By Ray Filegar

One giant step and Bruce Arians could have escaped the frying pan and the fire. But he didn’t.

The Virginia Tech football disaster of a year ago was hard on everybody at Blacksburg, but it seems unlikely that anyone suffered more than the 6-1, 190-pound quarterback from Pennsylvania.

To start with, he was vying for a position occupied one year earlier by the talented Don Strock, truly a passing whiz. And from beginning to end there were problems.

That Strock’s shadow, looming from the Tech record book would be considerable, was a foregone conclusion. Arians and the others could live with that, but there was more.

“Last year, if you made a mistake, you knew you were coming right out of there,” remembered Arians during a telephone conversation. And the mental anguish that resulted from the yo-yo-like process left a bad taste.

“It’s hard to say how I felt,” said Arians. “But I wanted out.”

So much so that even (when it was over) and the Tech administration had lured Jimmy Sharpe from Alabama to replace the resigned Charlie Coffey, there was strong sentiment in the Arians’ household to finish his schooling and get into teaching.

Only a long and thoughtful conversation, with Sharpe prevented such a move. And now, two losses into the 1974 season, Arians is still happy with his decision.

“It’s still hard on my wife,” admitted Arians. “She doesn’t see me very much. And now that school’s started I practice, come home and hit the books.”

Yet he readily admits, “I’m a lot easier to live with.”

Because a lot of the mental anguish has disappeared.

“If I make a mistake or two, they are not going to yank me out of there,” said Arians of Tech’s new coaching staff. Moreover, Sharpe, even when things are going bad, gives the impression of an iceberg in the desert.

“What I like about him,” said Arians. “He never loses his poise. And he is very honest and open with everybody.”

It is, then, with rekindled interest and still undaunted by early season setbacks at the hands of Kentucky and Southern Methodist, that Arians and the Gobblers take on Houston Saturday at Lane Stadium in Blacksburg.

And, this time, Arians is out of the pan and into the flames.

“They are even bigger than SMU,” says Arians. “They have a defensive tackle, Mack Mitchell, who is 6-8, 250 and runs the 40 in 4.6.” Translated, that means Mitchell is faster than Arians (4.75).

“Our offensive line is so small compared to others,” continued Arians. “At SMU where the Hokies came close to an upset the nose guard was about 275.”

Still, Arians is ranked fifth in the nation in total offense (238.5 per game) and he believes that can be attributed to the play of his ‘small’ teammates. There is also the realization that opponents are keying on running back Phil Rogers.

“What is bothering our offense,” admitted Arians. “I’ve come up with 10 and 15-yard runs but I haven’t broken one yet. They are concentrating on Phil because they know that once he gets going, he’s gone.”

To combat that, “we’ve got some new things we’re working into the offense,” against the Cougars.

With his added running responsibilities in the wishbone offense, Arians finds the greatest physical difference over a year ago.

“I’m not used to carrying the ball 18 times a game,” he said with a chuckle. “The big difference this year is getting hit so much.”

The legs, in particular, suffer and Arians noted, “If we had it the way we’d like it, we’d have two quarterbacks alternating, like SMU. They had three.”

An overabundance of personnel, however, is not yet a plus with the Gobblers. But then, it could have been a lot worse if Arians had taken that giant step.