Slot Is Still Tossup

By Bill Mason

BLACKSBURG—Virginia Tech’s quarterback position appears a tossup, two potentially explosive runners emerged and defensive rock Tom Shirley was injured in the Gobblers’ weekly scrimmage at Lane Stadium, which also produced a few fumbles.

Coach Charlie Coffey praised the quarterbacking of Bruce Arias and Rick Popp, the running of speedy freshman Phil Rogers of Gate City, the pass-catching ability of some receivers (Ricky Scales, Billy Hardee, Skip Creasey and others) who reached high for passes and of some defenders who brought them down hard.

Otherwise the coach spotted some good individual blocking, tackling and running but not the sustained, well-coordinated effort he was looking for and hopes to find in time for the spring game May 12.

Coffey felt both offense and defense started fast and well, had a good first 20 minutes, but generally lost some momentum after that. The coach who will start his third season next fall feels the team can put together a respectable offense and defense if it can stay healthy. A total of 19 players are now on the injured list. The exact extent of Shirley’s apparent leg injury wasn’t known, although he made it to the sidelines under his own power.”

Popp also displayed some excellent footwork and running speed, scoring a touchdown on a wide sweep from 9 yards out and being caught just short of the goal line on a 60-yard plus scamper.

Paul Adams had some good moments on the inside running game.

Bruce McDaniel, who boosted two field goals from more than 50 yards out, and Wayne Latimer who did the punting appear to be the top kicking prospects, although soccer-style kicker Carlos Castilla can provide backup.

When the reserves took over, Don Shupp, a transfer from Pennsylvania, handled signal calling. He faces one year as a red-shirt before being eligible for varsity competition.

The defensive unit seemed more impressive for most of the afternoon, although the defense held on a goal line stand in the early going. Pass interceptions (including an impressive effort by Howard Keyes), fumble recoveries and the sacking of a passer late in the scrimmage were among defensive highlights.

A year ago the big question posed by Virginia Tech football was could the acknowledged quarterback have another outstanding year. This year, the most obvious question at this point is who is the quarterback?

With Don Strock, the nation’s number one passing quarterback, no other signal callers got much experience but most of what little there was went to Bruce Arias, impressive in the way he mixed plays and with the run option.

Rick Popp showed good passing and excellent running in last Saturday’s scrimmage before a sparse crowd that included some attendees at Coach Coffey’s football clinic.

Popp, who had only a little more playing time last season than Gary Zetta who had none unless we missed it, deserves a good showcase before a final decision is made on a quarterback and likely will get it in the spring game.

Arias, rated as no. 1 by Coffey at the opening of the current drills, could be bumped although we reserve any predictions until May 12, and as the mayor of Pompeii reportedly said: “Predicting the future isn’t my long suit.”

This column was the first to predict that Pittsburgh would win the 1972 World Series.

One sight that turned on the scrimmage crowd was one we hope to see often in Tech games next fall: that of Ricky Scales outrunning all defenders, catching a pass and scoring from beyond field goal range.

Among the newer crop, Billy Hardee shows promise as a receiver with good hands and better than average speed.

A scrimmage obviously is the only situation in which a team can fumble and get to keep the ball, and this kept the offense out of trouble on several occasions. Coffey made it plain that he wants the fumbling to end before spring practice does and not have to work on it between ball games, which was the case last fall.

Defensive halfback and monster man of last season, Randy McCann has been switched to the offense to bolster the corps of running backs. McCann, wearing no. 33 in the white, looked good in several situations last Saturday.

Bruce McDaniel obviously has potential as a field goal kicker, but a true reading on how much can’t be had until he gets another second or so leeway to kick them. On many occasions people got through and hands went up, blocking the kicks.

Last year’s and Tech’s all-time best kicker of field goals, Dave Strock, has tried out with the Washington Redskins and at least one other team, and should hear something about the future soon.

OUT OF REACH—Pass receiver Billy Hardee dives, but the upcoming sophomore can’t reach the ball, which landed just beyond his reach as defenders converged on the play in last Saturday’s scrimmage. (NEWS MESSENGER PHOTOS by Bill Mason)