Sports on Air

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BLACKSBURG — Danny Ford leaned over and spitting a wad of tobacco into his own private copper spitoon.

"You know, my wife doesn't like for me to chew. She doesn't let me do it at home. She thinks it's a dirty habit. Maybe that's why I spend as much time here at the office," he quipped with a big smile across his face.

Ford is Jimmy Sharpe's protege at Virginia Tech. When Sharpe was offensive line coach at Alabama, Ford was an offensive lineman. Then Ford became an assistant offensive line coach under Sharpe.

When Sharpe accepted the head job at Tech, one of the first men he asked to join him was Ford. Ford is now the Hokies' offensive line coach.

When it comes to smiling like an old country boy, charming people right out of their shoes or generally getting along with everyone, Ford can even put Sharpe to shame.

"Danny has never met a stranger," said Sharpe. "Danny's value to me is hard to measure. He's great on the field. He's young and has great rapport with the players. He's a real asset."

Ford has bounced around in football. "I was recruited as a wide receiver but I wasn't fast enough," Ford explained. "I became a 195-pound offensive tackle. I played against some fellows like Ted Hendricks, Bill Brundidge and Tony Cline."

"After my last season, I got married. I wanted to stay at Alabama and go to graduate school. My wife worked while I worked on my masters and an assistant coach." Ford received his masters in special education, but decided he'd like to stay on as a football coach. "I'll probably stay in coaching the rest of my life. Like every assistant coach, I'd some day like to be a head coach," said the 28-year-old coach.

The Tech job wasn't the first move offered to Ford. "When Pat Dye took the job at East Carolina, I had a chance to go with him. I was pretty close to him. I decided not to," said Ford.

"Then this thing came up and I felt it was time for me to move on," he continued. "This was a step up for me. I was one of the two bottom men on the line at Alabama."

And Ford hasn't regretted the move for a minute. "It's been different here. You learn a hell of a lot more when you go out on your own. At Alabama, I always had someone to go to if I had a problem. Either Jimmy or Coach Bryant was always around. It's not like that now. I have to handle most of the problems myself," he emphasized.

"Danny is in charge of recruiting. I can see a change in him since we've been here," Sharpe said. "You learn something every day of your life."

Ford gets along with the players as well as any coach who has ever been involved in the game. Sometimes he gets along too well. Like the time he opened his mouth and ended up back- ing fullback Paul Adams, a fellow who outweighs him by 50 pounds.

"We were in the lunchroom last season after we had lost our first two games. We had played badly in both games and had lost the last one to a team we should have beaten (Kent State), everyone was pretty tight."

"The confidence of the kids wasn't good. I thought there was an All Right on TV or something and I said I could box as well as that. Well, Adams—said I couldn't go one round with him and I didn't think anyway about it."

"Then a few days later in practice, someone popped up with some gloves. I was just trying to survive," Ford remembered.

"I was just trying to have some fun and keep the team together. But we got some bad ink out of that. Someone wrote that instead of the coaches and players trying to knock each other down, we should try knocking down some of the other players for a change."

But Ford is the kind of guy who considers the players part of his family. "I'd say our whole staff is pretty close to the kids. We'd be lost if they didn't come to us with their problems. I like to joke around with them all," he said.

"I just try to be myself. I know these 18 and 19-year-old kids are putting food on their table. They're part of my family. They decide if my wife and kids eat or not. They decide if I have a job."

"Danny coaches the way he played. He coaches the way he was coached. I knew he would be a winner as a coach because he was a winner as a player," Sharpe added. "I wanted somebody who believed like we did and was not afraid to work."

According to Tech's head coach, Danny was always sitting in on meetings when he didn't have to. He would sit around and listen and ask questions. He was always wanting to know.

Ford has definitely been an influence on his players. If a tobacco-splitting content was held in Blacksburg, the whole offensive line would enter.

"When we have a meeting of the offensive line to show films, we have to pass out paper cups so they have some place to spit," remarked Sharpe. "I bought Danny that copper spitoon when I was up at Graves Mountain Lodge one time."

While Ford would like to go down in history as one of the most congenial guys or one of the best football coaches around he would be happy if no one remembered that he chewed tobacco. It was suggested that he put on a tobacco-chewing exhibition during halftime of the Tech-VMI game which happens to be the Tobacco Bowl.

"Hey, don't you mention anything about me chewing tobacco in any story about me," Ford said. "My wife will kill me."