Assistant Coaches Try To Salvage Tech Recruiting

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Virginia Tech assistant Joe White calls it one of the hardest things he's ever had to do. "After all, it isn't every profession where an employee loses his job and continues to go in to work." Yet, that is exactly the situation in Blacksburg, where football recruiting is still being handled by the old staff in the wake of the firing of head coach Jimmy Sharpe.

All of us more or less agreed we'd get in touch with the prospects," said White, noting that Sharpe's staff will remain on the payroll until June 1. "We've tried to encourage them not to make a decision, to give the new coach a chance." Since today is the first day prospects may sign letters of intent, nobody can say how much Tech has been set back by the coaching change. Most conferences abide by the Dec. 1 timetable, although Appalachian State signed Northside's Mike Price Friday, while Richmond has corralled two hometown prospects, Douglas Freeman wide receiver Meade Langhorne, and Kevin Canada, a lineman from Thomas Jefferson.

Several local recruits indicated this week that Sharpe's firing could hurt Tech's recruiting chances. Scott Dovel, the talented running back from E.C. Glass, said that "Before, I would have had to think long and hard about going to Tech. Now, I'd have to think longer and harder." Brian Tomlin, a top-rated lineman from Heritage, explained that for practical purposes he would have trouble going to VPI. "In fact," he said, "if the firing almost dropped them out of the picture." "I had a scholarship offer last weekend but I had to cancel it," he explained. "Now, I wouldn't be able to fit Tech in for a visit until the end of February and by then I probably will have signed." Both Dovel and Tomlin were offered scholarships by the old regime, but neither has heard a word clarifying his status. Dovel said he has not heard anything since the middle of November. Tomlin's last phone call came the week before Sharpe was fired.

"Scott Dovel was one of the finest prospects in the state as far as we were concerned," said White, the coordinator for Tech's recruiting. "If he hasn't been contacted, it is because of an oversight. We'll take care of that immediately."

Wayne Hall, who coached Tech's linebackers under Sharpe, said that any commitment made by the old staff will be met. "I had a walk-on, Bryson Cranner, who played a lot in our last four games," he said, "and Coach Sharpe said he'd go on scholarship. Well, that still stands."

In fact, Hall estimated that the old staff will entertain 13 recruits this weekend. If any have been offered scholarships and want to sign, they will be accommodated.

It is apparent that some members of the staff have been more conscientious than others. Danville Coach Alger Pugh indicated that he had received calls from Tech coaches encouraging his top prospects—Henry Smith and Darrell Harris—to delay signing, with Northside's Eddie Otey confirming that he, too, has received several calls.

First, Otey heard from Tech backfield aide Nelson Stokley, who told the Vikings' quarterback that the Hokies probably would pick a quality coach.

"Then, basketball Coach Charlie Moul called a week ago and said he felt they'd found a real good man," said Otey. "I think I'll save Tech a visit."

Highland Springs' Darrell Johnson, probably the top quarterback prospect in Virginia, first said he was turned off by the coaching change and then changed his mind after talking to Tech aide Perry Willis. He is expected to visit along with Virma wide receiver Wayne Wingfield.

"If any of the coaches haven't been contacting people, I wouldn't say it's because they're better," said White. "I think they just don't know what to say."

Added Hall, "It's easier for some of us to talk to the recruits than others. Let's just say there are some folks who aren't over the situation yet." Again, few signings are expected today. Tomlin admits he is leaning toward Virginia but says, "I'll have to make a couple of visits to make sure I wasn't just excited because it was my first big college trip."

The Cavaliers reportedly are also close on Chad Silliman, a wide receiver from Northern Virginia.

Hall speculated that the coaching change was bound to affect Tech's recruiting, at least with the prospects sought after by the former staff. "Face it," he said, "a kid usually goes to a school for one of three reasons: 1) he likes the head coach, 2) he has a special relationship with an assistant, or 3) he likes the school."

"Obviously, Tech can only be confident about the players who like the school at this point."

Hall, himself, feels reasonably sure he will have another coaching position before Christmas. Most of the other assistants, however, are still looking.

"I think most of us have gone beyond the call of duty here," said White, who admits he'd like a spot on the new staff. "What else can you say when we go down the road for five or six hours to help with recruiting?"

Indentified at first, the prospects' feelings toward Tech have improved little by little.

As Dovel summed it up, "To begin with, I was turned off. Naturally, I'd be hesitant to go somewhere that they change coaches so often."

"But, when you look at it, how many places are there where you'd play under the same coach all four years?"