A&M game may tell

Tech: How good?

It will be a confident Virginia Tech football team that girds for its biggest test of the 1976 football season Saturday afternoon on the broling artificial turf at College Station, Tex.

Although it is far too early in the year to call Tech’s game at Texas A&M a make or break contest, it is perfectly obvious that this should be the Hokies’ toughest opponent.

A&M was bidding for a national title when it lost its final game of the 1975 season to Arkansas. Then the Aggies were beaten in the Liberty Bowl by Southern Calif. and suddenly they were a disappointing 10-2 team.

Once the Aggies take a look at the films of Tech’s 23-6 thrashing of outclassed Wake Forest, A&M Coach Emory Ballard is bound to realize his team isn’t in for a late afternoon picnic.

Not only was Tech even better than expected against Wake, but the Hokies were so much in command that Coach Jimmy Sharpe could bench his regulars and develop some depth.

Many questions were answered, although it is too soon to say if the youthful secondary will hold up against any aerial minded foes. That question will linger a while, because A&M scorn the pass.

The Aggies doubtless will pound straight ahead, and in so doing could get themselves in some difficulty. If Wake Forest is any guideline, few teams are going to be able to run on Tech’s front seven.

Sharpe got a look at a lot of young players, going with an all-sophomore secondary and also giving freshmen like tight end Mickey Fitzgerald and defensive lineman Doug McDougald a long look.

Also pleasing to the Hokies had to be the kicking of sophomore Paul (Chill Bean) Engle. The cherubic Engle, from Raeford, Va., tied a school record with three field goals from 39, 32 and 27 yards. He had a chance to write his name into the record book but hit the left upright from 27 yards in the fourth quarter and the ball bounced back.

“I didn’t concentrate enough,” said the baby-faced Engle, a soccer-style kicker. “I got overconfident. Missing that one taught me a lesson.”

Engle is replacing the departed Wayne Latimer. Although Latimer hit a winning 61-yarder against Florida State a year ago, he never was very consistent during his career. Engle gives every indication of being able to do the job.

“I kicked one 49 yards in a scrimmage,” he said. “I think I can hit consistently up to 50 yards.”

Sharpe also gave his second unit backfield a lot of work. Eddie Snell, replacing Mitch Barnes in the third quarter, turned out to be the second leading ground gainer as he rushed for 56 yards.

If Snell has put a lock on No. 2 behind Barnes, who completed all four of his passes, then Sharpe may well want to switch David Lame back to defense to bolster a secondary that may have to do without cornerback Henry Bradley for some time.

Defensively, the Hokies showed a new wrinkle with a double wing formation out of their wishbone. Other than a beautiful pass from Barnes to the converted wide receiver, Moses Foster, Tech’s offense was methodical but effective.

For a first game, the execution was excellent.

The Tech defense was so good that the Hokies didn’t even miss Bradley and noseguard Bill Houseright. Walkon Gippy Belcher replaced Bradley and Curt Lowery played for Houseright, who probably could have played if needed.

“We want to make sure we have him for A&M,” said defensive coach Buddy Bennett.

Tech’s second team was as good as Wake’s first club. How important that is won’t be determined until the season has a little longer to develop. The Deacons actually thought they had a chance to win. If they are decent, then Tech is excellent.

While everything was coming up roses for the Hokies, it was a dark opening weekend for Richmond. Not only were the Spiders mauled by Tulsa, 22-7, but they now must face ACC favorite Maryland at College Park.

“We’re beat up bad and it will be tough,” admitted Richmond Coach Jim Tait, whose team is playing its first year outside of the Southern Conference. Richmond had the same troubles with Tulsa that Wake Forest did with Tech.

But if the Spiders think that Tulsa is big and strong on defense, wait until they see the Terps, who are bidding for an unbeaten season.

The saddest game of all will take place at Winston-Salem. The hosting Wake Forest club will meet N.C. State in what normally would be a sellout.

But, after Wake’s poor showing against Tech and Furman’s shocking 17-12 win over State, there probably will be seats available. “Those losses cost Wake about $40,000,” said one observer Saturday night, figuring that 5,000 fans will stay away. Wake can’t afford to lose the money.

North Carolina and Duke will face toughies in SEC powers Florida and Tennessee on the road. The Tar Heels, for one, can’t wait. Thanks to a trick play that Jerry Claiborne perfected years ago when he was coaching at Tech, UNC stunned Miami of Ohio, 14-10.

The first UNC touchdown came on a quick pitch from quarterback Bernie Menapace to wingback Mel Collins, who was standing with nine blockers far to the left of the startled Miami defenders.

Miami proved to be extremely well coached, but certainly not deserving of a national ranking. The Redskins proved that any team which wins up with a 10-1 or 11-0 record will get into the polls, regardless of its talent.

That’s something for Tech to ponder.

The Hokies can do themselves a big favor if they can upset Texas A&M.