Tech defense finds new self-confidence

DALLAS, Tex.—There's a new feeling of confidence and enthusiasm among the defensive unit of the Virginia Tech football team.

"Before, we kept telling ourselves we were different," said Larry Bearbrickman, the husky senior tackle who calls the defensive signals. "But we actually were trying to convince ourselves that we really belonged.

"Now it's different. I think we found it all in the second half against SMU. It was something you could just feel. We stopped playing, it's technical football. We started playing recklessly. When the ball was snapped we started flying at the offense.

"Before we had been thinking too much. We were standing around waiting for someone else to make the big play. Not any more. I think all 11 of us will be after the big play. We all want in on the action and we aren't standing around any more waiting for things to happen—we're going to make them happen."

Bearbrickman and his fellow Bobcats are disappointed they haven't won in two games under new coach Jimmy Sharpe. And they are especially disappointed they didn't have more time against SMU here Saturday afternoon in the Cotton Bowl.

"Time ran out on us," Bearbrickman said. "I wish we could have started a new game with the same feeling we finished the other one. I know one thing—we certainly wouldn't have lost like we did. You'll never know the difference you could feel out there on the field. We were an entirely different team in the fourth quarter than the one we had to start the game."

Students are enthusiastic

...And the entire feeling on the Tech campus is different. Registration for the fall semester began yesterday and the students, corps, band and other fans wasted no time in showing their support.

"What a spirited celebration we had last night," Bearbrickman said. "Without any warning at all, the yard behind our dorm was crowded with students. They were all yelling, the band was playing and the cheerleaders were leading the cheers.

"I know it got us all psyched. Man, I was ready to play a game right then."

Bearbrickman thinks it is just such student support that will help the Bobcats pull off an upset victory over Houston Saturday in Lane Stadium. It will be the first time the students have been able to see the team operate under Sharpe.

"And we are going to give them something to remember," Bearbrickman said. "We aren't worried about the past—the two games this year and all that stuff the defense has taken the past three years. We just want to show our students that we can play defense and make it as exciting as the offense."

It is the same attitude that was shown by Sharpe, his coaching staff and the rest of the Tech squad here Saturday. It was a disappointing loss but from it came a greater feeling of unity, confidence and optimism.

Sharpe realizes that Houston and many other future opponents this season will have much more weight, talent and experience. But he has instilled a confident air among his associates.

He likes to quote that old saying used by many athletes and coaches: "Life's battles don't always go to the faster or stronger man but sooner or later the one who wins is the one who thinks he can."

Arians finds himself

There were other positive things that came from the SMU game. Quarterback Bruce Arians now seems to have the confidence and temperament to become a fine leader for the offense.

"I admit I might have been trying too hard..." Arians said. "But now it's different. I know what I can do and I have confidence in my teammates. It makes a lot of difference.

"Against Kentucky I got rattled and lost my composure in the second half. Not against SMU. I kept gaining confidence man. I just knew we would score and if we ever got the ball back we'd win the game. I'm like Larry—time just ran out on us."

Arians is Tech's leading rusher but it's an honor he wishes he could shed. And if he keeps up his tank-like running, Houston and future opponents might have to change their defensive plans.

"It's not that I mind running," Arians said. "But I just wish they would play more. I would much rather pitch to Phil Rogers or one of our other backs. Man, they can do some damage."

Arians hit on 13 of 20 passes for 204 yards and gained 50 rushing including two touchdowns and a two-point conversion. He now has a total offense of 477 yards in two games—not bad for a young man who last spring was thinking about graduating and giving up a final season of football.