New Jimmy Sharpe Still Nervous

BLACKSBURG — Jimmy Sharpe was standing by a big window in his office, looking out toward the field where Virginia Tech's football team practices.

"You know, I can remember the first day I took this job," said Tech's head football coach. "I stood here and looked out and I was petrified. That was Jan. 20, 1974."

Since then, the Hokies have had seasons of 4-7, 8-3 and 6-5. Sharpe has made mistakes. Like all new coaches, he's learned.

That same Alabama drawl, blond hair, blue eyes and full set of teeth are there. The man could still woo a groundhog out of his hole or sell a book of golf instructions to Jack Nicklaus.

But while all the appearances are the same, the 1977 version of Jimmy Sharpe isn't. "I've changed," admitted Tech's head coach. "Fifteen times I've heard the boos and curses. Eighteen times I've been the hero. That changes you. No one enjoys being booed."

As the boss of the program, Sharpe is the symbol of Virginia Tech football. Whether he's in a grocery store or grabbing a hamburger somewhere in Blacksburg, Sharpe is recognized as the man in charge of Virginia Tech's fortune on the football field.

"You're in a fishbowl," said Sharpe. "It took some getting used to for me and my family. Basically, my wife and family are very private. Before we got here, we were private and family-oriented."

"We still find time for our private moments. We're at peace with ourselves. We've adapted ourselves to Virginia Tech and the task at hand."

Since moving to Blacksburg, Sharpe has had to change his phone number several times. "We're not bothered by the phone calls. We don't really get crank calls but we have people call us who are not considerate," Sharpe claimed.

Those people probably are trying to tell Sharpe how to run his football program. He runs it into it wherever he goes.

"The people who complain the most in religion, politics or sports are the least knowledgeable on the subject. There is a lot of pressure from people every time you lose a game," Sharpe noted.

"When you go to a meeting, someone will come up to me and ask me what we're doing about a quarterback. I'll tell them we didn't sign one and they say we should have. These people have seen our players for a few minutes during the season. I've seen them every day but they think they know more about it."

Sharpe isn't really harrassed. He's just dogged by well-wishers who want to offer suggestions. "I can't remember a time when I haven't been well received," he said. "No one has said anything about our win-loss record, but occasionally there is a heckler. You just have to know how to handle them."

As a football man, Sharpe hasn't had many problems at Tech. But there's a lot, a whole lot, more to being a head coach than just working with the team.

"I have to say that coaching was the easiest part of the job. It's the part I love to do the most."

"But the other things are time-consuming. I was gone for a week and when I got back, there was a stack of stuff six inches deep covering my desk."

"A lot of it is useless stuff. One was a letter thanking me for participating in a golf tournament in Texas and I wasn't in it. Most of it is requests for me to speak somewhere."

"Luckily, speaking comes easy to me. I enjoy it because I like people. But I never had given as many speeches as I did during my first two years here. It was phenomenal. I had 150 some the first year and 150 some the second year. I'd have a luncheon in Richmond and a dinner in Norfolk that night."

"I just had no free time. So I'm sending assistant coaches more now," Sharpe explained.

"I don't think anyone would ever be prepared to expect all the things that come on you when you become head coach. You have to be able to delegate the duties, but I tried to do everything myself at first. I wanted everything to come across my desk, but it's not like that any more," Sharpe continued.

During the off-season, a football coach does no coaching, but stays plenty busy. If he isn't a good public relations man who can sell his program, he can fail as a coach without losing a game.

"To be successful, you've got to be competitive and win on the field and maintain good rapport with supporters. All the successful coaches I know, and I mean successful over a long period, do a good job in both areas," Sharpe pointed out.

"Let's face it, we're in the entertainment business. We're after the same dollar people might spend at the picture show. We have to convince people that we offer a good show."

The pressure is there year-round on the head coach. If he doesn't do well in the off-season, he could lose his job as quickly as he could by not doing well during the season.

"I can name a coach who was fired this year and never had a losing season," Sharpe said of Tennessee's Bill Battle. "There was real pressure on my old Alabama teammate."

"Once you succumb to that pressure, you've got to win big or you're out. If you let the pressure get to you, you've lost your confidence and that's one of the basics of being a winner."

According to the Tech coach, "The majority of people look at success in sports as the final score or record. A coach can be very successful without being a big winner or he can win a lot of games and not be successful. Much of the success lies with what he does with his players, but people don't realize that."

Sharpe said he isn't going to let it get him down when his team is favored but loses. "During my 18 years in college football, I've been in the situation where the superior team didn't win. I've been there before and I'm certain it'll happen again."

"I look at our schedule for this year and there is nobody on it we can't beat. But at the same time, there isn't anyone who can't beat us."

With that attitude, Sharpe is anxious for the new season to start.

"I have more peace of mind, more confidence and more knowledge than I did in 1974. My family is more content."

"It's been almost four years since I took this job. I think I can do a better job. There are more opportunities than ever before. But I'm still scared when I think about it."

Tech's Jimmy Sharpe Explains...

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