Virginia Tech Gobbles Up Our Hero

By DENNIS LATT
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BLACKSBURG — For Jimmy Sharpe and his boys at Virginia Tech, football is a matter of whoopin’, hollerin’ and havin’ fun.

After a day of getting slightly involved in one of Sharpe’s practice sessions, I’ve come to realize that the whoopin’ and hollerin’ are cries of pain, and practice is anything but fun.

Playing the role of a backwater George Plimpton, I went to Tech Monday, found some pads, a helmet and a pair of football shoes and headed for the practice field.

But once there, my good senses returned. I only went through four of the drills and they were the easiest four I could find. How those players can get down and work for two hours a day like they do is beyond me.

One quick conclusion I came to was that football players need a lesson in anatomy. They don’t realize that the head belongs on the shoulders. They keep trying to knock it off.

After a fun-filled 25-mile jaunt on a bicycle, I was suggested that I might try some other first-hand stories. I’m afraid my choice of college football was a bad one.

The experience started quietly enough. Big Lake, Tech’s equipment man, had to dig deep to find shoes small enough for my little feet. Under a stack of uniforms, he found some pants small enough for me. That’s when I began to wonder if I wasn’t too small at 169 pounds to be trying this.

I attended a meeting with the running backs and quarterbacks where films of an earlier scrimmage were shown. Nice closeups of people knocking each other down and running into each other were the highlights. My confidence as a George Plimpton was wavering.

Then we went to a full squad meeting. To the entire team, it was pointed out that I was wearing a big X on my jersey. It meant I was to be treated delicately but the players murmured something about X marking the spot.

After that, we moseyed out to the practice field. Walking next to some of the interior linemen, my worst fears about being too small were realized. I couldn’t fill the shadow of some of the players.

They certainly looked a lot bigger than they did from the press box last year.

That was when I suddenly remembered this phobia I have. It has to do with pain. I have a low tolerance for pain. I often find that twisting the tops off Bud bottles is painful.

An idea popped into my head. Sharpe had asked me what position I planned working at. Immediately I volunteered to try place kicking. But I remembered I couldn’t kick. As a last resort, I volunteered to hold for the place kicker but they had a little plastic holder that was doing just fine.

Once on the field, it was too late. Coach Red Stickey, a notorious raccoutball player, put me in a punting drill. The idea was for me to push the punter.

Well, the first time or two, the man across from me tried blocking me. After he quit laughing, he also quit blocking me. Even without anyone blocking, I couldn’t get to the punter in time.

Then I wandered over to Coach Nelson Stokely and some fumble drills. The idea was for a runner with a football to run a quarterback with players trying to knock the ball out of his hand. The first two men had hand dummies. The others just tried to grab the ball with one hand.

It wasn’t tough when I was standing in line as a blocker but when I got to the front and became the grabber, it was different. You see, the two men with the dummies hit this dummy so hard I didn’t get through them. I had to step back and try again. I made it this time without fumbling. I put three players on the injured list. They were laughing so hard their sides hurt.

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Times Photo by Wayne Deel

Grimacing Latta (right) Attempts Block During Drill

DENNIS LATTA
Newspaper Lion
Our Hero
Quietly Retires

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On the third exercise, I was supposed to turn to the right and run 100 yards, but a man had a dummy so an imaginary runner behind me could get by.

Not only did I miss the snap, but I didn’t even get close to the dummy. I had the grace of an elephant in heat. So, un

doubtedly, I demanded a second chance, whereupon Coach Eales was holding the dummy. He had to ask me if I had hit you and I had given it the best lack I could muster.

I came in real handy in the fourth drill. Coach Charlie Pell had his line backers practicing their offense. The idea was for him to tell you if you were after running back or fullback and then you followed him until he got to the line of scrimmage and just sorta bumped him. There was no real contact.

Form was the problem, Pell, at first, tried showing me how to pick up a fellow in a stance so I could be off quickly. He gave up after the third try.

Then he started using me as a dummy. I hated to run the exercise. It was the only constructive use I had all day.

After that, the Tech team went to its favorite drill. It is called the option from the wing. The players dread it. Three offensive linemen with a runner behind them form up against three defensive linemen. They do a Yard line sweep. The idea is for the offense to go over the defense, and move the ball 10 yards in three plays.

My mathematical mind took over here. It didn’t take much for me to realize that a 240-pound lineman can run over a 160-pound sports writer with nothing left over.

I eased my way to the back of the line. They thereby removed my jersey and shoulder pads. I knew where I didn’t belong.

The three on the drill is the heart of the practice. A score is kept to see if the defense can stop the offense or the offense gets its 10 yards. It is the epitome of the contact drill.

There is enough violence in that limited space to quickly teach a person what football is all about.

With pads and helmet in hand, I edged over to the sideline. The drills started on inside runs and quarter backs. When the scrimmages started, I headed for the locker room. The quarterback weighs 15 pounds and I was tired of carrying it.

By the time practice was over, I had a shower and returned to the room to get my gear. The hot, tired, sweaty players ambled off the field and I just kept my mouth shut.

I think I’ll go back to bicycling.