Pollster Sharpe Likes A&M

By DOUG DOUGHTY
Sports Writer

The Associated Press calls them the 14th best team in the country, Sports Illustrated picks them 12th. But, in the Jimmy Sharpe Football Poll, the Texas A&M Aggies are most assuredly No. 1.

"Texas A&M is the best team in the country and that's no b.s.," the Virginia Tech coach commented Wednesday. "We're going down there with no pressure on us, we're going to have a fun trip and, hopefully, we'll get after some people on the football field."

Gone from the nation's top-rated defensive team are linebackers Ed Simonini and Garth Ten Napel, but the Aggies return 11 starters from a team that went 10-2 and should have gone to the Liberty Bowl barring a 31-6 loss to Arkansas in the last game of the season.

Most people have looked at the losses on defense and the graduation of quarterback Mike Jay, tailback Bubba Bean and wide receiver Carl Roaches and forecasted a "rebuilding" year for the Aggies. Not so, replies Coach Emory Bellard. "I think we're going to be pretty darn good."

Bellard was an assistant coach at Texas when he visited Alabama along with Longhorns' Coach Darrell Royal in 1971. The reason for the visit was a look at Alabama's wishbone, which Bellard learned first-hand from Crimson Tide aide Sharpe.

"It's funny, we've been following each other at lectures ever since," said Sharpe. "Take last spring at a meeting in New York. I lectured on the Virginia Tech wishbone in the morning, and he talked on the Texas A&M wishbone in the afternoon."

Always one to look for the psychological edge, Sharpe used the occasion to plead for sympathy in his club's trip to Ten-Gallon Country.

"All I said was that, 'We've got to get ready for Wake Forest and all you have to do is get ready for us.' That's the way I really felt. At this time last week, Wake Forest was the biggest challenge we would face.

"I wasn't going to let my team do what Mississippi did. All summer long, all they talked about was their game with Alabama last week. They should have known that Memphis State could have beaten them (which the Tigers did, 21-16)."

Now, the challenge at hand is Texas A&M, and Sharpe admits it is an imposing one. Normally, the ultra-positive Alabaman refuses to talk about his upcoming opponent, but, as he said Wednesday, "I just have to talk about this one."

If there was ever a doubt that the Aggies' defense could withstand its losses to graduation, the answer came when the Texas A&M first-stringers held the subs to minus five yards rushing and nine yards passing in a pre-season scrimmage.

And, the offense didn't do badly, either, rolling up a 79-0 victory over the reserves.

In fact, even though Jay and Bean were three-year lettermen, Sharpe isn't convinced that they're better than senior David Shipman, who took over for Jay at quarterback in a 20-10 victory over Texas, and freshman Curtis Dickey, a tailback with 4.3 speed in the 40.

Considering the Hokies' strength on the defensive line, where Tom Beasley and Bill Housersight are fully recovered from pre-season injuries, it is a blessing for Tech that Shipman is a better runner than passer.

"However, we'd like to force them to pass the ball," said Sharpe, who retains his confidence in the Hokies' under manned secondary. "If that happened, I would know they were having trouble moving the ball on the ground."

Henry Bradley, the two-year starter at cornerback, is still sidelined by an ankle injury, and a position that Sharpe considered one of the strongest at the start of drills has suddenly turned into a trouble spot.

With Nick Rapone and Ricky Harman out for the year, and David Lamie and Tom Cooper now playing offense, the Hokie secondary is manned exclusively by sophomores: Gene Bunn, Gary Smith, Chip Keatley and walk-on Gippy Belcher.

"I'm ready to do battle with that bunch," said Sharpe, noting that his secondary covered itself with glory last week. "Besides, I have no other choice."

JIMMY SHARPE
'Aggies No. 1 Right Now'