Bill Millsaps

BLACKSBURG — Somewhere between Raphine and Steele’s Tavern on I-41 Saturday morning, a voice on the radio announced the impending broadcast of the Tire (that’s pronounced “tair”) Discount Jimmy Sharp VPI Football Show. In a moment, Sharpe, the Virginia Tech football coach, came on and told his audience of the 1977 Hokies “have more players, more speed, more talent, more depth and more size than we had in 1974, 1975 and 1976.”

So how come the Hokies of 1977 are now 0-37? The first loss to a vastly superior Texas A&M team was easy to explain. The second to a decent Memphis State team in Memphis was not totally unexpected. But what happened here Saturday was.

In what was to be a fairly close game Tech was a two-point underdog, the Hokies were simply washed away by Clemson in its dressy an afternoon of football as the Southern is like to experience this year.

The game was played mostly in fog and rain, and the smoke from the exploding cannons on both sides drifted low over the field, making it look like an 18th-century European battlefield minus the morose craters and the dead and the wounded.

THE CROWD AT THE start was 34,000, and the sensible ones of that number began filtering out of Lane Stadium when the score reached 14-0, Clemson, in the first quarter. The Tigers were up by 21-0 before the home team got a first down, and when the game ended only a few thousand fans were huddled under their umbrellas and Day-Glo raincoats.

The rain didn’t seem to bother the Tigers, now 3-1 in a surprising resurgence guided by ex-Tech assistant Charlie Pell. Clemson had beset Georgia and Georgia Tech on consecutive Saturdays before it came to Blacksburg, but the decisive triumph over its old foe Sharpe, had to be nearly satisfying to the Tiger coach.

Tech’s most combative moment came before the game even started. As the captains gathered at midfield for the coin-toss, both teams danced behind them, and there was some pugging back and forth between Clemson’s white-clad warriors and the lads in maroon jerseys. The officials had to separate the most vociferous of the players on both sides.

The Tigers scored touchdowns on their first two possessions to set the tone for the day, and after the outcome had long been established, Pell laid on the final indignity by having Ober Arah, a 235-pound defensive tackle, pick up a fumble to make it 21-0, 5-24 left. Tech’s final TD to make it 31-13 did nothing to erase the impression Clemson had totally dominated the game.

BY THAT TIME, the rain and fog had drifted away, but Tech partisans could find no joy in the listings in the clouds overhead. The Hokies enjoyed playing hard, and a team that soundly whipped Tech in Blacksburg last season, Saturday in Richmond.

There is a very good chance Sharpe’s bunch will be 1-4 going into the Virginia game here Oct. 15.

Clemson is headed in precisely the opposite direction. The Tigers are winless in the Atlantic Coast Conference last season and for the first time in their history did not place a man on the All-ACC team.

It looks as if that oversight will be corrected this time around. People like Jerry Butler, Warren Ratchford, Steve Fuller and Willie Jordan make the Tigers look like contenders for the ACC championship.

“I sure hope this earns our team some national recognition of some kind,” said Pell. “I don’t know if we belong in the Top 25 or the Top 30, but there aren’t many teams that could win three straight games at Georgia, Georgia Tech and Virginia Tech. Now, that takes some doing!”

The Tigers did it against Virginia Tech with what amounted to a compliment to Hokie backer Rick Razzano. Pell, having coached Razzano, knew of the senior’s extremely quick reaction to play flow. So, for the first time this season, the Tigers mixed reverses and misdirection into their offensive game plan. While the Tech defense was hurrying to get from Point A to Point B, the Tigers were switching up and hitting them back at Point A.

FINALLY, THE TECH defenders began getting more tentative, more aware of the possibility of action away from the flow of blockers. “We’ve seen their linebacks,” said Pell.

All of the Hokies looked freeze-dried in the second quarter when Ratchford took a handoff for a standard power sweep to the left, got outside and chugged 48 yards to the end zone to make the score 21-0. Tech rallied briefly to make it 21-14, 7-29 before had Fuller turned his second touchdown pass, and from then on the only item in doubt was the final score.

At intermission, Clemson had 280 yards in offense and Tech 82. “It was one of those days that nothing worked,” said Sharpe.

It also was the second time this year Clemson had demonstrated itself superior on an off track. The Tigers beat Georgia in a steady rain, and in Saturday’s wet weather, they had only one turnover. By contrast, Tech had three passes intercepted and quarterback David Lamie and Don Lierle had troubles at times just getting a clean exchange from center. The Hokies fumbled seven times, though they lost only once. Four of the bobbles were by Lierle, the other three by Lamie.

“If you had been on the sideline,” Sharpe told a writer, “I might have you in the game. We needed somebody to go in and give us some spark.”

Sharpe finally found that man in the fourth quarter, inserting sophomore Mike Zogalis, who engineered a 68-yard touchdown drive.

PELL AND HIS TOP aide, Danny Ford (who was with Sharpe at Tech from 1974 through 1975) were in no mood to rub it in on their ex-supervisor and his players.

When Ford was asked his reaction to the victory, his eyes misted over. “Tech is better than what they showed today,” said Ford. “They got good kids, I know because I helped recruit them. They’ll be back.”

Pell said Sharpe, with whom he has had some publicized differences in the past year, was “all class” when the two met for the first time post-game handshake. “Coach Sharpe com-

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