Bowl hopes gone. Sharpe knows why.

By LAURENCE T. BROWN

— As he searches for the reason that Virginia Tech’s bowl chances evaporated, Jimmy Sharpe keeps coming back to an incident that occurred moments after the Hokies had beaten West Virginia two weeks ago.

"The last time there were two losses in a row," Sharpe said after the game, "I recalled, a fan ran up to me and asked in a rather loud voice, ‘Hey, coach, what bowl are we going to?’"

"I answered the kind of question that has me flustered, thought that kind of talk and, you know, they keep hearing it from their family and friends. Besides, we’d come so close to getting an invitation last year."

In essence, what Sharpe was implying was that the post-season bid had become a means and an end in itself. While the Hokies’ performance in a 35-11 loss to Tulsa was unquestionably one of their best, Sharpe’s club may have lost sight of its true objectives in earlier losses to Texas A&M and William & Mary and a drab 16-7 win over Southern Cal.

Possibly, more attention had been paid to where the Hokies were going than to how they would get there.

"The fans and everybody (when Sharpe says this, he means the fans, the usual ‘guys in the gallery,’ not the usual ‘guys in the gallery’ who usually aren’t going to happen to the end of the season)," the former Alabama assistant observed, "I’ve had too many Saturdays in my life when a team’s just had to win. We’ve got to stop that around here."

The Hokies started the year pointing for an 11-0 season, which quickly turned into visions of going 18-1 after the loss to Texas A&M. Following the loss to Tulane, Sharpe had issued order No. 2, a bowl bid became Tech’s consuming passion.

"I think our team has been super ready to play seven times in the last six games," Sharpe said in a news conference after the game, "day’s practice. ‘Against Mississippi Southern, we were flat and, for William & Mary, we were even flatter.’"

"The idea was that we needed to win the Texas A&M game and did some things that were psychologically con- trary to my nature. It was the first time in my life that I had to go out and hit a ball to win."

Admittedly, many of the pressures on Sharpe this sea- son have been self-imposed. For one thing, he treated a sparse student turnout at a pep rally before the William & Mary game as a personal affront. For another, he is sensitive to criticism that continued to plague a 6-3 team.

"I wouldn’t say I had any more calls than usual after the Tulsa loss,” Sharpe said. "And I don’t feel I’ve been besieged with tips from well-intentioned alumni, but there are a lot of people who must be saying, ‘What if?’"

"Last year, when we lost to West Virginia, people were asking what to do this year,” Sharpe said. "And we get the ball to Marcellus (Coles) (instead of Roscoe (Coles)). There must have been a lot of ifs about Saturday’s game, too."

Unfortunately, as long as Sharpe coaches at Tech, there are always going to be people who feel his heart lies elsewhere, that he will be gone as soon as a job opportunity pops up in the SEC. The same kind of sentiment prevailed before Tech canceled basketball coach Don DeVoe last winter. DeVoe had just posted his second 20-win season, but he fell out of favor after expressing interest in returning to his alma ma- ter, Ohio State.

There seems to be little Sharpe can do to convince Hokie fans that his stay at Virginia Tech isn’t just a passing fancy. Where else in America does a coach feel compelled to wear a sweatshirt like Sharpe’s “I’m a Hokie and Proud of It” or adopt the kind of super-Hokie posture Sharpe dis- plays on his TV show each Sunday?

As he watched the Tulsa game on film, Sharpe took the blame for every mistake—and there were plenty of them—that his team made Saturday. More than any other, Sharpe blamed goodness for the pass play that saw quar- terback Michael Poland fumble and loss control after he was sacked mid- way through the third quarter.

What made Sharpe’s apology seem so surprising was that it was so good a call, one that would have resulted in a touchdown had Bart Scott been a bit better frosted on the edge. In fact, even though Barnes lost the ball, it mat- tered little since the Hurricane failed to score.

"It’s just another thing," Sharpe said. "I just had a gut reaction that it wouldn’t work," said the Hokie coach. "But I thought the coaches asked, ‘What if the protection breaks down?’ I re- membered the last time, ‘If the protection breaks down, I’ll slit my throat.”'

The mere thought indicates what a premium Tech had put on a bowl bid. In the long run, however, the fact that Sharpe decided to follow up on his threat shows that he and his team may finally have learned their lesson.

Perhaps, one of these years, the alumni will learn theirs as well.