Winners’ Scarce

Tech’s Crying Need

The present situation at Virginia Tech must be somewhat perplexing for Jimmy Sharpe. Throughout his tenure as an assistant coach at Alabama, the problem was finding a way to take advantage of the droves of talented athletes who matriculated there. Now he’s puzzling over the matter of finding enough able bodies to fill the required number of spots.

Just the other day, Sharpe stole a few moments of precious time for a frank, heart-to-heart talk with his football team. The subject wasn’t entirely pleasant for coach or players.

“I told them,” Sharpe said Monday, “that we have about 20 winners out of the 106 people out here practicing. By that, I mean really talented people who can get the job done no matter what the circumstances are.”

“Then we have another group of 15 players who haven’t broken through that plane yet. Those are the guys who have some genuine ability, but haven’t reached that level of consistency you look for.”

Naturally, Sharpe’s assessment was a little disheartening for all parties concerned. Still, neither Sharpe, nor his players are unduly distressed. After all, it’s still spring and a lot can happen between now and the opening game Sept. 11 at Kentucky.

Perhaps more than anyone else, Sharpe is convinced Virginia Tech can have a very good football team this season. “If the little things all start falling into place.”

“We’re making progress in a lot of areas,” Sharpe said. “The defensive unit is making great strides especially, but we’re still a long way from being a competitive football team.”

Of course, the term “competitive” is relative, depending upon the person making the statement. The level of competitiveness previous coaches at Tech might have accepted aren’t necessarily what Jimmy Sharpe will tolerate.

“We’re gradually reaching a point where we might have adequate backup strength, and I really believe that will be the key to whatever success we have this season,” Sharpe said, trying to assess the first half of Tech’s spring drills.

“Being able to give our front-line people some rest, to let them recover from the pounding they take on every play, is a big factor.”

The one thing that has driven Sharpe to distraction so far is the preponderance of “little mistakes” his team keeps committing.

“No question about it,” he said, “if we can eliminate a few of those it’ll make a world of difference. I’m talking about things like missed assignments or poor technique, mechanical things that can be corrected with a lot of work.”

“Phil Rodgers was a perfect example of that during the scrimmage we had last Saturday. He had a very good day running the football, which we expected, and he threw the ball exceptionally well. But his mistakes were the mechanical kind.”

“I think that was pretty much the story of the whole scrimmage, too. It was dazzling the whole time, and that caused us to fumble the ball a lot. But our young kids are starting to come around.”

At least Sharpe has the confidence of his squad now, something that was absent when he took charge of Tech’s football team last spring.

“I think an incident Saturday shows the kind of attitude this team has,” Sharpe said. “I really got on one of our kids during the scrimmage because of a mistake he made, and when he came off the field at the end he stopped as he was passing me and said, ‘Coach, I’m sorry I let you down on that trap. It won’t happen again.’”

“One of the high school coaches who was down for a couple of days watching our practices was amazed. He told me he was surprised a boy could say he was sorry for letting me down, after I had chewed him out the way I did.”

“Now, I’m not saying I’m confident we’ll have a great season, and I’m not saying we have the greatest talent in the world. But I do have a good feeling about this team, and the kids believe in what we’re telling them.”

“There’s no comparison to last year at this time. Of course, there’s no way to be sure we will improve the way we should, or really eliminate the nagging mistakes, but I’ll look forward to this season a lot more than last.”

Considering the dismal state of affairs at Tech lately, that might be saying something in itself.