Tech's Baron debuts in regal fashion

BY SKIP WOOD
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BLACKSBURG — He'd been floating around in limbo, college-football style, for nearly two years.
But when Jim Baron's balloon finally landed on a field Saturday afternoon, the Virginia Tech junior-college transfer delivered a definitive dose of reality both to himself and Arkansas State.
Not only did the 6-4, 261-pound defensive tackle come up with a team-high three sacks, he also showed himself that he made the right choice in his stubborn insistence on becoming a Hokie.
Was Tech coach Frank Beamer surprised at Baron's strong outing in Tech's 34-7 season-opening win?
"Pleased is the word," Beamer said. "He could have transferred to most any university in the country, but he knew what he wanted to do."
Which was attend Tech. After playing for Triton Junior College near Chicago for a year and being voted the team's most valuable player, Baron committed to the Hokies and expected to play last season.
But he wound up several credits short of meeting Tech's core curriculum requirements. He would have qualified at other schools but liked how the Hokies responded to his problem.
"The coaches were very cooperative, even when I didn't get in," Baron said. "That showed me they really, really wanted me here."
He got a job working in the office supply business of Tech radio color commentator Mike Burch and enrolled at New River Community College to meet Tech's transfer requirements.
He then made it to Tech in time for spring practice.
Two years ago, though, Baron had never heard of Virginia Tech, much less planned to attend. That was before he was courted by defensive line coach Todd Grantham.
"I thought it might be a I-AA school, and I wasn't that interested," Baron said, "but then [Grantham] told me they were in the Big East Conference, that they were definitely I-A."
Blacksburg also was a long way from the Chicago area in which Baron was raised, and he wanted to get away from the local scene, one that wasn't always a delightful place to be.
"There are a lot of things to get into around Chicago," Baron said. "The longer I stayed there . . ."
The longer he stays here, the better things might get. In his first game, he got plenty of work behind starters J.C. Price and Waverly Jackson. He also had plenty of room to ad-lib, much to his liking and Arkansas State's displeasure.
"I had fresh legs, mainly because we rotate a lot," Baron said. "And we're very disciplined, but we have a lot of autonomy, too."
Actually, he expected to be playing defensive end upon arriving at Tech. That's the position he mastered so well in junior college.
"But when I got here in the spring I was a little heavy, so they moved me out to tackle," Baron said. "I'm happy where I'm at, though."
In more ways than one.