After minor surgery, Austin feels blessed

BY HARRY MINIUM
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

The procedure was as minor as knee surgery gets, a simple arthroscopic removal of torn cartilage that lasted less than an hour. But the recovery was anything but routine for Larry Austin.

The Virginia Tech corner- back awoke in Montgomery Regional Hospital coughing up blood. His lungs felt like they were filled with fluid.

And around him, in the intensive care unit, were the worried faces of doctors and nurses.

"I went in for routine main-
tenance," Austin said, "and
almost went and met the Man."

The 5-foot-9 senior from
Norfolk's Norview High can
laugh about it now. He recov-
ered so quickly that 13 days
following surgery he saw lim-
lited action for the Hokies
last Saturday against Syra-
cuse.

Today, he
reclaims his
starting posi-
tion for the Hokies when they
tavel to Pittsburgh.

He does so counting his
blessings.

Austin had suffered
through a rare side effect of
anesthesia in which fluid
forms in and around the
lungs. When he woke up from
surgery, he was still in an
anesthetic fog and wasn't
quite sure how serious things
were.

"They kept telling me to
cough," he said. "So I kept
coughing.

"They told me I had wor-
rried them for a while. By the
time I figured it all out, the
danger had passed."

Amazingly, he was back on
the practice field within a
week. Tech coach Frank
Beamer said he marveled as
he watched Austin work his
lungs and knee so quickly
back into shape.

Not that he was surprised
by Austin's fast recovery.
Tech recruited Austin out of
Norview more for his tenacity,

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Austin: Tech cornerback glad
to be back — and to alive

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speed and intelligence than his raw football ability.

The diminutive Austin rushed for three touchdowns
and 135 yards against Oscar
Smith as a senior, and after-
ward couldn't remember the
 game. He had suffered a
 concussion.

Austin grew up in Oakmont
North, a Norfolk housing
project. In part because of
the influence of his mother,
Veronica Austin Little, he had as
many academic scholarships
as football grants.

Duke was the first school to
offer a football scholarship.
He also turned down Wake
Forest and William and Mary.

"When I started out in
school, my mom made sure
I did my work," Austin said.

"But as I got older, she trusted
me. She gave me leeway early
in life so that when I got into
college, I would know how to
do my schoolwork on my own."

He has excelled academi-
cally at Tech — he graduates
in December with honors and

a degree in property manage-
ment — and has also over-
come his share of football
adversity.

After a sometimes shaky
sophomore season, Austin
stepped up in a close game
against Temple, returning an
interception 31 yards for a
touchdown. The end zone cel-
 ebration was, of course, robust,
but caught a contact lens. Barely able to
see, he nonetheless played
well the rest of the game, add-

ing a sack and two punishing
tackles in the second half.

Austin was playing well
again last season when he tore
the anterior cruciate ligament
in his left knee in the fifth
game against Boston College.

A torn ACL is the most dev-
astating of knee injuries. But
Austin threw himself into re-
habilitation. After surgery, he
hibernated in the weight
room, where he and fullback
Jarrett Ferguson won awards
as the team's strongest

players.

"Larry worked incredibly
hard," strength coach Mike
Gentry said.

Austin consulted with a
sports psychologist and re-
ported every day to trainer
Mike Goforth, who told him
the knee was progressing

well. By the time spring prac-
tice rolled around, his knee
and attitude were as strong as
ever.

He played well in the spring
and was rid of a knee brace
when summer practice began.

"The toughest part was
mental, not knowing whether
the knee would be strong
enough, whether it could take
the punishment," he said. "I
had to block that out and just
play.

"Once I did that and got rid
of the brace, it all came back.
It was like I'd never left the
field."

Austin had hoped to walk
off the field the final time this
season with a national cham-
pionship. But that didn't hap-
pen. Syracuse ended Tech's
Rose Bowl hopes with a 22-14
upset victory last week.

"At the end of the game, we
just stayed on field and looked
at the scoreboard," he said. "I
couldn't believe it.

"But we win as a team and
lose as a team. There was no
finger-pointing. We haven't
forgotten it, but we're over it.

"There's a lot left to play

"The toughest part was mental, not
knowing whether the knee would
be strong enough, whether it could
take the punishment."

Tech cornerback Larry Austin

Perhaps a Big East title and a
BCS bowl bid. Regardless, Austin
says he got more than he was
promised when he signed with
the Hokies.

"In some ways the program
 is light years ahead of where
it was when I came here," he
said. "The fan support, the TV
exposure are just amazing.

"So many things have hap-
pened to me here I didn't
expect."

Including a near meeting
with the Man.