Sharpe Hired; Defense No. 1

BLACKSBURG (UPI) — Last Oct. 27, Alabama offensive coordinator Jimmy Sharpe watched his Crimson Tide attackers run, pass, kick and waltz their way to a 77-6 victory over Virginia Tech that wasn’t even as close as the score indicated.

Sharpe, who obviously welcomes a challenge, Tuesday signed a five-year contract as head coach of Virginia Tech and naturally said his first team priority would be “defense.”

THE 34-YEAR-OLD Sharpe succeeds Charlie Coffey, who resigned after a 2-9 season in his third year.

Sharpe is the second assistant to leave Alabama coach Paul “Bear” Bryant this season and the latest in a long line of Bryant students to enter the head coaching ranks.

Sharpe, a native of Montgomery, Ala., said he left “one of the finest assistant coaching jobs in America.

“But having seen the facilities and the people here (at Virginia Tech), I am real excited because I believe there is a tremendous opportunity for a young coach and a young coaching staff to build the foundation for a great football program....

“WE’RE GOING TO start with defense,” said Sharpe, obviously still having visions of those 77 points the Gobblers yielded to Alabama, “then the kicking game, then an offense that won’t get us beat....”

Sharpe takes the Tech job with the highest recommendations from his former boss, Bryant.

“Jimmy has the qualifications to be a fine head coach,” said Bryant. “He is intelligent — is a good coach on the blackboard and on the field... gets a lot out of his players... is a hard worker.”

Jerry Claiborne, another Bryant protege, took the Gobblers to two bowl games and produced some fine teams during the 1960s. But Claiborne was fired when the 1970 Gobblers were 0-5 at midseason. He was allowed to stay through the season and finished with a 5-6 record.

Coffey was hired and the school embarked on a big-time program, but could not produce a winner.

AFTER THREE YEARS and a 9-20-2 over-all mark, the 39-year-old Coffey fled to his trucking business, claiming he had always intended to retire before reaching 40.

Sharpe admitted Tuesday he was “handicapped” in taking over coaching job so late in the year football-wise. But, according to Bryant, Sharpe is a “hard worker...you don’t outcoach anyone, you try to outwork them. Jimmy will work.”