Injuries Caused Collapse, WVU Believes

By JACK BOGACZYK
Sports Writer

Four weeks ago, West Virginia's football team had itself figured for a bowl appearance.

But, as the Mountaineers prepare to meet Vir-

ginia Tech Saturday, they're now just hoping to fin-

ish 1977 with a winning season.

It would take two straight wins to accomplish a 6-5 ledger (with Tech and Syracuse to play) and turn around the WVU mark recorded in Coach Frank Cignetti's first season a year ago.

"The players have worked very hard," said Cignetti, who wishes he could go back and pick up the pieces from four straight losses that sent the Mount-

aineers from bowl mentionable to unmentionable.

"Now, a winning season is all that's left. It's fun, but we don't practice like a team that's lost five games."

The Mountaineers were 4-1 a month ago, then came consecutive setbacks to Boston College, Penn State, Villanova and Pitt. In those four de-

feats, WVU has permitted an average of 40.5 points per game.

"Those statistics are a little misleading," said Cignetti, defending his defense. "In the last couple games, we've been playing five or six freshmen on defense. That's what we're most concerned about right now. Our offense is in the best shape we've been in for a while." Cignetti—like a lot of other coaches including Maryland's Jerry Claiborne—has learned that depth under the 3-3-5 scholarship rule isn't what it used to be. And when you ask the 39-year-old WVU pilot "What happened to the bowl-bound Mountaine-

ers?", the answer is one word.

"Injuries," said Cignetti, who succeeded Bobby Bowden after the 1975 season when the latter went to Florida State to rebuild the Seminoles' fortunes.

"We've had an unusual number of injuries. I don't believe there's a position on our team that hasn't had someone out at one time or another.

"We've lost five players for the season and we went through four weeks with three offensive tack-

les out. At one point, we had nine starters who couldn't play. I've never seen anything like it."

Among the players out for the season is wide receiver Steve Lewis, the favorite target of quarter-

back Dan Kendra and the No. 1 single-season pass catcher in WVU history. Lewis suffered a shoulder separation in a win over Maryland, Sept. 17.

Kendra, who was touted for all-America honors in pre-season discussions, ended up on the sidelines with bruised ribs suffered late in the first half of a 44-3 loss to Pitt last week. Cignetti said Kendra will return against the Gobblers.

"I'd say he's been executing well," said Cignetti. "Our offense gave Pitt the ball four times inside our 20. We shouldn't lose to Boston College and Villanova.

"What happened to us? Well, I approached the season figuring that if we had no major disappoin-

tments, then we'd have a chance at a bowl. We were young, but we were going along making the neces-

sary improvements. We didn't have any major dis-

appointments, but the injuries have been ridiculous."

"We don't have the maturity we need."

One player West Virginia's expected a lot from was freshman running back Robert Alexander, the former South Charleston High whiz who decided to play in his home state rather than at Penn State, Southern Cal or Maryland. Among the people help-

ing recruit Alexander for WVU was Gov. Jay Rock-

efeller.

While many people expected "Alexander the Great" to be the next Tony Dorsett, he's been ham-

pered by illness and injury and has gained only 254 yards. It is true that as Alexander goes, so go the Mountaineers?"

"I'd say to say it looks that way," said the soft-spoken Cignetti. "But our team isn't built around Robert. Originally, our problem this season was in our rushing game. Then Lewis got hurt and it killed our passing. But our ground game has been our main concern all along.

"The Mountaineers do not lack scoring punch, averaging 34 points per game. But their defense is giving up almost a point more, and has displayed that its chief tormentor is the wishbone."

That should be good news for Tech, as the Gob-

blers found new life in their favorite formation last week as Mickey Fitzgerald moved to fullback and gained 112 yards.

WVU's only loss in its first five games came against Kentucky, which ran the wishbone. And Vil-

lanova beat the Mountaineers, 41-48, by gaining 368 yards rushing out of the wishbone. Like Tech, Villa-

anova eschewed the passing game, getting only 22 yards through the air.

"Our big concern really is the wishbone," said Cignetti, remembering Villanova's first unit had 256 yards rushing in the first half. "We know Coach (Jimmy) Sharp's gone back and hung his hat on the wishbone. They broke the bone earlier and then went with the I-formation at Kentucky. But now, they're like Villanova in that they have a big full-

back to carry the ball."

"I think the wishbone is tough for us because it's something different. You don't see it all the time now, and we're having a tough time simulating it in practice. It works live, aggressive blocking on the corners, and we're afraid that if we do that sort of thing trying to prepare in practice, we'll just hurt somebody else."

The last four weeks have not disappointed Cignetti totally. The plans are set to build a stadium to replace antiquated 19,000-seat Mountaineer Field, and Cignetti has managed to sign the top state school sophomore in each of his first two years—running back Walter Easterly and Alexander."

"I had hoped and thought we could be a 7-4 or 8-3 football team," said the WVU coach. "I felt we had four teams on our schedule capable of being in the top 10-Pitt, Penn State, Kentucky and Mary-

land. I thought we could sneak up on one, and we did (Maryland)."

One of our goals was to go to a bowl (WVU has played in the Peach Bowl three of the previous eight years). But now we have to be content and play for a winning season."