoot and as tough as wet rawhide.

In high school (Cave Spring) he was such a mean linebacker that his teammates didn't like to scrimmage against him. And when they put him on offense as a bulldozing fullback, it was strictly no contest for the defense.

At the time, he weighed all of 165 pounds and when graduation rolled around, nobody offered him a scholarship.

That, despite the fact his brother Mike (who was even smaller) had been a standout at VMI a few years earlier.

So Thacker packed up and went off to Staunton Military Academy. There, he became the team's MVP and an All-Military League linebacker. In the process, he gained 15 pounds and the scouts came a-calling.

As a freshman, he saw spot duty as a linebacker in the early going last year and by late season, was also playing defensive end. This fall, he's started all three games at end.

"He has the mixture of recklessness and fierce competitiveness that coaches like," says Tech boss Charlie Coffey. "He will become increasingly valuable as experience teaches him finesse."

Thacker has been something of a standout on a defense that

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Tech has had its disappointments thus far. In Tech’s 31-26 loss to Kentucky, Thacker had 10 unassisted tackles and led the second half blitz that shut the Wildcats off with just two first downs.

Last week against West Virginia, he added five more unassisted tackles, although playing with a painful hip pointer.

CONSTANT PRESSURES

But Tech’s defense has been under constant pressure this year. They’ve given up 31, 31 and 24 points in three straight losses and this week must go against a Southern Methodist Wishbone offense that ranks No. 2 in the nation in rushing.

The Mustangs (in two games) have averaged 402 yards per game on the ground and their standout, Wayne Morris, is averaging 118 yards on his own.

But figures don’t worry Doug Thacker.

In a game of giants, the odds are against a 185-pounder, but Thacker always seems to make his presence felt.