Confusion Helps Gobblers Land a Football Player

By Bob Teitlebaum
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BLACKSBURG — So what's a guy from East Aurora, N.Y., doing playing offensive tackle at a small school like Virginia Tech?

That's the role Greg Birtch has for the Gobblers. In three years, Birtch has learned southern football is better than that played in his hometown and he's lost his Yankee accent.

He came to Tech almost as an afterthought. "I was considering five schools," recalled Birtch, who had to prep at Milford 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 Gobblers almost immediately.

"I didn't want to go far south," said Birtch.

Virginia is in the middle. People said some places

are prejudiced against people from the north, but I haven't noticed that here."

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

"They had only won four games in three years that I was there," Birtch remembered. "Only one player (a quarterback at Army) had gone on to play college football from East Aurora."

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

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

"Now I see what it takes to play football. 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."

Birtch also has found a new position and theory in football since coming to Tech. He started off on defense as a nose guard, but now is on offense.

"Because of my size and speed," he said, "they (the Tech coaches) tried to put 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 position of the underdog. It's more of a challenge. You can't use your hands like a defensive lineman. The offensive linemen have to do more thinking because they have a count to go on and specific assignments. The defense is more of a reaction."

Birtch 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 the public's eye, he would be lost.

"The only way to get noticed as an offensive line man," said the Tech junior, "is to do something wrong. Jumps 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 some time making a block downhill."

Birtch finally blossomed last spring in practice.

"There were three good tackles and Ervick (Jack) White said two of us would do a lot of playing," he explained.

"Birtch became one of them and quickly was named Tech's outstanding player during the spring game. Then he came up with another top effort in last week's opening 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 confident early."

This week the Gobblers play at Memphis State and Birtch compares the assignment with the one last Saturday.

"They're strong defensively like A&M," said Birtch. "They've played three games and they'll be in shape. We still have some bugs on offense."

Birtch agrees that Tech needs a win to help the program. He's not making any predictions. He simply says the Gobblers won't make the same mistakes as last year when everyone started talking about going to a bowl early in the season.

That's Birtch's secret to success. And if it works like his career at Tech, the Gobblers might be on the right path after all.

TECH NOTES: State has lost junior tailback Mike Bates, possibly for the season. He sustained a knee injury in the first quarter 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 in Memphis.