Tech Tackle Finds Offense ‘More of a Challenge’

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BLACKSUGAR - So what’s a guy from East Aurora, N.Y., doing at a Southern school like Virginia Tech playing offensive tackle? That’s the role Greg Birtsch has for the Hokies. In three years, Birtsch has learned Southern football is better than that played in his hometown and he’s lost his V coaching accent.

He came to Tech almost as an afterthought. “I was considering five schools,” recalled Birtsch, who had to prep at Millfield School in Connecticut once he left East Aurora. “I was confused and decided to add one more visit.”

The extra visit was to Virginia Tech and he chose the Hokies almost immediately. “I didn’t want to go real far south,” said Birtsch. “Virginia is in the middle. People said some places are prejudiced against people from the north, but I haven’t noticed that here.”

Birtsch said he had some offers when he graduated from high school. But he felt he needed extra training and beyond that provided at East Aurora.

“They had only won four games in three years that I was there,” Birtsch remembered. “Only one player is quarter- back at Army had gone on to play college football from East Aurora.”

That made East Aurora a real poverty area Birtsch soon discovered this fact.

“Football in prep school was the first football I played. I was way behind two years until I got there,” he explained.

“Now I see what it takes to play foot- ball. The game is totally mental.” In high school I would push guys around. Offensive football is really a simple game. People make it complicated. But it’s just a one-on-one game— you and the guy across from you.”

Birtsch has also found a new position and theory to football since coming to Tech. He’s been that hard off on defense as a nose guard, but now is on offense.

“Because of my size and speed,” he said, “Tech Coach Paul Cofer tried to get me on defense. But I just didn’t have a knack for it. Some people have defensive tendencies, some don’t.”

“I like offense. That’s sort of the posi- tion of the underdog. It’s more of a chal- lenge. You can’t use your hands like a defensive lineman. The offensive linemen have to do more thinking because they have to deal with assignments. The defense is more of a reaction.”

Birtsch realized when he made the change he wouldn’t be seen for three or four years unless some National Football League scout happened to like his style. In those years he would be going bust.

“The only way to get noticed as an of- fensive lineman,” said the Tech junior, “is to do something wrong. Jump offside or clip.”

“...But I’m on the left side of the line and Tech runs a lot of plays to the right. So I might be out there sometime making a block downward.”

Birtsch finally blossomed last spring in practice. “There were three good tackles and Coach Jack White told us we would do a lot of playing,” he explained.

Birtsch became one of them and was quickly named Tech’s outstanding player during the spring game. Then he came up with another top effort in last week’s open- ing loss to Texas A&M.

“I compare the A&M game with the way I felt after the spring game,” he said. “I want to get that feeling each game. I think confidence has helped me. I wasn’t confidence early.”

This week the Hokies play at Mem- phis State and Birtsch compares the assign- ment with the one last Saturday. They’re strong defensively like A&M,” said Birtsch. “They’ve played three games and they’ll be in shape. We still have some bugs to cut out of offense.”

Birtsch agrees that Tech needs a win to help the program. He’s not making any pre- dictions. He simply says the Gobblers won’t make the same mistake as last year when everyone started talking about going to a bowl early in the season.

That’s Birtsch’s secret to success. And if it works like his career at Tech, the Gob- bers might be on the right path after all.

TECH NOTES: State has lost junior tailback Walter Williams and probably the season. He sustained a knee injury in the first quar- ter of the game against Utah State. Bates was the Tigers’ leading ground gainer. A crowd of 25,000 to 30,000 is expected for the Saturday game downtown. Virginia Tech’s basketball program has lost guard Ronnie Edwards due to academic defici- encies. Edwards, a product of Graham High in Bluefield, was the No. 3 guard last year behind Marshall Ashford and Ron Bell.