VMI Stuns Tech in 22-21 Squeaker

BY BOB LIPPER

BLACKSBURG—And now, for all you nice folk who thought nothing else could possibly go wrong for Virginia Tech football this season, there’s a little nightmare. Gone for the road.

VMI 22, Virginia Tech 21

Those who made Tech’s one of the more publicly funded programs around found that with difficulties to swallow Saturday, they’re down for good reason. With the loss, the Hokies—temporarily, in preparation for good-ness, if not greatness—finished 3-8, their worst record in 22 years. VMI, beating Tech for the first time since 1967, wound up with one of its smartest 3-8.

Did it happen? You ask. Improbably is the only fitting reply.

The denouement—and a conclusion apropos of Tech’s season of woe—came with a half-minute to play and the Gobblers in the midst of setting up a field goal attempt for the lead. A time out was called before a VMI player could get settled, and a Tech player, Jorge Mora, was penalized for illegal touching.

On first-and-goal from the VMI three after a 12-yard run by Phil Rogers, Tech’s third back to find open field yardage, Mora dropped back to position the ball at the goal post for Lattimer. Lattimer was the hero of the 1967 game.

“We just wanted to keep from handling the ball,” said coach Charlie Cofey, explaining why Joyce—and not Rogers or Q. B. Barbee—carried the ball. “We didn’t expect a touchdown; all we wanted was to position the ball for the field goal, and with time running out and us with one timeout, that’s what (we) wanted.”

What VMI got was ruin. Joyce was felled first by Cliff Herring, and safety Gene Wil- liams then in and applied a crunching block. The ball popped loose near the goal line and cornerback Jay Newcomb (“It was just lying there. I just jumped up,”) made the recovery on the goal line.

“Twenty-seven seconds later, the Keydets roared out of Lane Stadium and into their dressing quarters, whooping as if they had just knocked off Ohio State. And, really, for VMI, Tech represents that much of a van- detta.

“They want to get us off their schedule, ‘cause they say we’re not good enough to play ‘em,” said Keydet running back Sam Nimmie. Added wide receiver Ronnie Moore, “We want to make ‘em eat those words.”

Tech was forced off by many Keydets. Among the more persuasive were:

- Moore, who thoroughly baffled Tech’s shaky cornerbacks (Don Davis and Lynn McCoy) with his sideline routes, catching seven passes for 92 yards. “It was my best game,” he allowed.

- Quarterback Tom Schultz, who completed 14 of 18 passes for 207 yards and a touchdown to tight end Allen Morgan which gave VMI a 10-6 lead in the second quarter.

- Phil Upton, a 5-11, 215-pounder who somehow plays defensive tackle and made 11 solo tackles many of them key ones. And then there was Ronnie Norman, the 5-10, 18-pound tailback from Norfolk’s Man- ry High School who made up for a most frustrating season in one wonderful afternoon. After suffering an ankle injury in the opener against Virginia, he had played sparingly, entering Saturday’s game with 15 carries for 31 yards.

“We didn’t expect to see him,” said Tech linebacker Dennis Dockov. And, in fact, Norman wasn’t even listed on VMI’s roster for the game. But he played—did he ever, carrying 27 times for 163 yards and the touchdown which won the game. (See Aftermath, Page E4)
The touchdown came with 9:21 to go and climaxed a 12-play, 80-yard march that followed a Latimer miss from 34 yards out.

Moore was the key in the drive, catching three of Schultz's perfectly-thrown passes for 35 yards and three first downs. The last reception—a post pattern on which he beat Davis—was good for 14 yards to the Tech six. Norman was stopped cold at right tackle by Dodson on first down, but on the next play the Keydets ran a counter, sending two set-backs in their triple stack-I to the right and giving the ball to Norman over left tackle.

With Dodson faked out of the play, Norman had less trouble some people to deal with. He bounced off a couple of would-be tacklers and dove into the end zone. A two-point conversion try failed, but VMI had the 22-21 margin by which it would win.

"It's funny, I sensed something in the locker room this morning," said Norman. Did he think, after Tech came back for a 21-10 lead, the Keydets would fold? "No," he said quickly, "I knew we could come back." And had he ever played a better game?

"Never, never."

And Ronnie Norman looked up and smiled apologetically. "I can't really express myself," he said. "I'm so overjoyed.

Down the hall, it was a different story. Tech players wandered about dazedly, and in front of his locker, Eddie Joyce, the highly-touted freshman from up the road in Salem, sat with his head hung low. One could swear he had been crying.

"All I had to do was hold onto the ball, but I didn't," said the man who passed for 216 yards and two touchdowns. He sniffled once and looked down again, and you knew that no amount of consoling ("One play doesn't decide a game," Dodson had said) could make it any easier for him. "That play," he said softly, "decided it right there."

The catastrophic fumble—whatever its tactical or philosophical import—did not end this game. Whatever its tactical or philosophical import—did it not end a most impressive comeback and diluted the meaningfulness of several outstanding performances. Among them:

- Rogers, who—in his sophomore year—became Tech's single-season rushing record-holder.
- He carried 17 times for 98 yards, finishing the season with 1,037 yards and breaking Terry Smoot's four-year-old mark of 940.
- Barber, who finished his career with 2,052 yards with a 23-carry, 127-yard day. He also scored the touchdown—a nine-yard run, pulling out of Williams' grasp—that gave Tech a seemingly safe 21-10 advantage on its first possession of the second half.
- Ricky Scales, the brilliant wide receiver who caught seven passes for 142 yards and a touchdown on a down six-yard play (great fake by Joyce on a second-and-one call) that brought the Gobblers to within 10-7 at halftime.
- Dodson, who finished his career with a great day—13 individual tackles and eight assists.

But the individual heros were not enough to overcome Tech's overall defensive deficiencies. Latimer's errant foot and Joyce's fumble.