Tech tackle Mike Faulkner makes grade

By JACK BOGACZYK Special Writer

BLACKSBURG — For Mike Faulkner, making the grade is important in more ways than one.

Faulkner, Virginia Tech’s sophomore defensive tackle, never did get the chance to receive a 63 per cent marking in Tech’s 19-0 loss at Texas A&M last weekend.

“He’s come much further than anyone expected,” said Terry Don Phillips — Tech’s defensive tackle coach. “He played the best game since he’s been here at Texas A&M. I say that because of the tackles he made (three tackles and six assists, including two quarterback sacks). Anyway, you grade over 60 percent, you’re playing winning football.”

Phillips and the other Tech coaches will be hoping Faulkner has another big game here tomorrow afternoon at 1:30 when the Hokies open their home season against Southern Mississippi.

Faulkner was Tech’s last signee a year ago and promptly stepped in and started at his position. He considers himself fortunate not only to be playing for a Tech team that is expected to go places — like maybe a bowl game — but anywhere in major college football.

Because of “marginal” grades at Bishop McNamara High in Washington, D.C., the 245-pound Faulkner was virtually ignored by recruiters until he was viewed in a summer all-star game by aides on Coach Jimmy Sharpe’s staff.

“I had just about made up my mind that I’d have to play junior college football,” said Faulkner before heading for the practice field as the Hokies prepare to open their home season Saturday against Southern Mississippi.

“Manassas and Syracuse talked to me, but then they went away. It seemed everyone was scared of me because of my grades.

“But I was taking some tough courses — all of them college prep courses at a Catholic high school. It was tough, but I made it. I’m very glad to be here. I was happy when Coach (Fred) Bickey came to talk to me after that all-star game.”

Faulkner was named to The Football News freshman All-America first-team defensive unit last year, and completed the play of Tech star Tom Bestley at the other tackle. But there is more than football in Faulkner’s thoughts, which emerge from his head in soft-spoken, carefully-chose words.

“My grades last year weren’t too great,” he said, thinking back to his introduction to college. “I didn’t work too hard because I thought all the courses were easy — most of the material I had seen before in high school.

“Now, I know what I want to do. And to get into law school, you can’t have lousy grades.

“Faulkner was an art major last year, but has since switched to communications. You have to have a minor, too,” he said. “I’m thinking of political science for the law school preparation.”

Faulkner isn’t worried about his grades on the football field, figuring they will come. Phillips said the 18-year-old tackle “has a tendency to get complacent,” and Faulkner realizes it.

“Auburn was a big game last year and I played well against them,” said Faulkner. “Then we play Texas A&M last weekend and I play another good game. Mental preparation is tough for me. I get my job done most of the time, but not the most of the time isn’t good enough.”

Faulkner said that last year he thought a lot about perhaps shooting for a pro football career, but he since has toned down his ambitions.

“You can’t think about yourself and play as well as you should for the team,” said Faulkner, who wears an earring in his left ear — which is pierced. “Maybe that’s been my problem getting mentally prepared.”

What he hopes to prepare for is a career in law. Or, as a second choice, a future in the technical end of TV. Before that, he has almost three seasons of Virginia Tech football.

“Just two years ago, I didn’t think I’d have a chance for any of those things,” said Faulkner. “And we have the potential this year to win the rest of our games.”

Faulkner probably didn’t consider bowl games, either. But he is now — along with law school, a future in TV, NFL, and higher grades.