A Nostalgic Twist at Tech: Fitzgerald To Play Both Ways

BY JACK BOGACZYK
Sports Writer

BLAUKRING — Being only 19 years old, Mickey Fitzgerald’s idea of life in the ‘60s is perhaps best reflected in the television lives of guys like Fonzie, Richie and Puerto.

But Saturday at Lane Stadium, Fitzgerald really will experience the life of a 1960’s college football player when Virginia Tech opens its 1977 season by hosting seventh-ranked Texas A&M.

Because of two knee injuries to Tech teammates, Fitzgerald will rekindle memories of single-platoon football as Coach Jimmy Sharpe has the Lynchburg sophomore slotted for both offense and defense.

On offense, Fitzgerald will play tight end, while on defense he will go at tackle.

Ironically, were it not for injuries to Mike Faulkner and Dave Dolphin, Fitzgerald might be starting at offensive tackle or guard.

“Coach Sharpe asked me if I wanted to set a record,” said Fitzgerald, recounting his surprise visit with the coach last week.

“Then he talked about me playing both ways. I was really surprised, because I didn’t know what kind of depth we had on defense.

Fitzgerald, the former E.C. Glass High star, was working on the offensive line unit Faulkner, a two-year starter, suffered a knee injury eight days ago. So, Sharpe moved Fitzgerald to Faulkner’s defensive tackle spot, figuring Dave Dolphin as the starter.

In workouts, Fitzgerald had been alternating with Dolphin at tight end, as well as taking his turns at guard and tackle. But now at defensive tackle, Mickey figured he wouldn’t be playing much on offense.

Then on Saturday, Dolphin went down, also with a knee injury. That left Sharpe short-handed and Fitzgerald with lots of work to do.

“I think I’m going to be starting at tight end and alternating with Danny Hill at defensive tackle,” said Fitzgerald. “I guess I’ll be starting.

“I’ll be ready to play a lot. One thing Coach Sharpe told me was that I’d better learn how to get a brutcher on my feet.

Fitzgerald said he has been paid the “highest compliment” by Sharpe. And while the Tech coach certainly doesn’t enjoy having to put one of his best blockers on defense, he said when the punt unit says that someone with a new unit hasn’t been as difficult as he first feared.

“I’ve worked close to a week on defense now,” said Fitzgerald. “Our defense really isn’t that hard to learn. We only have four or five defensive formations, plus there’s a few other stunts I have to worry about. But Texas A&M is going to do one thing most of the time. They run and then run some more. That’s basic football, and you know that if you’re going to play in this league you might have a couple other identifying marks.

“I’ll be the one wearing the leather jacket with the hair slicked back,” joked Fitzgerald, wondering if he could attract the females, a la Fonzie. “I’ll also be the one that says ‘I’m out of bounds’.”

Somehow, Fitzgerald isn’t the A.J. Fonda of the Fonz. Stiffness follows, and I think I had a handful with Fitzgerald shows he probably could do likewise. But Saturday, he only wants to stop the Aggies — and go home and rest.

GOLLERS’ GRISEFRAPERU: Sharpes has decided on junior David Laminie as his starting quarterback, halving back-ups Renee Cales and Dennis Scott and fullback Dickey Howay on the first unit. Don LaFleur will back up Laminie, although Sharpes said he “hasn’t decided whether to start Mickey both ways or one way. But we’re prepared to do both or either.”

Fitzgerald will be wearing uniform No. 68 Saturday, but the wise-tracking lineman said he might have a couple other identifying marks.

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“Getting that first feel,” said Fitzgerald, laughing. “They took me off the specialty teams because of this. Before, I was on the punt unit. I wonder how these guys did it earlier years. I mean, Coach Sharpe told me, ‘I did it (played both ways), so you can do it.’

Fitzgerald has been running extra sprints after practice to increase his wind. Sharpe says he “hasn’t decided whether to start Mickey both ways or one way. But we’re prepared to do both or either.”

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