'Big 5' Coaches: See 'Ya in '78?

A black-cowled, bare-chested brute with headsmen's axe in hand stands in waiting. Hands have been bound, eyes have been blind-folded and necks have been stretched across blocks. If any heads roll among state Division I football coaches before the start of next season, mine is going, too.

In deference to state-wide mumblings and threats citing the ouster of the likes of Jimmy Sharpe, Jim Tait, Dick Bestwick, et al, it says here all so-called Big Five coaches will return to their posts next September for better or for worse... probably the latter.

For the record, this is by no means an attempt to be added to any coach's Christmas list. Not by a longshot. This reporter has been left gagging by more than one Big Five coach's post mortem. On-field exploits of these football teams are not funny any more, though they were hilarious for a while.

Virginia Tech coach Jimmy Sharpe has been the prohibitive favorite to be asked to clean out his desk. He was tied to the stake before season's start by a report he was not himself during a public appearance.

True or false, his off-field activities have been cast under a magnifying glass and he has been buried in ridicule as a result. What's more, after back-to-back winning seasons, his team stands 1-6-1.

There are factors working in Sharpe's favor, however.

First, he has the undaunted loyalty of his players and coaches. Secondly, the schedule for the remainder of the season has the makings of three straight wins and a strong finish.

The "goll-oll-leh" approach has worn thin. It's time to rally the troops and produce. Sharpe charmed the Hokies of America two years ago with an 8-3 record and he's bidding for one more opportunity to win them over again.

TALK OF FIRING a coach borders on a foreign language around the campus of the University of Richmond, but some Spider backers think they have uncovered a need for a second tongue. After 5-5, 5-6, 5-6 seasons, Jim Tait's squad is staring at a 4-7 or 3-8.

UR stands 3-6 with Maryland and William and Mary left.

If anyone was listening back in September, however, it was generally conceded the Spiders were no match for the schedule stacked against them. Even Tait realized the Spiders stood to take their lumps.

There was disappointment over UR's inability to make a game of it early in the season, but a better showing (2-1) the last three weeks was the correct response to UR president E. Bruce Heilman's "vote of confidence" prior to the Tech game.

The attempt to upgrade the football program at UR already has begun. If the principal characters involved in this process weren't satisfactory, something should have been done earlier.

IN CHARLOTTESVILLE, they've sung all the songs of praise to Virginia coach Dick Bestwick, except "he's a good coach." Cavalier faithful have been overwhelmed with his handling of the players, the press and, most of all, Cavalier faithful. His personality and low-key approach have been soothing.

Virginia went 2-9 last year and stands to finish 1-9-1 after winding up with North Carolina and Maryland the next two Saturdays. That adds up to a big SO WHAT?... for now.

There's no pressure on Bestwick to turn pathfinder as yet and he's good for at least another year of the good life, before anyone considers tightening the screws. The same folks who were riled by 4-7 campaigns a few years ago have embraced patience.

Besides, Bestwick seems the type who can sniff discontent or recognize his deficiencies. It is doubtful he would ever have to be run out of town. If his approach works between the end lines, while the clock is ticking, it won't matter anyway.

A NOT SO FUNNY thing happened to William and Mary on its way to what might have been one of its most successful football seasons ever. After a 7-4 effort in coach Jim Root's fifth season, the Tribe was penciled in for a repeat performance, perhaps 8-3.

Instead, they find themselves 4-5 with East Carolina and Richmond still to come.

In fairness, key personnel — most notably quarterback Tom Rozantz — have been sidelined by injuries or playing hurt. Then, too, perhaps W&M played over its head at times a year ago.

Like Bestwick, Root won't have to be told to shovel off. He's already proven he can do the job on The Reservation. The question is how long he will continue to tolerate uncertainty about the future of W&M football, and busy-body bosses?

Root need not worry about the media climbing on his case. He has the respect of the state-wide press as a result of his upfront, no-bull dealings with reporters.

THAT LEAVES BOB Thalman at Virginia Military and the only danger he faces is an overdose of kudos. Lexington's answer to Lawrence Welk's bubble machine has the best of both worlds — the sweet satisfaction of doing his job at a small college on a major college level.

Winning is grounds-for-arrest and expulsion from the Big Five. Thalman is screaming for someone to put on the handcuffs.

He pulled this same act in 1974, when the Keydets went 7-4 and won the Southern Conference championship. VMI, currently 5-3, can add another SC crown with a win at Furman this weekend. Rhode Island follows, then there's a chance to sweep the state with a win over Tech.

Some people just don't know their place.

However, the bet here is all Big Five coaches will be in place next season. (Gulp).