Hokies to Start Over

At Start: Center Snap

By Jerry Lindquist

The Virginia Tech football team has fumbled 19 times in three games which helps explain why the Hokies bring an 0-3 record into this afternoon’s 20th Tobacco Festival match with William and Mary at City Stadium.

Call it a severe case of bad hands, stone fingers, whatever, but the fact remains Tech has proven, more often than not, its own worst enemy, and measures were taken this week to remedy the situation.

The primary culprit has been the center-to-quarterback exchange. On the surface it’s a rather routine maneuver in a game that tends to be more complex than sometimes necessary. At Tech, there has been a definite, unmistakable breakdown. Typically, the coaching staff has assumed the responsibility, specifically Jack White, assistant in charge of the interior offensive line.

More than half of the Hokies’ bobbles have been on the snap. Neither of the alternating quarterbacks, David Lamie and Don LaRue, has been immune, and it wasn’t until late last Saturday afternoon, following a 24-17 loss to Clemson, that White figured he located the answer to the puzzle.

TORY SMITH, THE Tech center, has small hands. “If you blame anybody, blame me,” White said. “I never realized how small they were until I was talking to him after the Clemson game. His hands are smaller than most backs’.”

Combine small hands with a rain-made-slick football and results are disastrous. The Hokies fumbled six times in the season-opening, 27-6 loss to Texas A&M. The following week they bobbed six more while dropping a 21-20 decision at Memphis State. Clemson was next. All were played on wet fields. Last week, a driving rain led directly to seven fumbles, all White said, when the ball was first put into play.

Tech has lost five fumbles so far, but the over-all number of bobbles has severely hampered the offense. In an attempt to correct the problem, the Hokies changed their method of giving the ball to the quarterback.

Tech went from the flip to what White simply calls “a natural turn.” Starting Sunday, all centers and quarterbacks have remained after regular practice daily for a crash course in the natural turn. “Each center and quarterback has been taking 100 snaps,” White reported.

Generally speaking, the flip begins with the center grabbing the point of the ball closest to him, standing it on the nose, “and putting the wet part of the ball into the quarterback’s hands,” White explained. “Now, we’re grabbing the furthest point of the ball, and if the laces, on a 45-degree angle away from you.”

Presumably, the quarterback will receive the upper or, hopefully, dry side of the ball on this exchange. It is designed to accommodate both the center and quarterback rain or shine but, for some reason, players normally prefer the other method.

“They didn’t want to change,” White admitted.

This is Smith’s first season at center for Tech. He was moved from tackle during spring practice. Two-time letterman Mike Heizer, like Smith from Richmond, was first-unit, but he was injured against A&M and has seen only limited duty since. White said, “The doctor has told Mike not to play this week.”

DESPITE THE comparative records — W&M is 3-2 with a two-game winning streak — local oddsmakers have labeled Tech a two-point favorite.

The Tribe’s primary defensive objective will be to stop Roscoe Coles, who has 3,018 career yards rushing. Clemson held him to 36 on 14 carries. For the season Coles has gained 231,