Wishbone Very ‘Passable’

Football folderol:

MOST FOOTBALL fans think of the Wishbone offense as strictly a run-oriented scheme. Not Jimmy Sharpe.

He’s the new football coach at Virginia Tech, and when the Hokies line up in the Wishbone this fall, opposing defenses are going to have to worry about more than just tackling the fullback.

“Passing is the most unexplored area of the Wishbone,” said Sharpe, who was Alabama’s offensive coordinator before he came to Blacksburg. “Given what can happen in the rest of the offense, the passing threat puts tremendous pressure on the corners.”

Sharpe said that a good passing offense integrated into a Wishbone can blow the mind of all but the most experienced and capable cornerbacks.

“That cornerback not only has to worry about coming up to stop the run on the outside, but he also has to worry about that lead blocker coming out,” said Sharpe. “With a pass receiver coming into his area, too, he can’t afford to be coming up too quick to stop the run.”

With proper execution, said Sharpe, “the reaction of the secondary to the Wishbone is favorable to throwing the football, because on every play, there is a short period of time when your wide receiver gets one-on-one coverage.”

It is a football truism that a good wide receiver can beat a good cornerback most of the time, and if the quarterback can deliver the ball quickly and accurately, you’ve got a big gainer.

So, said Sharpe, Tech has plans to put the ball in the air — a lot — this season. “We have spent a lot of time on the passing game since we came back for fall practice,” said the Hokies’ head man. “We’re not going to throw the ball a lot to thrill the fans. We’re going to throw it to take advantage of the problems any second has with the Wishbone.”

Sharpe knows first hand what a good air game can add to a team’s attack. Alabama’s No. 1 wide receiver last year, Wayne Wheeler, averaged nearly 20 yards per catch, and as a group, Alabama’s tight ends averaged nearly 47 yards per reception.

While Tech’s current No. 1 quarterback, Bruce Ariens, is not quite the thrower that Gary Rutledge is for Alabama, Ariens has impressed Hokie coaches with his rapid improvement.

Ariens ballooned up to 225 pounds this spring and came back for fall workouts at 193. “That shows you how serious he is about getting the job done,” said Sharpe. Ariens broke two long touchdown runs in the latest scrimmage, and he has been passing well thus far.

Not surprisingly, Ricky Scales has been impressive as a receiver. So, too, has tight end Kevin Dick of Midlothian.

“This week is our hard work week,” said Sharpe. “By the first of next week, we’ll start getting our game face on for Kentucky”