Recruiting is game of mayhem

When they start addressing the recruiting jobs done by Roanoke College and Virginia Tech in basketball, the experts will be of the opinion that 1971 was a very successful year.

Of course it still has to be proven on the court: But Roanoke Coach Mel Hankinson recruited virtually an entirely new team. Among his six signees are at least three players who had major universities hating for their services. The Maroons also snared a pair of players from the Dapper Dan Classic.

Roanoke needed a new team after this year’s disaster. When some of the players uttered their bitterness following a final loss to Randolph-Macon in Baltimore, they forgot about their own shortcomings.

Virginia Tech didn’t need as much as Roanoke for next year. But the Gobblers did desperately need power inside, and Tech Coach Don DeVoe feels he got it with the addition of 6-11 Ernest Wansley of Anderson Junior College.

Tech also needed another guard. The Gobblers solved to see that problem with the signing of 6-2 Marshall Ashford from a Durham, N.C., high school last week.

Several Atlantic Coast Conference schools sought these two players. That made the prize valuable in itself. But more important, they fill the vital gaps in Tech’s program.

The signings of these players really represent only half the story. Ordinarily the public doesn’t see the story on the work that goes into the signings.

But it must be said that Roanoke Coach Mel Hankinson gets a five-star rating (apart from the Garbinkle recruiting report) for hours spent in the field while Gobbler assistant Sonny Smith, according to DeVoe, should have at least a couple of hundred overtime hours.

Their stories are amusing and show just why it costs a small mint for a college to recruit a basketball team.

Hankinson’s vacation

It was ironic the other day that when Hankinson finally finished his wandering and signing, he should receive a free vacation offer from a certain company.

Of the various sites, Hankinson was offered a few days in either New York City or Washington, D.C. It was fine except that these two cities have become Hankinson’s home away from Roanoke the last few months.

Essentially, Hankinson would have been a great person for Chas. Dooney & Sons if he had ever written a book called, “Tale of Three Cities.”

Hankinson took about 60 days between the end of the season and beginning of May to complete his recruiting. “I guess I spent about 40 days of that time away from home,” said Hankinson.

When he got back he had the vacation offer. He politely refused. Going to New York or Washington this soon would be like sending a man to Siberia—for the duration.

What was it like for Hankinson as he uncoiled last week following his completion of recruiting?

“Have you ever tried to catch up on three months mail?” he asked facetiously.

Bob Teutelbaum

“Since I’ve been back, I’ve had people stacked one on top of another in my office.”

Hankinson still has nightmares about those trips he calls “sideline runs.”

Especially this kind of trip had Hankinson finishing practice, then darting to Washington or a spot in Pennsylvania to see a game that had been stuck in Roanoke the next day, ready for another practice or a game.

“We played a game at Randolph-Macon on Feb. 12,” Hankinson recalled. “After practice on the 11th I visited three kids that night and the next day in Eastern Virginia. Then I was back at Randolph-Macon that night.

Hankinson followed a very ordinary recruiting season last year with a great spring in 1971. What was the difference?

“Last year I didn’t get that involved,” said Hankinson. “This year I did. I got a chance to see the players playing and I got into the homes.”

In all but one of the six cases, Hankinson convinced the parents that Roanoke was the best spot for their sons. In the case of Rick Weber, the 6-6 forward went against his father, who thought he should try university division. But even the elder Weber swung over to his son’s way of thinking.

Most people say the secret in recruiting is to win the parents. That’s usually just under 100 per cent effective.

“Tale of Three Cities” continued. “I’ve been under a tremendous amount of pressure,” Hankinson admitted. “I just feel myself getting down. I still only sleep three hours a night.”

Hankinson often would drive at night. Those are hours when a coach can’t recruit. He made the dawn patrol run from Washington to New York many times.

“I fell asleep once and had a dream of driving into a snow bank,” Hankinson said. “I had a cardboard box and time was running down. I pulled off the road and slept for 40 minutes.”

Hankinson says that it’s a wonder what a few minutes of sleep can do when a person is tired. They can only have hours.

When Hankinson finished and came home, he even had someone driving him around the city. That’s how tired he was getting before he finally fell asleep.

Now that it’s over. The future will tell if Hankinson’s efforts were enough. But going by credentials, there seems to be no worry that the Roanoke coach did the job.

Different for Tech’s Smith

Smith had it a bit differently from Hankinson. His enemy wasn’t the car or the highway by night. His loneliness came from camping out in a motel at Anderson, S.C., to keep an eye on Wansley.

He would have done the same thing with Ashford, but the two signings came almost together. So Tech’s other assistant, Jim Hallihan, camped out in Durham, N.C. And Smith gives Hallihan much of the credit for signing Ashford.

“I guess this is the first time I’ve camped out for a boy,” said Smith. DeVoe himself has never done it. But Tech needed a big man, and this was the only way.

What does a coach do when he lives at a motel? Well, he doesn’t watch the morning newscasts or the afternoon soap operas on television. Mainly, he works.

“You have to spend time with the coach every day, some time with the family, and you have to be around with people in the community who influence the situation,” said Smith.

The Tech assistant said sports writers, ministers, professors, and business men in the community could all come in to the picture when a boy chooses a school.

“The things I did took up a full day,” said Smith. “I also tried to have a meeting with the kid. Three or four times he told me to go away.

“I went away once. He said, ‘You don’t have any faith in me.’ But I went back when others came in. Clemson came to Anderson one day and brought all the seniors to play against Ernest and his team. They tried to influence him to go Clemson.”

Smith said that he had four or five other coaches camping out at the same hotel as he did.

“But I’ve been working on him for two years. He’s a major college center. Not a shot blocker. But he shoots at the top of the key and is a good rebounder. He gives us everything but rejection in the middle,” Smith explained.

Smith had one other thing to contend with. Tech recruited Barry Isom from Anderson last year. Unfortunately, Isom was injured. He was upset when he did return and saw little playing time. Tech coaches worried what he would tell Wansley.

“Really, Barry told him to go and he did it to do over again he would still choose Tech,” Smith said.

Another member of Isom’s family wasn’t as kind, but it didn’t persuade Wansley to stay away from Tech. Like Hankinson, Smith’s hard work paid off in getting the man Tech wanted.

This could story could have a happy ending. But it doesn’t. Next year will be the same thing will happen. Maybe Hankinson will be coming out after one or two players instead of driving all over the East. That’s because Roanoke can specialize in its efforts next winter.

But Tech will lose a lot of players after next year. So maybe Smith will go on those suicide runs from midnight to dawn. And maybe he will miss about two months of family life.

There just never seems to be an end to the circle that keeps recruiting of college athletes ranking as one of America’s longest paid jobs by the hours spent and money earned.