Keydets visit Tech in ‘save face’ game

By BOB MCELLEND
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Coach Charlie Coffey of Virginia Tech says VMI isn’t coming to Blacksburg tomorrow just to keep from getting embarrassed—but to win.

Coach Bob Thalman and his VMI Keydets are quick to agree.

“This is a young team that has a hurt itself with turnovers,” said Thalman. “But we are fully capable of playing a relatively mistake-free game. We definitely feel we can win and that’s what we are after.”

Both teams come into the game with a disappointing 2-8 record. But Tech is something like a three-touchdown favorite—which is, indeed, a new role for Coffey and his Gobblers.

Thalman said the Keydets are in their best physical condition since the opening game at Virginia. Injuries have been a big factor in the VMI turnovers. The important tailback position has been the hardest hit. Thalman has been forced to start five different players at the spot.

Tech also is in relatively good condition. However, the playing condition of star linebacker Tommy Shirley of Roanoke remains a question. He has a knee injury that isn’t responding to treatment.

The bright spot for Tech this season has been at running back where J.B. Barber and Phil Rogers have been running roughshod over most opponents.

“We have played some good teams this season and have faced some good runners,” said Thalman. “But I don’t see how any team can offer two better runners than Barber and Rogers. They are truly outstanding.”

Barber, who will wind up an outstanding collegiate career, holds numerous Tech records. The Charlotte, N.C., native has 800 yards rushing this season and a record career total of 1,925.

Barber also holds the school career scoring record with 174 points and 14 touchdowns.

Rogers, who is only a sophomore, has 938 yards rushing and needs only 63 yards to become the first Tech runner ever to pass the 1,000 mark.

Freshman Eddie Joyce Jr. of Salem will quarterback the Techmen. The lean youngster has done a good job with 35 completions in 68 passes for 356 yards and four touchdowns.

The game will feature two of the finest wide receivers around. Ricky Scales of Tech caught 43 passes last year for 528 yards and seven touchdowns. He has grabbed 29 of his season for 630 yards and six touchdowns.

Ronnie Moore gives VMI a definite threat. The talented sophomore has grabbed 29 for 598 yards and four touchdowns, despite being sidelined several games with injuries.

Neither team has been successful on defense. Tech ranks last in the nation among major colleges—having allowed the opposition an average of 35.8 points per game. VMI has given up points at the rate of 29.5 per game.

Both coaches and teams realize this is a game that can erase many of the bad memories of the season.

However, each team has some top defensive players. Safety Gene Williams of VMI ranks with the best and Tech linebackers Shirley and Dennis Dodson have been leaders.

VMI has an added reason for victory. Thalman and his Keydets want to prove they can play with the Gobblers and their much larger athletic program.

“I think this is a great natural rivalry,” said Thalman. “I feel we can play with them and I certainly hope the series will continue for years to come.”

Coffey said the win last week over Florida State did his team much good. “Now if we can beat VMI, we will close with two straight wins. This is nothing great but it will make us more enthusiastic during the winter and we can start our recruiting program on the right note.”

Kickoff for the game in Lane Stadium is at 1:30. But the battle isn’t expected to attract the attention and crowd it once did when it was the game of the year and played before packed stands in Roanoke’s Victory Stadium.

Tech officials say they expect a crowd of about 22,000.