Tech Not Impressive, But ‘It’s Still a Win’

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BLACKSBURG — It winning isn’t everything, then Virginia Tech has troubles on the football field.

Tech found its way to a 16-7 victory over Southern Mississippi in Saturday’s Lane Stadium opener—a contest in which Gobbler’s panther George Roberts was clearly the standout performer.

The Gobbler’s got their usual solid defensive work from Rick Razzano and Co., but moving the football was another story against a team that was blasted by East Carolina, 48-9, one week earlier.

A pair of second-half touchdowns was enough to lift Tech to victory on an afternoon that turned both cloudy in the sky and on the field for the Gobbler’s.

“We’ve got a whole lot of work to do,” said coach Coce, who ignited the Gobbler’s with a 35-yard touchdown run when they led 3-0 in the second half. “We know this wasn’t a great win, but it’s still a win.”

Coles said he hoped the 35,000 that turned out for Tech’s sixth straight home-field win would still believe in a team that has been mentioned in bowl talk. But the junior halfback from Virginia Beach also wondered aloud about the Gobbler’s offensive work.

“We want the people to believe in us,” Coce said. “But first, we have to believe in ourselves. The offense just didn’t ever get going. People are stopping us there. I stopped a couple times myself when I should have been running. When you do that, you’re going to mess up.”

A 42-yard field goal by Paul (Chile) Bean against 25 seconds left in the first quarter was all the scoring in the first half. Coce capped a seven-play, 73-yard drive with his 37-yard scoring jaunt on the first series of the final half. Then Southern Miss moved within three points by scoring its only points of the 1976 season on tailback Ben Garry’s 46-yard run.

Garry’s effort started with a pitch from quarterback Kenny Alderman—the former Harvard treat star—towards the right sideline. Garry then made a beautiful move on Tech corner back Henry Bradley to escape a prospective tackle near the 20-yard line. Garry finished as the game’s leading ball carrier with 143 yards, 22 more than Coce.

Before then, the Golden Eagles had missed four good scoring opportunities. Three of those came on field goal attempts by Randy McDonald, but Southern Miss passed up a field goal try on the first series with fourth down and two to go from the Tech nine. A penalty later nullified an apparent second quarter touchdown pass.

Ejecting to try to put the Gobbler’s into a six-point deficit, Coach Bobby Collins ordered his team to try for a first down. Halfback Chuck Curry made only half of the necessary first-down yardage before being wrapped up by Tech tackle Tom Beasley, who had started the game on the bench with injured ribs but came on after five plays when USM started to move.

Coles said that the Gobbler’s decided to go with “basic plays” on offense during the second half, but it was a fancy-dan decision from the sidelines that gave the Gobbler’s their last touchdown.

Tech took the ball at 50 and used 17 plays to score in a drive that cleared the third quarter and worked almost all four minutes of the clock in the final period.

Eight plays into that drive, the Gobbler’s had third and fourth and four at the Eagles’ 34. Coce came in and set up for a 32-yard field goal attempt, but holder Mitchell Barnes kept the ball and hit Paul Adams with a six-yard pass. Adams also got four yards on a fourth and one-half yard situation from the Southern Miss 18 four plays later.

Barnes’ one-yard sneak with 11:19 to go finished the drive and the scoring.

Tech’s defense got lots of help from Roberts, who punted six times for a 45.5-yard average. Four of those kicks went for more than 43 yards—his previous long boot. What’s even more interesting is that Roberts never punted in a college game until two weeks ago at Wake Forest.

A former kicker at E. C. Glass High in Lynchburg, Roberts came to the team as a walk-on this spring just to see if he could make the team. He was given a scholarship just before the Gobbler’s opener at Wake.

“I punted well today, but you can always get better,” said Roberts. “I worked this spring to get my confidence back. Sure, I’d like to have a good average. But the object they (the coaches) stress is a 40-yard kick with four seconds hang time in the air.”

Roberts, a senior scholastically and junior as far as football eligibility is concerned, came to Tech his freshman year (1973) and wanted to try out for Coach Charlie Coffey’s team. But after three years—practically hadn’t even started yet—he gave up on the idea. He returned in the spring after the Gobbler’s lost Bruce McDaniel—last year’s kicker—to graduation.

Alderman, a junior, admitted disappointment outside the Southern Miss dressing room after playing so many of his friends from nearby Radford.

“It hurts deep down inside,” said Alderman, who completed 11 of 17 passes for 94 yards. “Any loss hurts. But there’s a special feeling here.”

But Alderman will find another home, sweet home Saturday. Southern Miss plays its first home contest in three years—its stadium was under construction next week. But the Golden Eagles’ loss is state rival and Alabama-bester Mississippi.

It will be the junior quarterback’s home collegiate debut.

Tech has things even easier, taking its 2-1 record into an open date.

Tech’s Chip Keatsley Flips Ben Garry of Southern Miss After Short Gain

Staff Photo by John Cook