By Mike Bevans

The last time the Virginia Tech football team visited the Capital City, the Hokies arrived facedown. They were easy pickings for a fired up University of Richmond team, which secured a 16-0 victory in the next to last game of last season.

Coach Jimmy Sharpe called his team's uninspired performance the "most nightmarish" thing to happen in his three years at Tech. The Hokies had shot their wad in a 35-31 loss to Tulsa the week before, falling to 6-3 and out of post-season bowl consideration.

Tech returns to Richmond this weekend to play William and Mary in the Tobacco Festival game Saturday at City Stadium. There is no truth to the rumor the Hokies will arrive in a hearse, but the dark cloud that settled over them after the Tulsa game has yet to move on.

Tech has lost six straight, including three this season, and came up short in another emotional test last week with Clemson. With two former Tech assistant coaches now mapping the fortunes of Clemson, the Hokies wanted a win badly, but lost 31-13.

PLAYING WITH ENTHUSIASM, having the "want-to," is the foundation of Sharpe's philosophy. The Hokies, however, have played so emotionally at times, they have come out of games drained — win or lose.

"My job is to guard against anything like that," said Sharpe. "We've got to loosen up, not be so uptight and relax. We know we are a better football team than we have showed. Football is not a gimmick game, you've got to be honest with yourself and with your players."

Sharpe contended the situation facing his team after the Tulsa loss and the situation facing his team after the Clemson loss are entirely different. "We've got the whole season in front of us," he said. "After Tulsa, the season was behind us.

"The seniors and the folks who have been around want to bring this to the squad's attention. They want to grab hold of the situation right now. They want past history to be a lesson and they want to do something about it."

Monday the juniors and seniors held an impromptu meeting to thrash over the difficulties. Injuries, which sidelined three starters for the season and left the secondary in a shambles, and faulty ball handling were difficulties conversation could not alter.

"IF THERE WAS any emotional letdown after the Clemson game, it's all over with now," assured Tech senior linebacker Rick Razzano. "It's a new season starting today and we have to regroup ... play with some pride.

"We haven't been having fun in practice. When you start having the dreads, going through the motions, you aren't going to win on Saturday. We talked about all the things we should be doing to have fun in practice.

"If we don't get anything else out of the meeting," added Razzano, "we got one thing out of it — togetherness."

Razzano classified the Clemson game as probably the worst for Tech in his four years in Blacksburg. He also agreed with Tigers defensive tackle Jim Stuckey, who said, "In the second quarter, when we went ahead, 21-0, they really slacked off."

Razzano is recognized as the Hokies' leader on the field and it is a role he relishes. Last weekend was another story. Razzano, used sparingly the last two weeks, admitted even he was flat.

"I've had a bruised calf muscle and wasn't with the team for two weeks," he explained. "It's hard to stand up and try to psyche up the team when I wasn't going through it with them.

"YOU NEVER KNOW when you're going to be emotionally high," Razzano continued. "I'm sorry to say whenever we've gotten emotional it has been when something bad has happened to us.

"During the game, you look for something to happen, a teammate to make a big run or an interception. Before the game, you think a heckuva lot about what the game means to the team.

"We want to win, not just for ourselves, but for coach Sharpe. We love him and we'll tell the whole world. All the talk about how many good athletes we have here and that coach Sharpe isn't doing the job is a bunch of baloney."