Tech Has 'Simple' Defense...And a Hard Row to Hoe

By STEVE CLARK

Coach Charlie Coffey has thought about tinkering with his collapsible defense at Virginia Tech. But there's this problem. "How can you expect them (Tech's defensive players) to learn a new defense when they can't even handle the simplest coverage known to football?" Coffey said Saturday after the 27-24 loss to South Carolina in Blacksburg.

Tech's 5-2 defensive alignment must be very simple to understand, just as Coffey says. Five opponents haven't had a bit of trouble figuring it out and the Hokies are winless at 0-5.

Take this South Carolina bunch which showed up for Tech's Homecoming. The Gamecocks started the day averaging 157 yards rushing and 97 yards passing per game. In other words, they don't have the most devastating attack in the nation.

BIG PLAYS

But against the Hokies the South Carolina veer looked like the proverbial well-oiled machine. Sophomore quarterback Jeff Grantz directed the Gamecocks to 236 yards rushing and 242 yards passing for 27 first downs and a total yardage of 478.

Too bad for the Hokie faithful that the defense wasn't slightly more ornery, because Tech had enough big plays toot the ball to win on a splendid October day in the hills.

On the second play from scrimmage, sophomore quarterback Rick Popp threw a beautiful long pass to sophomore wide receiver Billy Hardee and it resulted in a 74-yard touchdown play. Tech 7, Visitors 0 with less than a minute elapsed. Surely this was the day the Hokies would snap out of their losing ways.

More big plays for the Gobblers were to follow. Freshman George Heath ran back a kickoff 70 yards to the SC 30. (The Hokies failed to cash in.) Popp threw a 36-yard TD pass to Ricky Scales. Hardee broke a 96-yard kickoff return for a TD.

For the afternoon, Tech had almost as much offensive yardage as the Gamecocks. Led by the running of James Barber (18 carries, 164 yards) and the passing of Popp (10-22 for 219 yards), Tech rolled up a total of 453 yards. All for naught.

DIETZEL'S 100TH

The outcome provided Gamecock head coach Paul Dietzel his 100th career victory. But Dietzel wasn't there to enjoy it. He was hospitalized in Columbia with an intestinal illness.

Pride Ratteree, a veteran assistant coach, was in charge in Dietzel's absence. But Ratteree didn't want any credit. "All I did was stand there and holler," said Ratteree.

Strangely enough, the Tech defense almost saved the day. With three minutes to play, Coffey elected to punt on a fourth-and-three situation near midfield.

"Our defense had stopped 'em pretty good in the second half and we thought we could get the ball back," said Coffey.

He figured right. SC was forced to punt and with 49 seconds...to play the Hokies had the ball on their own 42 and trailing by just a field goal. Popp had thrown three interceptions in the second half, so Coffey put in Eddie Joyce, a 6-4 freshman from Salem. It was to say the least, a tough situation for a frosh QB. Joyce was promptly sacked twice and Tech had muffed its chance to tie or win.

"We had some 17-18 yard pass patterns we wanted to throw and Joyce has the better arm for that," reasoned Coffey.

Ratteree couldn't believe Coffey inserted a freshman in that testy situation.

"A poor freshman is just a freshman," said Ratteree. "I don't care how good an athlete he is, that's a hard row to hoe."

Tech's row gets even harder to hoe this week. The Gobblers play Friday night against offensive-minded and unbeaten Houston (4-0) in the Houston Astrodome. A loss there will assure Tech of a losing season. The rest of the schedule includes Virginia, Alabama, Memphis State, Florida State and VMI. The Hokies appear doomed to suffer their worst season since 1951 when they were 2-8.