Tech's Wayne Shelton

No Basketball, Just Home Runs

By BOB TEITELBAUM
Sports Writer

BLACKSBURG — Only the fickle finger of fate and sound judgement kept Wayne Shelton from trying to play ACC basketball.

The Virginia Tech catcher hardly looks like one of those tall, rangy monsters who inhabit basketball courts from October to March each year.

He also is far from being a speedy guard who can shoot with unerring accuracy.

Shelton, simply put, looks like a catcher. Nothing else.

He has a bulldog face, is built along the lines of a miniature Paul Bunyan and can hit a baseball out of sight.

So far this year he has smashed eight homers and leads Tech's batters with an average in the .370s.

Three years ago, though, when Shelton, then a star for Tunstall High, was looking around for further baseball activities, ACC basketball almost called him.

"Wake Forest offered me a scholarship to play both basketball and baseball," said Shelton.

It wasn't a shot in the dark exactly. Shelton was a good high school basketball player. Fortunately, for himself and Wake, he realized that high school talent is different from the ACC.

"Actually," recalled Shelton, "the athletic director was going to talk to the basketball coach about looking at me, but he thought it was a good possibility."

Carl Tacy, the Wake coach, would probably shudder at the thought of possibly having his coaching future in the hands of the Tech catcher.

"I didn't want to play ACC basketball," said Shelton.

"I'm not ACC basketball material."

This led to Tech where Coach Bob Humphreys was just taking over for the legendary Red Laird.

Humphreys was smart enough to know that a baseball team starts and ends with a good battery, that is, several pitchers and a catcher.

"The first thing you have to have is a team. Then you have to have someone to throw a baserunner out and call a good game," said the Tech coach.

"Other than having a good pitcher, the catcher is the most important man on a club. If you don't have a good pitcher, it doesn't matter much who you have back there."

Humphreys really didn't have to pick Shelton away from Wake Forest or the Texas Rangers.

Shelton was drafted late in the free agent picks and Texas offered him $2,000 to sign. That was hardly worth a college scholarship.

"I met Coach Humphreys after we played Basset. We got beat 5-3, but I got two doubles and a single," said Shelton.

"He offered me a half scholarship at that point."

Shelton didn't commit right away. He showered and returned to his farm home in Pittsylvania County.

"Coach Humphreys and my high school coach came over that night and he (Humphreys) offered me a full scholarship. I told him I would come to Tech," Shelton recalled.

It meant Shelton was following in a tradition of good Tech catchers that included Johnny Oates (presently with the Los Angeles Dodgers) and John Arnhem, who was the leading hitter in the NCAA early in the 1970s.

Shelton recalls his first year at Tech when he discovered that Humphreys can be hard on his charges. The Tech coach drives them to perfection with sharp words that sting when a player doesn't perform fundamentally.

That first year, I was hitting the ball well. When I stopped hitting it well, I got down on myself," recalled Shelton.

That's when Humphreys' driving force got to the catcher. But he shook it off and has been a mainstay with Humphreys' first three Tech teams.

"I just accept it (his coach's yelling) now. Sometimes it's good and sometimes it's bad," said Shelton.

"He's helped me a whole lot. He tells you what he liked when he was a pitcher in the majors) from a catcher. It's unbelievable what the man knows about baseball."

Shelton got his start catching in an odd sort of way. He was 10 years old and sharing right field duties on a little league team.

"Our catcher got hurt and we had no one else," Shelton recalled. "So I told the coach I wouldn't mind moving so I could play full-time. I just wanted to play."

It was a move of the future. Whereas some players as big and slow as Shelton seems to be when he runs on the basepaths wouldn't be considered pro prospects, the opposite might be true of the Tech catcher.

He is hoping for another shot at the pros this year in the free agent draft. Since he is a good hitter with his long ball and plays a position where there are not a lot of prospects, the Tech junior has an excellent chance to be drafted.

"Wayne has improved more this year," said Humphreys in discussing Shelton's chances of making it as a pro. "He's come on as a catcher. He's always been a good hitter."

"If they (the pros) give him anything, I'll advise him to sign. I'm all for it. If not, he has his education paid for. I really think someone will draft him and give him a chance to play."

Shelton shrugs his massive shoulders at the thought of playing in some small tank town hundreds of miles away from home if he signs with the pros two months from now.

"It's still my ambition to play pro ball," he said.

"Being a catcher ought to help me in the draft. If you're an outfielder or catcher, you have several positions to play. As a catcher I have only one position. I can be a specialist."

"I don't mind leaving home if I can play pro ball. I can make new friends. One of the reasons I came to Tech was to stay close to home."

And maybe to stay away from ACC basketball—except on television.