Lavery Fires Sharpe

By Bill Millsaps

Jimmy Sharpe, football coach at Virginia Tech for the past four seasons, was fired yesterday by Tech president Dr. William E. Lavery in what could be the first move in a major shakeup of the Hokies’ athletic department.

There were unconfirmed reports last night that athletic director Frank Moseley, Tech’s AD for 27 years and the man who hired Sharpe, would announce his resignation today to be effective Jan. 1, 1978.

"It is evident that the football program must be given new leadership if Virginia Tech is to achieve the potential that it obviously has," said Lavery in a prepared statement, "and I am sorry that Coach Sharpe has not been able to achieve the success he deserves."

It will cost Tech more than $120,000 to buy out the four years the 25-year-old Sharpe has remaining on his contract, which was extended after the Hokies won eight games and lost three in 1974. Tech finished 3-7 in 1977, giving Sharpe a record of 21-22-1 in Blacksburg.

IN HIS FOUR YEARS at the helm, only one other state Division I school had a better record than Sharpe — VMI under Bob Thalman. The Hokies beat VMI 27-7 Saturday to end the season, and Sharpe’s career at Tech.

Sharpe is the fifth Big Five coach to be fired in this decade. His successor will be the 14th head coach at Big Five schools since the 1970 season. Lavery said he “had not addressed” the question of a replacement and added that he would think about that one tomorrow.

Sharpe was in trouble with the Tech administration before the 1977 season started. He allegedly was intoxicated at an Aug. 4 meeting of the Roanoke Touchdown Club. Several alumni at the meeting complained to Lavery about Sharpe’s actions, and Lavery summoned Sharpe for an explanation. After word of their meeting leaked out, Lavery gave Sharpe a mild vote of confidence.

Lavery fired Sharpe two days later.

The Hokies went 1-7-1 for their first nine games — beating only William and Mary in the Tobacco Festival game in Richmond — before rebounding to win their last two over Wake Forest and VMI.

Friday, Lavery met with the board of directors of the Tech Athletic Association to discuss the athletic department. Yesterday, Sharpe met with Lavery at 3 p.m. and was given the bad news.

SHARPE WAS unavailable for comment and Lavery would not elaborate on his prepared statement, but an informed source at Tech said Lavery told Sharpe that if he would resign, his staff of assistants would be paid through June 1, 1978. If not, they would be terminated from the payroll Jan. 1, 1978.

Sharpe left to meet with his assistants. Reportedly, they convinced Sharpe not to resign. So Lavery fired him.

Sharpe met with some of his players yesterday afternoon to inform them of Lavery’s decision. Many of them were upset at the news. Lavery met with members of the team last night at 6:30.

In his statement, Lavery said, “Jimmy Sharpe is a fine person with many admirable qualities, and I regret very much that we have had to make this decision. He has worked hard to put together the kind of football program Virginia Tech could be proud of, and has generated a lot of interest among the football players that is truly impressive.

“Coach Sharpe’s energy and enthusiasm, and his drive to build a successful program, makes this indeed a difficult decision. But in the best interest of the university and its intercollegiate athletic program, I don’t believe we have a viable alternative.”

SHARPE, A NATIVE of Montgomery, Ala., played football at Alabama and remained there as an assistant coach for 11 seasons prior to succeeding Charlie Cofey at Tech in January of 1974. Sharpe was 4-7 in his first year and Ignited Tech hopes with an 8-3 mark in 1975. He seemed invincible — he had a long-term contract, he was a winner and he was personally popular with a huge segment of Tech fans.

But prior to the 1976 season, he lost Charlie Pell, his defensive coordinator, to Clemson. Pell became the Tigers’ coach for the 1977 season and guided them to a Gator Bowl berth. Tech was 6-2 heading into the final three games of the ’76 season — and lost them all.

Tech had to open the ’77 season with three straight toughies — Texas A&M, Memphis State and Clemson. The Hokies lost all three and never quite recovered their confidence. The Touchdown Club incident had already seriously eroded Sharpe’s backing among Tech fans.

Lavery’s action yesterday assured Tech of its fourth coach of the 1970s.