Tech Stops Marshall On Rhodes’ 3-Hitter

By DOUG DOUGHTY
Sports Writer

BLACKSBURG — The Mike Rhodes that Virginia Tech coach Bob Humphreys thought he had bargained for finally surfaced against Marshall Wednesday afternoon.

It wasn't Rhodes' first appearance in a Hokies' uniform, nor was it his first start, but the freshman pitcher from Bayside finally showed Humphreys why it was that he recruited the high-school phenom so heavily last spring.

On a day on which snowflakes were as much in evidence as sliders and curve balls, the lefthander Rhodes had more trouble with the elements than with the Thundering Herd batters, pitching a three-hitter as Tech won its eighth straight, 6-2.

With one out in the ninth inning, Rhodes was staring at the team's first shutout of the season and the steak dinner that is awarded by Humphreys when he allowed a two-run homer by Marshall's John Rulli.

Rulli's long fly that barely cleared the center field fence came a bit too late, however, as the Hokies had come up with six runs in their half of the sixth. Doing the most damage was catcher Wayne Shelton, who broke a scoreless tie with a homer to right, his eighth of the season.

"I swear I didn't know the game would turn out like that," said Humphreys. "I could foresee the score being 1-0 or 2-1 and us losing after 16 guys had run together while chasing a pop up."

For another thing, Humphreys wasn't sure he could count on Rhodes, who carried a 1-1 record and a not-so-sparkling 7.86 ERA into Wednesday's action. "At this point, expecting him to run a win one-run game was a little too much to ask," said Humphreys.

As mentioned before, Rhodes' biggest problem was the weather, as the temperature dipped into the high 30's and the wind contributed to make the chill factor much lower. It started snowing midway through infield practice and, although the white stuff didn't stick, it continued to fall through the fifth inning.

Normally, weather conditions like that favor the pitcher, and Wednesday's game was no exception. "Nobody likes to hit when it's this cold," said Humphreys, noting that anything but the most solid blow can leave a batter's hands stinging for hours.

"A lot of times, a batter's rear end is the only thing at the plate. He's left his heart in the dugout."

Many a sore arm has been irritated in near-freezing temperatures, with Rhodes admitting to a little tightness after the game. "You get arm trouble in your elbow or shoulder," he said. "It's my forearm that hurts. I guess it was from gripping the ball."

Because of the cold, Shelton was calling for Rhodes to throw mostly fastballs, and with that they may have found the root to the first-year man's problems. Rhodes' control had deserted him in an earlier outing against Connecticut and, since then, Humphreys had been reluctant to use him in a big game.

"I just tried to throw strikes, instead of throwing hard," said Rhodes. "I'd like to think I'll get to pitch a lot more because of this."

"Early in the year, when we needed big wins against teams like South Carolina, it wasn't the time to start a freshman," Humphreys said. "Sure, I'll be using him more. The more he pitches, the more confidence he'll get and the better he'll become."

Humphreys admitted that none of his players welcomed the idea of playing in the snow, particularly former Miami-Dade junior college star Rick Wade, but that things could have been worse especially if Tech had lost a couple in a row.

"When I used to pitch, I always did well when it was cold," said the Hokies' coach. "As long as the weather is in the '40's, which was the forecast, and the snow isn't sticking, we'll play. We've had too many games rained out to call one like we had today."

The crowd, which reached a high of 45 midway through the afternoon, had diminished to 15 by the ninth inning. All they missed was Rulli's home run, which was accompanied by much merriment in both dugouts.

"I was pretty upset with myself, but I guess I had to laugh, too," confessed Rhodes. "Everything was quiet, and then some guy in the dugout yelled out and asked, 'How're you going to like those pork chops tonight?'"