Gobbler Stole 3 Passes

For FSU, Bell Rang Trouble

By BOB LIPPER

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Lord knows, John Bell is no monster. Not at 5-11, 173 pounds, he isn’t. A gremlin maybe, but not a monster. And yet, given the curious vernacular of football, that is precisely the position he plays for Virginia Tech. He lines up on the side of the offense’s tight end, and while some might label him a strong safety, in Blacksburg they prefer monster, thank you.

Not so in Tallahassee, Fla., however. There, where the local football team is billed as Florida State, they are calling John Bell—among other things—a thief. The charge—felonious assault with intent to win a football game.

Bell pleads guilty. And why not. The evidence is conclusive. Saturday against Florida State, Bell intercepted three passes, returning one for a touchdown and setting up another score in Tech’s 36-13 conquest of the Seminoles.

"Yes, sir, that was really nice," said Bell, a quiet sort. But he did acknowledge, in freer prose, that the win, only Tech’s second against eight losses, came at a most critical time.

"It really would’ve been terrible to lose, ‘cause they’ve been having a bad year (FSU is 0-9), and we were playing at home," said Bell. "People are pretty down on us around here. As much as the win can help, I guess it did."

On an individual level, Bell’s performance also came at an opportune time. Three weeks ago, after the Gobblers’ victory over Virginia, he had been demoted to the second team, the result of a touchdown pass thrown over him to Harrison Davis.

Ask him how he felt about that change in status and he will reply, “About like anybody else.—bad.” And while he played about three-quarters of the time in the next two games—against Alabama and Memphis State—he admits that being a first-teamer makes “all the difference in the world” psychologically.

“Nobody wants to be second team,” said Bell, a 1970 All-Tide-water pick as a halfback (he scored 17 touchdowns that year) at Maury High School. “During the week, I don’t think you prepare as hard if you don’t think you’ll be starting.”

Thus did he move back into the starting lineup for the FSU game, and he obviously made his presence known in a big way. In the first half, he returned an interception 36 yards to the Seminole one (“I should’ve scored, but I guess I was lucky to get that far”), and on the next play J.B. Barber went in to give Tech a 22-7 halftime advantage. Then, after intermission, Bell picked off another pass, returning this one 33 yards for the first touchdown Tech’s defense has managed this season.

Bell’s score resulted in a wild end zone celebration, though a day later he was judging success in his unemotional way.

“Playing well and winning at home...” he said. “It means a lot. You figure all the work hasn’t gone for nothing.”

And so, we come to the final week. Saturday at 1:30 p.m. in Lane Stadium against VMI, another 2-8 club, one with even lesser credentials than Tech.

Not that the Gobblers are going overboard with the confidence bit.

“With our record,” said John Bell, “I don’t think we have the right..."