Tech's Roberts Glad He's Kicking

By Jack Bogaczke
Sports Writer

BLACKSBURG — Pardon the pun, but George Roberts can't kick because he's not in law school. He is because he can kick that he's not in law school.

Roberts, a Virginia Tech's record-setting punter, is one of three current Gobblers who started in the program five years ago under ex-coach Charlie Coffey. And if Coffey were still the Tech coach, Roberts probably would be in law school.

"I came here in the fall of 1973 as an invited walk-on," said Roberts, who has booted 36 times for a 41.9-yard-per-kick average this year. "I guess I stayed about a week and then I really let things slide. I was just tired of football, I guess.

Roberts had been both a punting and placekicking specialist at E.C. Glass High in Lynchburg, also working as backup wide receiver. But he decided that he'd stick to studying after his aborted tryout with the Gobblers.

"I finally realized I really missed it," said the left-footed Roberts. "I couldn't stand sitting in the stands anymore. I thought I could help the team, so I had to try to play."

Roberts "walked on" again after the 1975 season when he was a 4.8 on academically. He won the punting job the following spring, and last year established a school record with a 41.5-yard average on 68 kicks. His current pace would reset his own mark.

The 22-year-old Roberts is majoring in urban affairs, which he describes as "a pre-law course. In other words, he might still work for the defense after he leaves college football behind five games from now.

"An average isn't all that it's cracked up to be," said Roberts, noting that the way a punter's value is figured can be deceiving. "You can't really tell how effective a punter is unless you watch him. Kicking for the corners is often important, and that doesn't help your average—but it helps the team."

Roberts will take a swollen nose to Kentucky this weekend as the 1-4-1 Gobblers face the seventh-ranked Wildcats in a night game. The Lynchburg was hit in the face while kicking against Richmond last week. For his efforts, he got a roughing the kicker call against the Spiders and a very sore nose.

"At least it (his nose) wasn't broken," said Roberts. "That's the hardest I've been hit since last year against Tulsa when I dropped a snap and was buried. It was my pride that was mostly injured then."

While it's placekickers that usually worry whether they'll be kicking on a grass field or an artificial surface, Roberts is one punter who prefers one field over another.

"Usually, I kick best on grass," said Roberts.

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Roberts, "but don't ask me why. Except for the game at Virginia last year and last Saturday at Richmond, I've had my worst games on artificial turf.

"Last year if you would have asked me whether the field conditions make a difference, I would have said, 'Yes.' But this year I'd say, 'No.' Against Clemson I kicked good under miserable conditions (rain). I guess it all comes down to concentration."

Roberts said his goal for each game is to average at least 40 yards per kick. And he disputes the oft-believed theory that if a team is playing badly, a punter has to work more.

"Last year we scored 42 points against Kent State and I still kicked seven times," said Roberts, a 6-6, 165-pounder. "I don't know what our problem is this year. I guess if I knew the reasons, I could come up with some answers for us."

So far, Tech Coach Jimmy Sharpe has been nothing but pleased with Roberts' work—especially since the Lynchburg native was a non-recruit and offered his services when he could have graduated.

"Am I surprised at how I've kicked?" asked Roberts in answer to a question. "Yes and no. I knew from high school that I had the ability, but I never had the chance to put it to use.

"I figure I'm effective if the hang time and distance are the determining factors. So far, I think I've done what's been expected of me."