By JACK BOGACZYK
Sports Writer

BLACKSBURG — The home field advantage in college football is wanted by coaches, welcomed by players and considered by bookmakers. But Virginia Tech's Paul Engle says you can have it.

“Our stadium is a tough place to kick,” said Engle, the Hokies’ soccer-style placekicker who goes by the nickname “Chile Bean.”

“The ground is real soft and when you take your three steps and plant your left foot (at support), sometimes you slip.”

Engle is 7-for-9 on 1977 field-goal attempts, his only misses coming from 44 and 47 yards. In Saturday’s 14-1 tie with Virginia, he booted a career-long one of 56 yards. Ironically, four of his seven successes have come at Lane Stadium, which isn’t his favorite place to kick.

“The grass here is real thin, and high,” explained Engle, who in places where a lot of kicks are made look like the 10-yard line (a spot where point-after-touchdowns are booted from), it’s hard to find a spot to get set up. Sometimes you see backs slip when they’re running. It’s a slippery field.”

But Engle isn’t unhappy with his role at Tech, and he works out at Lane Stadium each day with fellow kickers Eric King and Steve Tempany to acclimate himself to the turf and the swirling wind.

“We started working out in the stadium this past spring,” said Engle, “I went to Coach (Jimmy) Sharpe and asked if I could do it, because it’s easier to get the feeling in games if you practice on the field.”

Engle has been the Hokies’ No. 1 offensive weapon this fall, having scored 40 of their 70 points. He’s been perfect on five conversion tries and four of his three-pointer attempts have come from 36 yards or farther.

“To me, putting the ball through the goalposts in practice is easy,” said Engle, a native of Chile who came to Tech by way of Kentford, W. Va. “I hardly miss at all then. During a game, I’d say that if I’m inside 36 yards, I expect to make it.

“I really never have tried many long ones. But in practice the other day, I was fooling around and hit six of six from 65 yards.”

But Engle realizes that those efforts have come before 40,000 empty seats with a 30-yard defensive lineup trying to climb each others backs to block the kick.

Engle has already equaled his field-goal output of a year ago (he was 7-for-14 as a 1976 sophomore) and is just about halfway to the Tech season record of 15 established by Dave Strick in 1972.

“We’ve got it down a little better this year,” said Engle, referring to his “crew” of holder Mike Zovanka and center Mike Heiter. When Heiter was injured earlier this year, Barry Miller stepped in to snap for the field goal team.

“To me, it’s not really a big deal,” he added. “I’m supposed to kick field goals. If it wasn’t me, somebody else would be doing it.”

Engle received a late scholarship offer from Tech, deciding to play for the Hokies just three months before his first practice as a 1975 freshman.

“I wanted to be in big-time football and this was a full scholarship,” said Engle, who had planned to accept a partial grant from Fairmont State in West Virginia before Tech made its offer. “I only had two offers. The other was from West Virginia Tech. The difference between those schools and here is like comparing a Volkswagen to a Cadillac.”

Engle learned to kick while playing soccer as a youth in Lozac, Chile. His family moved to the U.S. in 1971 in time for Paul to start high school in this country.

With Chile, West Virginia and Blacksburg at places Engle can call home, he still manages to add another one to the list.

“I like turf,” said Engle, referring to the artificial surfaces in many stadiums across the country. “People can tear up a grass field. Turf is always the same.”

So, Engle looks forward to Tech’s Saturday visit to Richmond's City Stadium, which has a modern synthetic field but an ancient scoreboard clock with two hands. Still, there's always something to worry the kicker.

“Richmond's turf is like all the rest,” said Engle. “But that stadium is open, and it seems to be windy all the time.”

But like the mailman, neither wind nor rain can stop Chile Bean’s right leg this fall.