Lack of Size Remains Problem for Tech's Neal

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BLACKSBURG — At a time when
enroaching obesity is a concern of
almost all of us, Virginia Tech
linebacker Lewis Neal is wracking
his brain trying to find ways to gain weight.

Not that anybody is calling the 5-11, 180-pounder skinny, at least not in
his football uniform. It's just that ever
since he was in grade school, people have been telling the Patrick Henry
graduate he's too small to play college
football.

I've tried to gain weight; I really
have," said Neal, a sophomore who has
proved the skeptics wrong by starting
the last two games for the Hokies in
place of the injured Rick Razzano.

"I remember this one coach from
Richmond telling me there was no way
I'd play if I didn't get up to 180 and
that really scared me. I had this stuff
called Nutriment and I used to drink
four cans a day. It got to the point
where all I had to do was smell the
stuff and it would make me sick.

While Razzano, for one, was able
to put on pounds by lifting weights,
Neal hasn't found that any help, either.
"I'll get up to 160 or so," he shurgs,
"but as soon as I start working out, I'll
be right back down again."

Funny thing, Neal's weight — or
lack of same — hasn't posed nearly as
many problems as the sprained ankle he
suffered midway through last season
or the broken foot he sustained in
the spring. When regular Mike Stollings
had to leave the game, the weakside
linebacker position was there for the
asking.

"No, I didn't expect to start," said
Neal, who missed much of spring ball
due to the injury. "I knew our depth
situation, though, and thought I'd be
playing a lot. It was pretty apparent
that Jerry (Sheehan) would start at
weak-side linebacker and Rick at
strong, but they told me I'd alternate
a little at both spots."

From a freshman class two years
ago that included Cave Spring's Ricky
Hall and George George from Roundbowl
Catholic, Neal is the only Roanoker
left. "The coaches who recruited me
said I could play and that was enough
for me," said Neal, "but I must admit,
even though he was a little ana-
rous at first.

Charlie Feil, who recruited Neal
for Tech before becoming the head
coch at Clemson, warned the Patriots' fulback-linebacker that the Hokies had
no particular position in mind for him.
"Back then, they talked most about
free safety," Neal said.

North Carolina, the only other
school to offer Neal a scholarship, basi-
cally told him the same thing, VMI also
expressed interest but Neal told the
Keydets' coaches he wasn't inclined
toward the military.

Starting slowly, Neal began his ca-
reer at Tech on the JV's. Although he
dressed for the varsity game with Will-
iam and Mary, he didn't play until the
next week against VMI. "I got in for 10
plays against VMI," he said. "After that," he recalled, "but I really messed
up."

Neal, it must be noted, is one of
those players who never seems satis-
fied with his performance. While he
received favorable reviews for his play
in last week's 31-13 loss to Clemson,
when he did not miss a play on defense
except at the goal line. Neal was angry
at himself "for making the same old
mistakes."

He explained, "I don't read pass
coverage very well and I'm a poor
receiver. I guess I've always been. My
style is to tackle low with my head down
and I miss a lot of tackles that way.
Also, I have to stop getting knocked
down too much."

It was a couple days after the
Clemson game before Neal could bring
himself to talk about the loss. When
asked to comment on Coach Jimmy
Sharpe's statement that the Hokies
may have peaked too early in the week.
Neal said that may have been true, that
he had found himself "very nervous,
very tense."

After the game, he had felt ex-
tremely tired and then stayed de-
pressed until Sunday. A talk by Sharpe
helped lift the sophomore out of the
doldrums.

He doesn't want us sitting around
and mooping and grooping," said Neal,
"It has to make you feel better when
you're not criticized all the time."

"Don't get me wrong. He can be
critical, but in a teacher's sort of way."

But, while Sharpe comforts his
players, there is nobody to put the bi-
neagured coach's mind at rest. "He's
been in the newspapers enough lately," said Neal. "I could say something nice
and somebody could still take it the
wrong way, so I won't say anything."

Because he didn't play against Wil-
liam and Mary last year, when Tech
was victimized by quarterback Tom
Rozantz and the rest of the Indians,
27-19, Neal finds no special significance in
this year's return match.

"I'd like to think I get 'up for all
the games," he concluded. "To get
back on the winning track, I'm ready
to do anything I can."