Dumb or Smart?

Imagine the uproar from the oil industry if the government were to remove its depletion allowance. Then you have some idea of the “stink raised by many college football coaches when the NCAA voted last winter to install a national limit of 30 freshman football scholarships per year. From plush offices, from practice fields, from podiums at alumni dinners came the squeal of the stuck pig: “They’re killing the game” x 4.

For a time, however, a Blacksburg resident, who figured to be hurt most by the rule, remained relatively quiet. Charlie Coffey, Virginia Tech’s football coach, carefully avoided blasting the 30-limit, which takes effect with next recruiting season. In fact, he once went so far as to say that Tech’s football program would prosper in spite of the new rule.

“He’s just whistling in the dark,” said Richmonder Jimmy Gray, who annually gives large amounts of money and generous contributions of time to the Tech athletic program. “This thing will kill us and Charlie knows it.”

FINALLY, COFFEY is saying what the really thinks about the rule, which was ramrodded through the NCAA councils by college presidents and faculty athletic chairmen who wanted to do something, anything, to stop the alarming spiral of athletic costs in general and football costs in particular.

“The 30-limit,” said Coffey heatedly, “is dumb, just plain dumb. The people who are supporting this rule are not supporting college football.”

They certainly aren’t supporting college football at Virginia Tech. Like many national independents, Tech’s football program, both on and under Coffey and his predecessor, Jerry Claiborne, has been built on the weight of numbers.

The idea in Blacksburg has been to bring in a large group of scholarship freshmen, say 60, and maybe 30 of them can compete against the Longhorns and Florida States that in the nation.

He many college presidents would sooner admit Lucifer himself to their hallowed halls than to allow their football coach such signing freedom. Not Tech president Dr. T. Marshall Hahn. He wants a big-time football program, and he is willing to pay the big money necessary to get it.

Now the NCAA is saying that, even if Tech and Hahn and Coffey want to put out the large sums required to conduct a program on that scale, they can’t do it.

COFFEY IS FOND of applying the metaphors of business to football, and he said that, “in any enterprise, you have got to spend money to make money whether you’re selling automobiles or newspapers. The people who want to cut costs by drastically cutting back on the number of football scholarships are going to find they’re cutting their own throats.”

“Did you know that last fall, for the first time in years, the television ratings for college football fell off? If they keep missing around with the game, keep hurting it with rules like this, they’re going to find sources of revenue like TV money dwindling to a trickle.”

The only hope for Coffey, and other coaches who feel as he does, is the summer NCAA reorganizational meeting. The nation’s major football-playing institutions want to split the NCAA into two groups with separate rules for each. As a byproduct of such a division, many coaches hope the 30-limit can be junked and a 35-limit put in its place. They know that, given the feelings (and the power) of the college presidents, some sort of scholarship limit is inevitable.

Thirty-five isn’t nearly enough,” said Coffey, “but we can live with it for a little while.”