Memphis State Likes Freedom

By Jerry Lindquist

Memphis State and Virginia Tech, which meet Saturday night in Memphis, would seem to have an awful lot in common. They are independents which, by collegiate definition, means without conference affiliation, and both have made designs on becoming national powers. The commitment was made long ago.

Whether Tech will succeed remains open to debate. It seems the Hokies have been trying to effect a breakthrough since the flying wedge.

In Blacksburg, and throughout the state, wherever two or more Tech alumni happen to be, there's guaranteed talk about getting to a bowl game and residence among the Top 20. Invariably, it's no more than that. Talk.

WHILE LIFE AS AN INDEPENDENT has been, at times, a lonely one for Tech, Memphis State has found the decision to bolt from the Missouri Valley Conference in 1973 wise and rewarding. There have been no regrets. "Absolutely none," said Billy Murphy, the Memphis State athletic director, yesterday.

"If the conference is not a good conference, you're better off on your own. Independence? Why, it's a plus. It opens doors for you."

"You go by NCAA rules. That's all... (and) there's not a lot of hogwash tying you down... faculty people telling you you can't do this and you can't do that."

THE MVC LOST Memphis State when it enrolled New Mexico State and promptly passed a resolution that all teams must play each other every year. For the Tigers, that meant dropping some really big games. To play New Mexico State? No way.

"At first, some of our basketball fans were upset," recalled Jack Bugbee, sports information director at Memphis State.

"This was right after we reached the NCAA finals, and the NCAA decided conference runnersup would be eligible for the (post-season) tournament. That made things a lot more difficult for independent teams to get in... but then we joined the Metro 6."

Now the Metro 7, which includes Georgia Tech and the universities of Louisville and Cincinnati, is for basketball and several minor sports, but not football. Murphy admitted membership in the prestigious Southeastern Conference would be welcomed, but not required for the Tigers to achieve parity with current SEC members.

THE BIGGEST PROBLEM, Murphy suggested, is scheduling. There are no automatic opponents which a conference affiliation guarantees. "If you can persuade the top teams to play you...", he said, noting that was the least of Memphis State's worries now.

Playing their home games in spacious Liberty Bowl Memorial Stadium, the Tigers led the country in attendance increase a season ago. They attracted an average of 40,180 for seven games, compared to 24,075 in 1975. With that kind of interest, Memphis State's athletic program has become self-supporting.

"Being an independent can't hurt you if you can guarantee a team $100,000 to play us here," Murphy continued. "If they were reluctant before you told them that, they say, 'You've got a point,' We've all got a big budget staring us in the face."

The University of Mississippi left Memphis last year with a check for $160,000. Memphis State also meets Mississippi State and Southern Mississippi, as well as Tennessee, Tulane, Vanderbilt and other Southern institutions on a regular basis.

Schools in that part of the country are not reluctant to tangle with their natural rivals, which isn't always the case in this part of the country. "That's stupid," Murphy said.

"We don't have that problem, except a little bit with Tennessee. They say it's too big a rivalry. It's too tough on their coach."

Larry Van der Hayden, Memphis State's offensive coordinator, knows all about Virginia. He spent two years (1973-74) at the University of Virginia, serving as then-coach Sonny Randle's offensive line coach.

"Those were tough years," Van der Hayden said, recalling the turmoil that eventually led to Randle's dismissal.

THE DIFFERENCE IS approach, Van der Hayden explained, "is I believe the Memphis State president, athletic director, everyone, wants a first-class program, and they've gone about doing what it takes. They just don't talk about it. They've gone out and done what has to be done.

"They've tried to give us an equal chance to compete. You've got to do everything possible to show people you really mean what you say. You're not going to fool people very long if you don't. You're not going to fool the kids you're trying to recruit."

Virginia Tech, Van der Hayden, said "has definitely moved forward. They've got better personnel now than when I was at Virginia. They're a lot more aggressive. They're quicker. They're very similar to Ole Miss. We're going to have a tough time trying to block their linebackers. That (Rick) Razzano is a super player."

Memphis State dropped a 7-3 decision to Ole Miss, which, last Saturday, shocked Notre Dame. Memphis State then defeated Tulane (27-3) and Utah State (31-26). "We're not able to line up and blow people off the line of scrimmage. We're going to know more about ourselves after this game," Van der Hayden said.