By Bill Millsaps
Executive Sports Editor
BLACKSBURG — Ricky Scales got into his three-point stance and exploded off the line of scrimmage during a Virginia Tech passing drill Thursday afternoon. He turned around a defender with one fake, broke into the middle and took a long, long pass from quarterback Bruce Arians.

"That's the way, Skunk," shouted Tech coach Jimmy Sharpe.

"Come again, Jimmy?"

"Skunk. That's Ricky's nickname."

That time de comba fat would fit a fourth-string tackle a lot better than a little, quizzical receiver who is taking dead aim on all of Virginia Tech's career passing records.

"My father, who is dead now, was called Skunk," said Scales after the workout, Tech's last before Saturday's battle with Southern Methodist University in the Cotton Bowl in Dallas.

"So everybody in Martinsville [his home town] began calling me Little Skunk. Around here, they've just shortened it to Skunk."

And switching from nicknames to verbs, skunk is what SMU did to Scales last year. The Hokies' primary pass receiving threat of 1973 did not catch one ball against the Mustangs during a long, long afternoon. SMU won, 37-6.

Despite an NCAA probation, the death of one of the Mustang players (spinal meningitis) and the fact the team was less than impressive in a season-opening, 7-6 victory over North Texas State last week, SMU rates a strong favorite.

"You can throw out that game they played last week," said Sharpe, who called it "a real blood-letting. How would you like to get a bunch of kids ready to play on a day one of their teammates died?"

Assuming no such disasters strike Tech before game time (2:30 p.m. EDT kickoff, expected crowd of 16,000), the Hokies WILL be ready. Following last Saturday's 38-7 defeat at the hands of Kentucky, Sharpe put his team through an extremely rigorous practice week.

"We scrimmaged Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday," Sharpe said, "which is kind of unusual for a team after the season starts. We had two broken hands Tuesday. It wasn't anything brutal, though. We just needed to hit and work. And I think it helped a whole lot."

Scales was not one of last Saturday's sinners. The 5-11, 178-pound senior caught seven passes for 155 yards, bringing his career total to 1,753, a school record. He needs but four more catches to top the school career record of 86, and his next touchdown pass will tie Carroll Dale's long-standing mark in that category.

"Scales is as good a receiver as I've ever seen," said Sharpe, who also said his wide-out star was better than Wayne Wheeler, Alabama's top passing target last year. Tech assistant Nelson Stokely compared Scales very favorably with former LSU standout Andy Hamilton.

This year, however, Scales has become a more complete player. "He's better in his blocking. ... at least, he's getting out there and getting in folks' ways. He's involved in the play when the quarterback isn't calling his number."

Everybody blocks in Tech's Wishbone offense, and Scales seems to like it. especially the man-to-man coverage the Wishbone forces on the defensive backfield.

"I got some double coverage in the Kentucky game," he said, "but if we can establish our power running off tackle and up the middle, they can't afford to do that too much."

"We should have won that Kentucky game. We had the ball inside their four-yard line four times, and didn't score."

A dean's list student in biology, Scales said the decisive defeat didn't shake the Hokies' confidence in themselves, their coaching staff or their new offensive and defensive schemes. "The whole atmosphere and attitude around here is positive. There's more of the winning attitude around than I've ever seen before."

Now, about that nickname. Isn't it kind of ... strange? Scales laughed. "Really, I like it. It's unique." Like Ricky Scales.