Tech Players Bitter Over Firing

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BLACKSBURG — The setting was just right for a press conference: bright lights, microphones, a four-man panel with a spokesman reading a prepared statement.

"I'm sorry we're late," said Virginia Tech football player George Roberts. "But we were consulting with Dr. Lavery."

"That," he continued, "is the way it should have been happened in the first place."

After learning in mid-afternoon that Jimmy Sharpe had been fired as their coach, the players unloaded a barrage on the school administration that must have shaken the roof off the Tech Coliseum.

It wasn't just that Sharpe had been fired, although the players were plenty indignant about that. And, it wasn't the manner in which the affair was handled, although the Hokies had their qualms about that.

The players' statement cut to the core of Tech's whole athletic philosophy.

"We are the ones that sweat and bleed and cry together, and when things go well we celebrate together," said Roberts. "Isn't that of importance? We are the team."

The players were also irate because of the reasons given for Sharpe's dismissal. "Dr. Lavery stated that Coach Sharpe didn't fit the image of the university," said Roberts, again reading from the statement. "Why isn't this hurt the team?"

"What other 2-7 team goes out in the 30-degree weather and plays with the enthusiasm we did last week against VMI?" said star fullback Mickey Fitzgerald. "This whole thing was a pyramid situation and it keeps coming back to us. The players are at the bottom, yet we had the least to say about the decision."

Fitzgerald had said after Saturday's game that he would "seriously think" about transferring if Sharpe were fired. At the same time, Razzano said he would call Lavery to discuss Sharpe's status.

"I didn't call him because, when I read what Mickey said, I thought that put it on the line," said Razzano. "Otherwise, whatever we said didn't make any difference. As far as I'm concerned, the decision was made a long time ago."

It could have been a drinking incident Aug. 3 at the Roanoke Valley Sports Club that sealed Sharpe's fate. "Oh, yeah, I definitely feel that made a difference," said Razzano. "But, again, that's the ironic thing. If it were such a big deal, why didn't it hurt the team?"

After the team had met with Lavery, Fitzgerald and the school president took private lessons for several minutes. Lavery asked the sophomore from Lynchburg to wait until a new coach is hired before deciding whether to transfer.

"I want to wait and see," said Fitzgerald. "I don't want to sit out a year. They (three other schools) are interested in me, but I can wait with my decision."

Few of the players felt satisfied with Lavery's reasons, including Fitzgerald. "Lavery conducted himself well," he said, "but he never came out and gave a reason for the firing."

"He sure brought his gold shovel tonight," an anonymous player sarcastically concluded.

Most of the Hokies felt alumni pressure had been brought to bear on the Tech president, suspecting that groups had offered to buy up Sharpe's contract. "But don't they realize we aren't robots," pleaded Rapone. "or pawns in a game of chess."