Gobblers’ Coffey Goes Trucking

By Bill Millsaps

With a 2-9 season and a key personnel loss in his immediate past, and an "off" recruiting year in his immediate future, Virginia Tech football coach Charlie Coffey resigned yesterday. The 38-year-old native Tennessean submitted his resignation in a morning meeting with Tech president Dr. T. Marshall Hahn, but the first indication of Coffey’s intentions was contained in a story in yesterday morning’s editions of the Bristol Herald-Courier.

Coffey had four years to run on a contract worth approximately $30,000 per year, and Hahn said, “This was entirely Charlie’s decision.” That decision was, however, made against a backdrop of considerable alumni dissatisfaction and pressure from several segments of the news media.

Coffey said he had “planned to retire following the 1973 season” because he said he had long ago planned to quit coaching before he was 60. “But after a dismal 2-9 season, I bristled up and decided to coach one more season.”

“After more thought, I have decided to retire now. I feel an obligation to my staff, and it wouldn’t be fair to bring in new staff members knowing I had planned to coach only one more year.”

Then Coffey got on a noon plane out of Roanoke and flew to his home in Shelbyville, Tenn., where he owns a trucking company and has a 91-acre farm. He will devote his full time to operating both ventures, and his wife, Mai, said by long-distance telephone yesterday that she and the couple’s four children would be joining Coffey “just as soon as we can sell our house in Blacksburg.”

Coffey gave no hint of resignation in several conversations Thursday with reporters, many of whom called to inquire about the decision of Billy Clay, Tech’s newly-hired defensive coordinator, to return to the University of South Carolina.

“Losing Clay was the final blow for Charlie,” said a high source in the Tech athletic department. Clay, hired at a salary of $20,000 per year, had been authorized by Coffey to bring in two

Continued on Page 7, Col. 4
new defensive assistants and pay them $16,000 each. Clay reportedly told Coffey that, after three weeks of interviewing coaches, he couldn’t get the men he wanted to come to Tech. That was given as the main reason he returned to the Gamecocks.

"Charlie has tremendous respect for Billy," said the source, "and what Billy told him was a real jolt."

Tech is already looking for an athletic director to succeed Frank Moseley, who has held the post since 1951 and earlier announced plans to retire in July.

Hahn said Tech would begin an immediate search for a new coach, and late yesterday afternoon, one of the likely candidates for the post took himself out of the running. "I’ve decided that I’m not going to be a candidate for the head coaching job here," said Tech offensive coordinator Dan Henning. He said he would immediately begin seeking another position.

The source said that the other assistants on the Coffey staff—Richard Trail, Marshall Taylor, head recruiter Cari Ellis—would be paid through February, but it was not certain how many, if any, of them would be retained. Three other assistants were discharged by Coffey at the end of the ’73 season.

A FOUR-MAN COMMITTEE was named by Hahn to begin interviewing coaches for the Hokies’ top football post. The four are Moseley, faculty athletic chairman Dr. Wilson Bell, assistant athletic director Bill Matthews and Dr. Stuart K. Cassell, Tech’s vicepresident for administration.

The source said the committee was looking "for a head coach with a track record of winning." Another Tech source said the committee would likely talk to Miami (O.) coach Bill Mallory, Kent State coach Don James and Furman coach Art Baker. Mallory and James were both prominently mentioned as possible candidates for the Virginia job prior to the hiring of Sonny Randle. Baker, a South Carolina native and a former assistant at Clemson and Texas Tech, had a 7-4 record last season, his first as a head coach.

Coffey, a former player and assistant coach at Tennessee, came to Tech in December of 1970 after five years as defensive coordinator at Arkansas. His first team had a 4-7 record, and in 1972, the Hokies were 6-4-1 behind the record-breaking passing of quarterback Don Strock.

The 1973 team, however, lost its first game in a stunning upset at the hands of William and Mary and the season went downhill from there. The Hokies lost six in a row before beating Virginia (a defeat that ultimately had a great bearing on U.Va.’s release of coach Don Lawrence). Then Tech suffered a 77-6 loss at Alabama, giving up NCAA records in rushing yards and total offense.

THE SEASON ENDED as it began — on an upset note. Tech bowed, 22-21, to Virginia Military Institute, and from that moment on, a sizeable number of Hokie alumni and contributors pressured Hahn to buy up the remainder of Coffey’s contract.

Hahn resisted the pressure and publicly threw his full support to the beleaguered coach. But the bad season and continuing, if unconfirmed, rumors of mass player defections resulted in serious recruiting problems. When Coffey left, Tech had signed only eight players, and only one was rated a "blue-chipper" by rival recruiters.

"Charlie made a good move," said the Tech athletic department source, "good for him, good for Virginia Tech."