sidelights from lane stadium

FSU Will Long Remember Mickey

By MEL JEFFRIES

As the elevator descended from the ninth level to the concourse beneath the towering West Stands of Virginia Tech's Lane Stadium last Saturday afternoon two affable guys from Tallahassee, Fla., were aboard and brimming with conversation. They had reason to be talkative and elated.

Florida State had just beaten Virginia Tech 23-21 in Tech's Homecoming football game. The two, who were assistants to Bobby Bowden, head coach of the Seminoles, had been diagnosing the action and passing on what they saw to the Florida State bench by telephone as the exciting battle ebbed and flowed.

What this pair of gridiron tacticians had seen and recommended to their head coach might possibly have tipped the scales from impending defeat to victory over the embattled and hungry Hokies, who knows? Football is a quite complicated game, full of moves and counter moves, you know.

Now that Florida State, 15th ranked team in the nation, had come from behind and won, the two were happy and thankful, of course. One of them, who was a bit puzzled, suddenly asked, "Do you mean to tell me that this big Mickey Fitzgerald has been on this Virginia Tech team for nearly two years and never played fullback until today? That's hard to believe. Really, I can't understand it."

I am quite sure that some others can't either. The Seminoles had certainly seen just about all of Mickey Fitzgerald in one sudden afternoon that they want to see of any opposing team's fullback. "The Hulk," as his teammates call him, who is 6-2, 231 out of E.C. Glass, Lynchburg, lost no time in warming to his new duties at the expense of the Seminoles.

Fitzgerald did not act like a tight end turned fullback. He took the first two cracks at State's line right after the opening kick-off and picked up five yards. Moments later, George Roberts went back to punt from Tech's 33 but Bobby Butler and Scott Warren of the Seminoles barred through and blocked it. Net result: a 42 yard field goal by Dave Cappelen that put the visitors up by three with just 3:08 off the clock.

That sudden, unexpected bit of misfortune evidently didn't set well with Mickey Fitzgerald. He stormed through the middle for nine yards, then veered left for five, then seven, then seven again, then six before Ron Simmons, FSU's fine freshman middle guard, sacked quarterback David Lamie, Tech faced fourth and 12 at the foe's 45, so Roberts boomed a beauty beyond the end zone.

Lightning struck the Seminoles two plays later. Gene Dunn, Tech's craftiest defensive back, intercepted quarterback Wally Woodham's pass and returned it 13 yards to the State 19. Fitzgerald planted the ball in the end zone on one unstoppable thrust and Paul Earle kicked the PAT. Only five seconds had elapsed since Dunn's bit of thievishness.

That play atoned was the sixth this season for Gene Dunn and the thirteenth of his varsity career, which has three games plus another season ago. In less than two seasons he has surpassed by one the mark of 12 set by All-American Linebacker Mike Widger of the Hokies in 1967-69 and has tied the Tech career record of 13 achieved by Ron Davidson in 1966-68. At 5-10 and 187 pounds, Dunn is a smallish defensive back, intense and smart, out of Virginia Beach and Kellham High.

Like others on the Hokie squad, "Hulk" Fitzgerald has a boundless admiration for the leadership and talents of Rick Razzano, the team's superb linebacker. The story goes that Fitzgerald really found out in three hard scrimmages last week how really magnificent Razzano is. Coach Jimmy Sharpe put "Hulk" through a crash course at fullback against the first defensive unit.

"Oh, Brother! This game was almost a picnic after the mauling I took from Rick and his cohorts last week," big Mickey said after the game, "It'll suit me just fine if I never have to try running over or around Rick again. The Florida State linebackers and Front Four are good but Rick Razzano is something else."

Mickey Fitzgerald lugged the slick, water-soaked football 25 times and fumbled only once. That bobble David Lamie alertly scooped up the loose ball and dashed 13 yards with it for a first down—one of 16 the Hokies chalked up. In the minds of some, perhaps this one play will partly atone for several drive-stopping fumbles by Lamie on dry fields this year.

In this water-logged Homecoming encounter there were more than enough heroes on both sides and enough tension and excitement to keep the turnout of 36,000 in their seats to the bitter end.

As the Seminoles and other teams long ago found out, the Hokies are tough to whip in a Homecoming setting. Just ask Fred Biletnikoff and Ron Sellers, two of FSU's great All-Americans, who were on ranked teams that "bit the dust" at Homecoming in Tech Territory.

As some who saw it may recall, Biletnikoff was so upset at game's end in '64 he took the football and hurled it high into the crowded Tech stands. The 20-11 defeat was the lone loss that year for the bowl-bound Seminoles.