Players Blast Decision at Tech

By DOUG DOUGHTY
Sports Writer

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 happened in the first place.

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

It wasn't just that Sharpe had been fired, although the players were plenty indignant over 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," read Roberts.

"I don't think that's the team we were both used to and it is our opinion that the reason we were not consulted was that we were behind Coach Sharpe 100 percent.

Joining Roberts in front of the cameras were fellow seniors Rick Ranzano, Henry Bradley and Ronnie Cole, but the biggest shot of all was taken by junior defensive back Nick Rapone, who made his comments to Lavery personally.

I got to the meeting players' meeting with Lavery late," said Rapone, "and he didn't seem to be pin-pointing anything. Then, when he said, 'By bringing in a good coach, we'll get the program back up. I got irritated.

What sense does that make, I wonder? Bring in a good coach and fire a great one. You bring a new coach in here with his recruits and tell me what kind of record he'll have.

As far as I'm concerned, I'm a redshirt with one year of eligibility left, and I'll tell you now I won't play my fifth year and there are 13 other red-shirts just like me.

Much of the dissatisfaction seemed to rest with a statement Lavery made to the team the week of the Kentucky game. "He told us Coach Sharpe's job was secure," said Ranzano. "I guess he didn't want us to throw in the towel. We were definitely de-

erviced.

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

"What other 27 team goes out in 30-degree weather and plays with the enthusiasm we did last week against VMI?" said star halfback Mickey Fitzgerald. "This whole thing was a premeditated 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, Ranzano 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 Ranzano. "Obviously, 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 Ranzano. "But, again, that's the ironic thing. If we were such a big deal, why didn't it hurt the team?"

After the team had met with Lavery, Fitzgerald and the school president hunted privately for several minutes. Lavery asked the sophomores 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 set 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 show to night," 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."

"After back-to-back winning seasons, Tech had slipped to 3-7-1 in Sharpe's fourth year. "I asked Dr. Lavery if the record had anything to do with it," argued Ranzano, "and he said it didn't.

"Then I asked him if we had gone 11-0, would Coach Sharpe have been fired then? And he just wouldn't say."