Tech Offensive Change Set

By JACK BOGACZYK
Sports Writer

Virginia Tech's football wishbone will be broken Saturday when the Gobblers visit Kentucky.

And while Tech won’t completely abandon the offense it’s played since the arrival of Coach Jimmy Sharpe in Blacksburg 3½ seasons ago, the Gobblers are planning to run from the I-formation.

"It’s the wing formation we have in our repertoire," said Sharpe, discussing Tech’s offense after it was learned that the Gobblers were running from the I-formation in practice Monday. "We haven’t made any drastic changes. This has been a part of our attack all along."

But the "I" is something the Gobblers haven’t used much. And when asked if Tech plans to use the "I" at Kentucky, Sharpe answered, "We intend to break the wishbone this week. We’ve done it before."

Sharpe said that it’s possible Tech could shift into the "I" out of the wishbone once the quarterback is over center. And it’s expected that the Gobblers will line up sometimes in the "I" and other times in the wishbone. Whatever, the move is being made in an effort to bring Tech out of its offensive doldrums.

When asked if Tech was abandoning the wishbone, Sharpe answered a firm, "No." But running from the "I" should give the Gobblers more offensive versatility. That formation is currently the most popular in college football and was employed by Michigan last year when the Wolverines won the nation’s total offense title.

"I don’t think the (wishbone) formation has anything to do with our won-lost record," said Sharpe, defending the offense brought to the fore by Texas in the late 1960s. "Kentucky runs the wishbone (the Wildcats are 6-1), and so does East Carolina and they are certainly two fine teams."

But Tech is 1-4-1, and Saturday gained only 45 yards total offense in the second half of a 17-14 loss to Richmond.

“Our assessment at this point is that we have to make some changes,” said Sharpe. "Certainly, I’m very disappointed in what we’ve done offensively (288 yards per game total offense). We have 300 yards in penalties and I’m disappointed with our execution and costly penalties in key areas."

"People have been stacking their defenses against us and taking away our tight end attack. That’s a big part of the wishbone. By going to the wing formation, we’ll out-flank the defense with two people."

In the "I" formation, the fullback lines up directly behind the quarterback and the tailback takes his position behind the fullback.

The other back lines up on a wing, and that’s where Tech gets its terminology in its playbook. The wingback, or flanker, is a big assist in passing and blocking.

"If we use our wing formation exclusively or quite a bit, it will enable us to get the ball to a predetermined back more," said Sharpe. "We used this a lot against Wake (Forest) and in other games early last year."

Roscoe Coles, a halfback in the wishbone, is expected to be the prime force when Tech goes to the "I." Coles, who has 3,215 career yards but only got the ball for nine plays Saturday at Richmond, will play the tailback spot.

From his position behind the fullback, Coles (or his substitutes) will have the advantage of many different angles, as well as the opportunity to run to either side effectively. Defenses also will have more trouble keying on Coles because it won’t know on which side he will run until the ball is snapped.

The tailback also has a big edge in running outside on pitch-outs because he’s already halfway across the backfield. And he can use the fullback as a straight-ahead blocker or the wingback in motion to pave his way.

When asked if Tech will go exclusively to the I-formation, Sharpe answered, "No. This is just another part of our plan. We haven’t made any drastic changes."

But he does plan to try something different behind center,

"I think you’ll see some other quarterbacks in the ball game," said Sharpe when asked if junior David Lennie would play the entire game as he did at Richmond.

Will Lennie start? "I don’t know," said the Tech coach. "We’ll have to wait and see."