Tech, UVa Kick Off Seasons Today

By BILL BRILL
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Anxiously, like a huge horde of expectant parents, fans of Virginia Tech and Virginia have awaited the start of the college football season.

They don’t have to wait any longer.

At 1:30 in Blacksburg, Jimmy Sharpe will send his first Tech team on the field against Kentucky, a two-touchdown favorite. Some 30 minutes later at Annapolis, Sonny Randle’s first UVa club will face host Navy, which is a 7-point choice.

Supporters of each school are eager to see what will happen. After last year’s co-disasters—Tech was 2-9 and Virginia 4-7,—nobody seems to expect too much, although hope springs eternal in the breast of any fan.

The two coaches have taken a vastly different path to their opening. Randle, the high-energy emotional UVa grad who guided East Carolina to a pair of Southern Conference titles, has been embroiled in controversy almost since his arrival.

Tech will have to stop Kentucky’s all-American candidate Sonny Collins, the Wildcats’ leading rusher. Collins has a clean-shaven head on the field but wears a wig off the field.

For quiet Jimmy Sharpe, this is his first game as head coach. It is also his first time away from Alabama in 14 years, and the feeling must be strange.

Sharpe has made friends and influenced people in an unusual way—by keeping his mouth shut. His predecessor, Charlie Coffey, dug his own coaching grave by spouting off and then not producing. Sharpe has said repeatedly that his team will do its talking on the field.

All of the action will not take place at those two sites, however. Far from it. After a few games this week, in which Richmond won, William & Mary lost and N.C. State took its 11th straight ACC triumph, all of the area majors will play.

VMI, hoping for its best team in several years, entertains Furman in Lexington. The Paladins were the surprise team of the Southern Conference last year under new Coach Art Baker. Even so, Furman barely beat the Keydets, and VMI insists it is a much improved team even without quarterback Tom Schultzze.

The Keydets will open with senior Tony Furry, an erstwhile defensive back, at quarterback. The Keydets also have a great deal more depth than in recent seasons.

Richmond, which staged a miraculous rally to beat Villanova, 14-13, has an even tougher test at Morgantown against West Virginia and its all-American backer, Danny Buggs. The Spiders upset WVU 31-27 last year, which has prompted Mountaineer Coach Bobby Bowden to say, “I don’t have to say anything to get the team ready for Richmond.”

William & Mary, crushed a week ago by Mississippi State, 49-7, comes back in class at Wake Forest. The Deacons haven’t won a game since they beat Florida State in last year’s opener, Wake lost its first game to N.C. State, 33-15, but Coach Chuck Mills insists his team is improved. This is a pick ’em game.

A Maryland team that is the odds-on favorite to win the ACC plays its biggest-ever home game against mighty Alabama, No. 3 nationally. This is the fourth meeting between the teachers, Erskine Bryant, and the pupil, Jerry Claiborne. Bryant has won them all, but then Claiborne was at Virginia Tech. The Tide is a 12-point choice before 35,000 at College Park.

Meanwhile, one of the biggest ACC games of the year will be played under the lights at Raleigh. Defending champion N.C. State, winners of 11 straight league games, hosts ambitious Duke. State has never lost at night, at home or in red uniforms under Coach Lou Holtz and will have all three going for it. A veteran Duke team, trying to bounce back from the worst record in the school’s history, is a 10-point underdog.

Elsewhere among ACC teams, North Carolina, also seeking a comeback from a 4-7 debacle in ’73, is at home to Ohio U. while a good Clemson team plays at Texas A&M, one of the pre-season choices in the Southwest Conference. UNC is a 13-point pick, while A&M is selected by 18 over Clemson.

In the Southern Conference, defending champ East Carolina opens at home against a good Bowling Green team; Appalachian, winner in its opener over East Tennessee, entertains Middle Tennessee. The Citadel plays at home against Presbyterian. All of these are night games.

In the college small ranks, Washington & Lee opens at tough Millersville, Pa.; Hampden-Sydney plays at Guilford; Georgetown, Ky., is at Emory & Henry; Hampton Institute plays at Winston-Salem and Virginia State takes on Morgan State at Hartford, Conn.

Ferrum opens its year at Nassau, N.Y. Tech and UVa will be using different offenses, and each will be defending against a premier runner.

The Hokies must find some way to stop the brilliant Collins, who gained more than 1,200 yards last year for Kentucky and was named the Southeastern Conference player of the year.

Under Sharpe’s tutelage, Tech will run from the wishbone, with resurrected quarterback Bruce Arias at the controls. The Tech ground game will be keyed around Phil Rodgers, who dashed for over 1,000 yards a year ago when even a good offense couldn’t save the Hokies.

UVa can throw an experienced offense at Navy, which closed last year with a 54-0 win over arch-rival Army.

The Virginia quarterback is Scott Gardner, who accounted for 2,120 yards in offense as a sophomore to lead the nation and rank seventh in the country. Gardner has been bothered by a slight separation of his left shoulder, but should play. Reunited at running backs are former Lane High teammates Billy Copeland, last year’s freshman sensation, and David Sloan, converted from corner back.

The UVa defense, revamped by assistant coach Carl Reese, must gear to stop Navy’s brilliant Cleveland Cooper. The fleet Middie tailback already holds five rushing records, including the best two single-season ever. Navy’s biggest problem may be at quarterback, where underclass junior Mike Yeager is expected to get the starting nod.

After today, everybody should have a better idea of what to expect for the rest of the year. For Tech and UVa faithful, it has been a long, uncertain wait — and there is no guarantee that the results will be happy ones.

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