Tech's Belcher Moves
From Unknown to Star

By DOUG DOUGHTY

In this day when college recruiting has turned into a precise science, Gibson Roosevelt Belcher's presence in the Virginia Tech secondary can be compared to the discovery of a new chemical element.

"Frankly, I never expected to make the traveling squad," said Belcher, who likes to be called by the less-formal Gippy. "In fact, I kind of figured I'd be red-shirted this year."

However, when Virginia Tech takes the field at College Station Saturday, Belcher will be starting at left corner back against the nationally ranked Texas A&M Aggies.

It won't be Belcher's first start—that came last week against Wake Forest—but the walk-on from Colonial Heights admits he's slightly overwhelmed by his new-found claim to fame.

"They'd been hinting to me all week that I would be starting," admitted Belcher, whose height (5-9) and weight (190) kept the college recruiters from his door. "Still, I was pretty excited when Coach (Jimmy) Sharpe announced the starting lineup."

"Coach (assistant Buddy) Bennett said to relax, but I was real nervous the first half against Wake Forest. Later in the game, after I got in a couple hits, things got better. The second half, I was hardly nervous at all."

On one particularly jarring tackle, Belcher stripped Deacons' receiver Steve Young of the football, setting up a recovery by teammate Rick Razzano. The turnover resulted in a touchdown to the Hokies' second field goal in a 23-6 opening-game win.

"At that point," smiled Belcher, ever modest and unassuming, "I had to try hard to keep from pinching myself."

As much as anybody, Belcher has had Henry Bradley to thank for his position in the starting lineup. Bradley has provided Belcher with many helpful tips, but nothing was as fortunate for Belcher as the pre-season ankle injury that has sidelined the two-year starter for the first two games.

The Hokies had already lost corner backs Nick Rapone and Ricky Barman for the season and Sharpe toyed with the idea of moving quarterback David Lumie back to defense later on, but for the time being, Belcher said, "It's still a possibility," Sharpe said the other day, but Belcher's play against Wake Forest clearly gave his coach a little longer to deliberate.

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Regrettably, Belcher realizes his days as a starter are numbered as Bradley's ankle slowly responds to treatment. At the same time, he's proud of the fact that he's risen to the top of the depth chart after such humble beginnings.

"I really didn't know what I was facing when I came up here," Belcher recalled. "I even went to Coach (former assistant Charlie) Pell. He was the one who said I could stay with the team."

Normally, the scholarship players report about three weeks prior to the start of school, while walk-ons are asked to wait until registration begins. Somehow, Belcher's signals became crossed, and he reprinted with the grant-in-aid players.

That experience proved to be profitable when Belcher attended the starting spot with the JV's, where he played alongside another starter, Gene Hunt. Still, as Belcher was leaving Blacksburg last spring, Bennett told him he didn't have enough speed to play corner back and that he'd have to gain a step or two.

"I ran a little bit faster this fall," said Belcher, who was timed at 4.8 seconds in the 40-yard dash, "but, that's nothing compared to when I was a receiver at Blacksburg."

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For all his work, Belcher was not only rewarded with a spot in the starting lineup, but there proved to be financial benefits as well. He had been worried that he might not receive a scholarship and had approached Bennett on the subject.

"I'm still not sure I've got one," Belcher conceded.

"But coach Bennett said he would take care of everything." That Belcher was a full-fledged scholarship player was confirmed later, where he stated, "That's one thing he can stop worrying about," the Hokies' coach said.

Clearly, it was a small sacrifice to make for a major discovery.