Arians Keeps Tech Strong

By Bill Millisaps

For most of last fall, Bruce Arians collected more splinters than dirt on the seat of his football game pants. The 6-1, 185-pounder was Virginia Tech's backup quarterback, and when you remember that the No. 1 quarterback was Don Strock, you know why Arians' play very much.

As the No. 2 to Strock, the nation's leading passer last season, Arians appeared briefly in only four games. But in those cameo appearances he was responsible for four touchdowns, two by him and two by a running back.

After Arians had tossed a long TD pass in the waning moments of a victory over South Carolina, Strock told reporters, "You guys don't write about him, but Bruce is a heckuva quarterback."

NOW THAT STROCK is headed for the Miami Dolphins, Arians has to sit no longer. The rising redshirt junior has clearly established himself as No. 1 at quarterback, and he'll be displayed prominently when the Hokies have their spring squad game tomorrow afternoon at 1:30 in Lane Stadium.

"I have some pretty big shoes to fill," said Arians, a native of York, Pa. "And I don't think anybody can replace Don Strock."

Arians, however, won't be asked to do the same things Strock did. Tech coach Charlie Coffey calls Strock "a picture beautiful thrower who is with him in command of the offense. Arians said, "Our offensive mixture was probably 90 per cent pass, 20 per cent run."

While Coffey has no intention of juggling the passing scheme which has proved itself so effective, the 'mixture' will change drastically with Arians at the control.

"This spring," said Arians, "we've probably been very close to 50-50 running and passing, with probably a stronger accent on the run."

While Arians cannot throw the ball like Strock (and few college quarterbacks can), he is an excellent runner whose skills carrying the football, noted Coffey, "adds a new dimension, a new threat to our offense."

THE OFFENSIVE CHANGE also offers a threat to the health of the Tech quarterbacks, said Arians. For the last two seasons, Strock was hit hard only when his passing pocket collapsed. In a sprint-out scheme, said Arians, "the quarterback has to take more of a beating. You have to be more ready to take licks, to have three or four guys hit you at the same time. The way I look at it, you've got to be a running back who can throw."

And Arians can throw. Coffey keeps statistical charts on Tech's workouts, and he reported that Arians "has hit on 60 per cent of his passes this spring. He's no Strock throwing the football, but he has looked real good."

Arians said he has had a drastic fall-off at quarterback (and there is no reason to believe there will be). The Hokies should make improvement on their 1972 record of 6-4-1.

"We've got more depth," said Arians, "our line backers and our defensive backs are really strong, and our offensive line is improved."

THOSE WHO GO To Blacksburg for the spring game will see, said Coffey, "two truly great football players in Ricky Scales (a wide receiver) and Tommy Shirley (a linebacker)." Both are rising juniors, and both, said Coffey, "are All-Americans no matter what standard of measurement you use."

"I was at Arkansas when we had Chuck Dicus (an A-A receiver), and Sales is better. He's bigger, stronger, faster, quicker. And I was at Tennessee when we had Frank Emmanuel and Tom Fisher (both A-A line backers), and Shirley is better than either one."

Scales and Shirley are known quantities. What Coffey wants to know now is whether some rising sophomore offensive linemen are as good as he hopes they are.

Offensive tackle Steve Brick, 6-3, 245-pounder, has been a continuous standout this spring, and Coffey has also been impressed with Rich Arthur, a 6-5, 255-pound offensive tackle who, said the Tech coach, "runs the 40 in 4.8. Arthur don't dance every set, but when he takes a mind to hit you, he can hit you a fearsome lick."

Coffey has more talent than he's ever had before at Tech, which is the major reason he's enthusiastic about the Hokies' performance this spring. "It's a damn thrill to go out to practice," said the Tennessean who is going into his third year as Tech's field boss. "I'm really enjoying coaching, because our kids are busting their tails in practice no matter what we're doing."