Sharpe Vs. Pell Saturday: It’s ‘No Personal Thing’

In Blackburg, the question is whether Clemson Coach Charley Pell or Virginia Tech’s Jimmy Sharpe will feel the pressure more this week.

That’s because those two coaches, who used to be associated with each other at Virginia Tech, will be on opposite sides of the field Saturday afternoon.

The reason for this is hard. Suffice it to say that the circumstances under which Pell left Tech two years ago, to take an assistant’s job at Clemson, were not for money or a better job.

Last winter, Pell became head coach when Clemson fired Red Parker. Today, Parker sells automobiles in Atlanta and admittedly thinks he was done in by Pell.

If Pell and Sharpe feel this game more than the usual Saturday madness, they won’t admit it. But their friends are whispering and everyone knows this game will be emotional.

“I know,” said Sharpe, politely choosing the right words, “that Clemson will play with a lot of enthusiasm. They have a good coaching staff and they have a job to do. They remind me a lot of us four years ago.”

That was in 1974 when Sharpe took the job as Tech head coach following a disastrous 2-9 record turned by the 1973 team under Charlie Coffey, who resigned two months later.

Sharpe hired Pell as his chief assistant. It meant

if Sharpe took ill, was added on the sidelines by a player flying out of bounds, or if he was missing for some unknown reason, Pell would be in charge.

The two had played together at Alabama and were best of friends. Then came the split with few words of explanation.

“These games are different than our next game,” Sharpe added. “This is no personal thing. This is for my university and my team.”

Sharpe says he doesn’t care whether he’s with Notre Dame, Georgia Tech or Clemson. “It’s just like this past Saturday against Richard Williamson (Memphis State coach, who also played with Sharpe). You’re friends before and after games. Sure, Charley and I are friends,” said Sharpe.

Pell himself says there is no conflict. “My leaving was just a personal decision. There were no crooked words. No deceit. It was just a matter of me taking an opportunity at Clemson,” said Pell.

“As far as my feelings, what went on was a personal thing. We kept it private in a personal way,” he said.

Still, not to be overlooked in the babubalo are the feelings of the Tech players, many of them old-timers under Pell and his assistant, Danny Ford, whom he hired away from Tech.

More importantly, though, the Hokies need a win in a desperate sort of way. The Hokies have played two good games and come up empty-handed. Saturday night’s 21-20 loss to at Memphis State might have been the toughest of all.

The Hokies missed a chance to win as Paul ‘Chili Bean’ Engle’s 49-yard field goal attempt was blocked by Stude’s Judson Flint as the game ended.

No one was certain how Flint got into the Tech backfield quick enough for the block. “A kick that long,” said effective lineman Greg Burtch, “has low trajectory and I think he got up on someone’s back and blocked it.”

Engle, distraught over the miss, refused comment until after seeing the films. The films showed that Flint sped around Tech’s left side and got the ball instead of coming over the middle.

“Our left up back,” said Sharpe, “might have moved his foot (the tail leg) That would have permitted Flint to come straight in at the kicker instead of going around.

There were other chances for Tech, however. Near the end of the first half, the Hokies blocked a kick on the Tiger 35 with 17 seconds left.

Unfortunately, the Hokies were out of timeouts. When David Lamey tried to pass and get better field position, he was dropped and time expired.

“Anytime the ball is inside the 40, we want to kick a field goal. I have that much confidence in Paul,” said Sharpe. “We wanted to run one play and try and get as field a position as we could. I’m not sure what the play was, but we tried to call a circle pattern for our receivers.”

Again a mistake, although there is no assurance that Engle would have made an attempt of 48 or 49 yards had he been given the chance. But in both instances he had a gusty wind at his back in the first half. Engle kicked a 49-yarder into the breeze.

Tech was also forced to take two timeouts in the third quarter when there weren’t enough men on the field. One came after the second half kickoff when Roscoe Coles was no where to be found. Another was on a punting situation when Carl McDonald, who blocks in this situation, was down on the other side of the field with an injury.

Both were easily explainable—caused by confusion. Sharpe was told there would be a 20-minute halftime, but officials started the second half after 15 minutes. Coles, getting reseted and putting on another uniform, was still in the dressing room and no one realized he hadn’t come on the field.

Tech coaches also didn’t realize McDonald was down behind the Memphis State bench. Players were supposed to inform their particular coach that they can’t continue to play so a suitable sub can be sent into the game.

How important was this? With two more timeouts, Tech might have moved the last field goal try closer and taken off some of the pressure.

That’s no assurance there would have been a conversion.

Summing up Tech’s first two games, Sharpe saw some positive things. “This is two games and four weeks of practice,” said the Tech coach.

“Our players played better than I’ve ever seen them play since I’ve been at Virginia Tech.” Assuming this is correct, it’s quite possible off the Memphis State game, things will start happening right for the Hokies. If not, such games as the one played Saturday night might follow.

Tech’s showing was just part of a strong day for the Big Five. VMI lost a similar 14-13 heartbreaker at East Carolina, where it was an underdog. Richmond and William and Mary provided upset wins. Only Virginia was according to form in a 31-7 shellacking by Duke.

By most judgements, Virginia football did itself proud, though the record was only 2-3.