Tech Players Feel Cheated

Last winter, Jimmy Sharpe moved into a spacious new home on the outskirts of Blacksburg. Sometime soon, he's going to be moving out.

The 37-year-old Sharpe was fired yesterday as Virginia Tech's football coach, and two years ago nobody would have believed it possible.

Sharpe had just finished an 8-3 campaign. His bosses liked him. His players loved him. The media enjoyed him. And Hokie alumni, normally fractious, found him irresistible.

Yesterday afternoon, the only real support Sharpe had left came from his players. The ones reached by The Times-Dispatch were mad, mad as hell, that Tech president Dr. William E. Lavery had told their coach to hit the road. The players' loyalty to Sharpe is so intense that Lavery made mention of it in his statement announcing Sharpe's ouster.

"No wonder the players love him," said a Tech official over the weekend. "He never made them do a damn thing."

The remark perfectly illustrated the isolation of Sharpe from those who would ultimately decide his fate as Tech's coach. There had been a growing division between Sharpe and his bosses, starting in the spring of 1977, and it became all but an unbridgeable gap after Sharpe was accused of being intoxicated for a speaking engagement at an Aug. 4 meeting of the Roanoke Touchdown Club.

IN A MEETING WITH the Hokies' players last night at the athletic dorm in Blacksburg, Lavery was questioned about his new role the Roanoke incident had played in Sharpe's dismissal.

"Dr. Lavery said it was a minor part," said junior defensive back Gippy Belcher, "but I tend to believe it was a major part."

Junior defensive back Dennis Windmuller said Lavery had told the players that "he was looking for an image that Coach Sharpe didn't have."

Lavery, added Belcher, "didn't give any valid reasons" for his move. "He sounded like a politician to me. All he did was take all the blame for the decision on himself."

Windmuller doubted that the decision was all Lavery's. So did sophomore fullback Mickey Fitzgerald, who scored seven touchdowns and gained 503 yards in Tech's last four games of the 1977 season. "The heavy bucks (big contributors to the athletic program) talked," said Fitzgerald, "and he listened." Said Windmuller, "They gave the money, and we gave the effort and sweat, and the money prevailed."

What disturbed Fitzgerald, Belcher and Windmuller was their feeling that Lavery had misled them. "The Wednesday before the Kentucky game," said Windmuller, "he spoke to our regular mid-week squad meeting and led us to believe that everything was going to be OK." While the three agreed that Lavery did not specifically promise to keep Sharpe, they all came away with the impression that Sharpe's job was safe.

THE FACT THAT IT wasn't has made some of them examine their alternatives. Fitzgerald said Saturday that he would consider transferring to another school if Sharpe were fired, and yesterday he said "the majority of the players want to take a hike away from here." He said he had discussed leaving with junior defensive tackle Mike Faulkner, a starter.

"We don't want to play for any other coach," said Fitzgerald.

When Sharpe came over to the athletic dorm yesterday to inform the players he had been fired, Windmuller said, "Everybody was completely emotionally disturbed. We all shook his hand and hugged him. He told us, 'The sun's going to shine tomorrow. Don't worry about me; worry about yourselves.'

"We knew something was coming today, but we never expected them to send him away. We figured a few assistant coaches. I don't think they ever considered us, and we're the people playing. We feel kind of cheated."

The admiration between Sharpe and players apparently extends to at least one key high school player — Highland Springs senior quarterback Darnell Johnson, one of the most heavily recruited players in the state.

INFORMED OF SHARPE's ouster, Johnson said, "It's a tragedy. I was really interested in Tech, but I don't think so any more. I was scheduled to visit there Dec. 10, but I don't know if I'm going now."

"They have destroyed their program. The players liked Coach Sharpe the way we like Coach (Al) Rinaldi. I really feel strongly about this. They would have to come up with a strong replacement for me to consider Tech now."

Johnson has made a visit to Illinois already and is scheduled to go to Florida, Kentucky, Pittsburgh and N.C. State, in addition to his now-uncertain Tech trip.

It's fairly obvious that Sharpe's successor will have to bind up some major wounds before setting the football program on the right course.

The next guy would at least appear to have a chance. Of the 22 players starting in the Hokies' 27-7 victory over VMI Saturday, only four were seniors. "We're a young team," said Windmuller. "We missed being 8-3 by 13 points, and that's a helluva record. There's a lot of talent here to be wasted."

Give Lavery credit, though. He had a tough decision to make and he made it and took the consequences. No longer can anyone think that Lavery is an indecisive nice guy.

The man who is Sharpe's replacement would do well to remember that.