Sharpe: 'Never Once Have I Embarrassed Tech'

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Sports Writer
BLACKSBURG — In his four years at Virginia Tech, Jimmy Sharpe never took anything with a shrug. He laughed and cried and prayed and hugged and, when it was all over, he was hurt. The man was really crushed.

"In four years, I never lied or cheated. I have never bought a football player," said the deposed football coach Wednesday. "Only my team knows the true story."

Two days after learning that he would be replaced, Sharpe returned to his office for the first time Wednesday. He seemed in control, taking only momentary time-outs to glance knowingly out the window as he answered questions and then met with his staff.

There were some things he would not talk about; Sharpe's lawyers had urged that. "I can't go into detail," he said vaguely. "I'm talking to them about contracts and liabilities and things like that."

However, he would discuss the statement made by Dr. William Lavery, the Tech president, that Sharpe did not fit the image of the university. For a coach who prided himself on the loyalty of his players, that might have been the most painful blow of all.

The players, themselves, had said that an incident at the Roanoke Valley Sports Club Aug. 3, when Sharpe allegedly had too much to drink, may have been the big reason behind the firing. "I could furnish you with a list of over 500 places where I've spoken the last four years representing this university," said Sharpe, "and I've received everything from mild applause to standing ovations."

"All I can say is that never once have I embarrassed Virginia Tech."

Sharpe, like the players, had felt his job was secure. Much of their optimism dated from a meeting Oct. 26, the Wednesday night before the Kentucky game. Lavery appeared before the group and delivered what most felt was a vote of confidence.

"I must admit, I felt it was sort of strong," said Sharpe. "He talked about a lot of things but the whole gist of it was the rumors. He talked about Lavery's Air Force (a group of the missile group in Richmonds) and about all the stuff there'd been about the coaching staff. And, he said there was no substance to the rumors."

Sharpe said he did not talk to Lavery again until Monday. The day before, a confident Sharpe taped his television show in Roanoke, returned to his office and then went home when it started to snow. He spent the evening with his son, Jay, pulling stranded motorists out of the snow in his four-wheel-drive vehicle.

When Sharpe was called to meet with Lavery, he was asked to resign and, when he wouldn't, was fired. "I couldn't resign," said Sharpe. "How could I do that when all I'd ever told my team was that they should never quit?"

"What did he say when I told him that? What could he say? He'd already dealt his hand."

Sharpe said that he had few regrets, that he would change nothing at all from a football sense. "I know what you're getting at, the personal stuff," he said.

"But I hesitate to say that I would change any of that."

After well-regarded assistants Charlie Peil and Danny Ford left Tech for Clemson, Sharpe was criticized for promoting from within. School sources have said that Sharpe was asked to go out and hire the top assistants money would buy, but he elevated graduate assistants instead.

Sharpe considered these among the unkindest cuts. "If you want to talk about age and maturity," he countered, "I was the offensive line coach at Alabama in my third year and the offensive coordinator in my seventh season. The oldest coach on our staff was 42 and the rest of us were 33 or under."

"To say there was anything wrong with my staff ... that's a bunch of bull. It's just something else for someone to pick on."

Sharpe's emotions ranged from confusion to frustration to occasional mirth. He was only bitter at the thought of how everything had taken place behind his back.

"All this criticism ..." he shook his head. "It's like the critics have been hiding in the bushes, waiting until the battle's over to come out and stab the wound-

Stopping for a moment to collect his thoughts, Sharpe philosophized as he stood up. "The marriage between Jimmy Sharpe and Tech is over. There has been a divorce. Now, we're waiting for the settlement to begin."

If that is the case, don't question for a moment who is going to keep the kids. Sharpe met with the team Monday, asked the players if he could hold their hands one more time, and then he and his wife Anne went around the room and hugged them. They have been at his side ever since.

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JIMMY SHARPE
'I Couldn't Resign'