W. A. T. H E  T H E  B A L L  B O U N C E S

BY BOB MOSKOWITZ

AN ORIGINAL STORY

BLACKSBURG — This has not been your ordinary Spring on the Virginia Tech campus. The baseball season has neatly po go-sticked from the ridiculous to the sublime. Once 1-6, the Hokies now have won 27 successive games. They go for No. 28 today at Marshall and even Coach Bob Humphreys, mostly trying to lower key expectations, is exulting. "It's unbelievable when you think of it."

When the former major league pitcher isn't passing off the image of trying "to be realistic," he also likes to lecture his fans on subjects — both positive and negative. To be sure, the Hokies started this Spring on the rockiest of grounds. Then the pitching and fielding began to improve and they started winning, blinding happy with a skilled at bat mentality.

Most painful topics concern suspension of a player, although Humphreys had never done before. However, he told-obtained to east Warwick grad sophomore Tony Merlo for the season. It was, he says, an "explosion last week that triggered a full-scale brawl with West Virginia."

"It's not the first time he and I have had problems," admits Humphreys. "He is a good kid and an intense player (who was hitting 369 as a designated batter). He helped us a lot and we'll miss him. I'd like to see him come to bat. Still, he's got to learn some things. I hope he learns from this." Humphreys is quick to recall that "I've been in free-for-alls and I like aggressive play, but you have to have more reason than he did. Just because someone says something to you isn't enough."

"I don't think he has the ability to play as a catcher, but he could (an expected) return to NCAA post-season competition later this month "is up to him. Right now I have no idea, says Humphreys.

Pinpointing reasons for this immense streak — 30 had been Tech's all-time prior high — is understandably challenging. Still, Humphreys eventually gets around to talking at length about people like second baseman Danny Gries, freshman pitcher Mike Rhodes of Virginia Beach's Bayside High and hurler Dean Powell.

Grief is slowly turned into what his coach calls "our most consistent hitter," but it wasn't even then. Only a 245 hitter a year ago, the junior from Springfield "has gradually crept up two or three points a week." Now he's not only a consistent starter, but has become an alarming rash of early-season errors.

Humphreys goes much farther than that. "Last year we posted 5 errors in all our 42 games (of which Tech won 33). In our first five games this year, he made 13 errors. I don't want to point a finger at anyone, but his turnaround is the big reason we've come around.

Now Humphreys calls Gries "the best second baseman in the ACC." As far as turning double plays is concerned, few I mean a low level of play — can turn them as quick as he can. More than that, he gets on base 30 percent of the time.

Rhodes is a youngster Humphreys "figured would help late. Instead, he has come through with a 5-1 ledger, a 2.40 earned run average and three of the incredibly 11 complete games Hokie hurlers have registered this delightful Spring. Powell's story is even more exciting. Humphreys says simply: "I lucked out."

In brief, Powell is a Ferrum Junior College recruit who was on the brink of being named. Trouble is, he didn't work hard to keep the metal off his bat. He was cut off the team and required treatment for the cornea of an eye. He could have lost his sight — as well as his confidence. Happily, he retained his vision and also his confidence. Powell's performance has been another major milestone. Now he's 3-4 with a 1.75 earned run average.

There are, of course, a host of other grandstands. There would have to be a 36-7 team, left alone one that has won 27 in row. Not too long ago Humphreys posted a 26-game Clemens tear. "How in the world could anyone top that?" he asked himself. Now he's the only one who knows.