Back in mid-June, the Atlanta Touchdown Club asked new Clemson coach Charlie Pell if he would be the guest speaker at a luncheon on Monday, Sept. 26. Pell agreed to show up and give the members a few laughs with their roast beef and gravy.

"I don't know too many jokes, but I told them all. I didn't get many laughs," said Pell. "The audience was 95 percent Georgia and Georgia Tech people."

Those few Clemson fans in attendance doubtless thought their coach was uproariously funny. Pell came to the luncheon as the state champion of Georgia, having beaten U. Ga. and Tech — on the road — on consecutive weekends.

THIS IS NOT THE WAY the world was made, especially not for Clemson in what was to have been a rebuilding year for the Tigers after last season's 3-6-2 record. For the first time in the 25-year history of the Atlantic Coast Conference, Clemson did not win an ACC game, and coach Jimmy Dale. "Red" Parker went on home to Fordyce, Ark., where he is reportedly getting rich selling cars.

Enter Charles Byron Pell, 36-year-old Alabama native, former U. of Alabama lineman, ex-Jacksonville State (Ala.) head coach and a member of the Virginia Tech coaching staff for the 1974 and 1975 seasons.

Pell immediately set about solving internal problems triggered by the departure of Parker, his boss for one year. Then Pell did something unusual for a new coach taking over a football program that has produced but one winning season since 1967. He decided he'd lean on his seniors rather than dump on them.

There are 14 seniors on the Tigers' traveling squad, and 12 of them play. All of them, according to Pell, "have provided simply super leadership." It is the first thing Pell cites when he is asked why he thinks the team's fortunes have reversed.

THE TIGERS OPENED THE season by playing Maryland to the wire before losing, 21-14, on a touchdown pass that featured, according to Clemson partisans, the Terps' receiver going out of bounds then coming back in bounds to make the reception. That, fans, is illegal.

Clemson proved it didn't leave too much on the field against Maryland when it went to Sanford Stadium and beat Georgia, 7-6, in the rain. Last weekend, the Tigers laid it to Georgia Tech, 31-14, at Grant Field, and Saturday they come sailing into Virginia to play Virginia Tech in Blacksburg.

The Tigers are flying so high right now they need FAA clearance.

And that, according to Danny Ford, could be a problem. "Our kids think they're pretty good," said Ford, Pell's top assistant and a member of the Tech coaching staff from 1974 through 1976. "They're not as good as they think they are, and if they think they're going to win just by showing up, they have a real surprise in store for them."

The possibility that Clemson's players could still be reveling in the glories of the immediate past worries Pell sick. Pell and Tech coach Jimmy Sharpe, ex-teammates at Alabama and coaching associates for years, are no longer good friends, and each wants to beat the other in the worst sort of way.

WHEN OUR TEAM COMES OUT of the tunnel to play Clemson Saturday," said one Tech official, "Jimmy's going to be so tight he'll be squeaking." Told that, Pell said, "So will I."

Pell wonders how much three straight emotionally-draining football games have taken out of his team. "Two things concern me very much: (1) we have a tired football team right now and (2) I'm at a loss as to what to do about it. Plus, I think Tech has every advantage in the book over us.

"They played Texas A&M and Memphis State real strong football games, and they are determined to win their first one against us. I'm sure their players and their coaches want to beat me and Danny pretty good. I bet Jimmy doesn't have to mention me and Danny this week. They go to bed every night thinking about whipping us and they have since spring."

Among the unusual number of undercurrents involved in the game is the fact that Pell, while a Tech aide, signed Roscoe Coles, a senior who is the Hokies' game-breaking tailback. "Roscoe is a great athlete," said Pell. "I bet he wants to score 50 points on us. Same for people like (linebacker) Rick Razzano and (defensive tackle) Bill Houseright."

"What happened to us in the last two weeks won't make a tinker's damn when we get to Blacksburg... Now, I'm not afraid of going up there. It's been 30 years since Clemson has won three straight road games, and we're sitting here with an opportunity to do that."

Perhaps realizing that he was protesting too much, Pell ad-