Charley Pell returned to Virginia for a night and with him came one of the biggest crowds in Roanoke Valley Sports Club history.

Nearly 200 persons watched Pell, former assistant at Virginia Tech, explain how Clemson, where he is now the head coach, became the miracle team of the year.

Pell's Clemson team went 8-3 and earned a trip to the Dec. 31 Gator Bowl opposite Pittsburgh. In the two previous years, however, the Tigers won just five games before Pell became head coach.

"Fortunate?" asked Pell. "Yes, but we were able to have faith and confidence in our players."

Pell related an experience of a year ago, just after he took the Clemson job.

"The Greenville, S.C., touchdown club always honors the All-ACC players," recalled Pell.

"Last year, just after I had taken the Clemson job, I went there. Clemson didn't have one all-ACC player for the first time in 25 years. It was embarrassing. It indicated a lack of respect."

It was then that Pell made up his mind to change things.

"This year I wouldn't miss it for all the money in the world. Clemson has seven players all-ACC," said the Tiger coach.

It wasn't an easy sell job by any means. Pell met with the same feeling in a pre-season meeting at Greensboro in which the ACC coaches talked to a group of writers.

"I remember telling them that Steve Fuller could be one of the best quarterbacks in the ACC," said Pell.

"There was a stone silence. But he was both All-ACC quarterback and the offensive player of the year."

Pell agreed that his trip back to this area was like homecoming.

"A year ago last week I took the head coaching position at Clemson with as much controversy as there is going on Blacksburg," said Pell, referring to the situation at Virginia Tech, where the administration is looking for a replacement for Jimmy Sharpe, Pell's former boss.

"It was a bleak time of the year. People were questioning Charley who? (as the coach) and saying we weren't going to win a game."

Now it's history, but Pell was humble in greeting Tech's Rick Razzano, college defensive player of the year whom he coached.

Razzano, too, made reference to the Sharpe situation in his acceptance of the award, which he has won two straight years.

"I'd like to thank the Lord for playing in Virginia, at Virginia Tech and for Coach Jimmy Sharpe," said Razzano.

VM's Andre Gibson, winner of the award as offensive player of the year, credited his offensive line.

"I think of them as my offensive line and they refer to me as their offensive back," said Gibson.

"I'll remember them the rest of my life and I want you to do that, too."

The dinner also honored high school and sandlot players of the year as well as the All-Metro team picked by the Roanoke Times & World-News.

Chris Talley and Cedric Lavender were the top sandlot players while Jeff Maronic and Eddie Otey were the best high school players.