VMI Grounded 37-7 In Tobacco Bowl

By Kyle Parks

Virginia Tech got back on the winning track in a big way last Saturday when the 28th annual Tobacco Bowl, crushing VMI 37-7. The Keydets seemed to be cursed from the very beginning of the game, choosing to kick off after winning the toss, due to a mix-up. To make it worse, the choice gave Tech the option on which side of the field to take, the Hokies choosing to have the almost 30 m.p.h. wind going with them.

VMI coach Bob Thailman took blame for the mix-up, saying that his captains misunderstood his instructions. The rest of the game was beyond Keydet excuses, though, as Tech simply blew VMI out of line of scrimmage on almost every play. This game was clearly won in the "pit," the area between the offensive and defensive lines, with Tech clearly the winner.

Tech was slow in starting as the first quarter passed uneventfully. The Hokies seemed to start every drive in good field position, with the result of one drive being a 47 yard field goal by Paul Engle. The quarter ended with the score VPI 3, VMI 0 with Tech apparently on their way in another scoring drive.

The Hokie drive stalled just short of paydirt however, as quarterback Michael Barnes fumbled at the VMI 2 after a hard pop from Keydet linebacker John Willison. It seemed that it was going to be another long day for QB Barnes as VMI recovered. Tech roared right back, after VMI stalled, though, as a 55 yard drive was promptly ground out with George Heath scoring from 11 yards out. Engle's extra point made the score going into halftime Tech 10, VMI 0.

With a minute and a half left, Tech's "broken wishbone" being made after the William and Mary game, the Tech running game was due for a good day. The first half showed that such a day was in store, with Tech having 152 yards on the ground at halftime to VMI's 19. There seemed to be two keys to the new success: improve execution by quarterback Barnes and improved outside running due the moving of George Heath back to right halfback.

The game was not over at halftime, though, as VMI came back early in the third quarter to close the gap to 10-7 with a 26 yard drive for a touchdown. VMI's best field position of the day was set up by a 43 yard punt return by Keydet Cary McNeal to the Tech 26. After getting down to the Tech 17 on several running plays, QB Robbie Clark lofted a ball over the head of tight end Jeff Reynolds at the Tech 3. Interference was called on Tech's Chip Keathley however, and VMI fullback Steve Oddi scored two plays later on a 2 yard run.

VMI's score was the beginning of the end for the Keydets, as Tech scored twice before the end of the quarter. The Hokies looked the liveliest they've looked in weeks, starting a drive on their own 35 and taking the ball all the way down the field. The key play in the drive occurred when Tech went for the first down on a 4th and 3 play on the VMI 32. George Heath took a perfectly timed pitch and swept around left end for 10 yards and the first. Paul Adams scored the Hokies' second touchdown of the day six plays later, diving 1 yard to give the Hokies a 17-7 lead.

The game was put out of reach only a minute and a half later, with Tech's Greg Payne pulling off a thrilling 70 yard punt return for a touchdown. Payne was returning punts because Henry Bradley was hurt, and with the results it is possible that the change could be permanent. Payne gracefully leaped one defender at the VMI 30 before cutting back behind the last of many great Hokie blocks. The result was a lead of 23-7 and the team's pleasure was evident as Payne was mobbed in the end zone after he crossed the goal line.

With the beginning of the fourth quarter came another Tech score, the result of another long play for the Hokies. Quarterback Michael Barnes showed that he is indeed a running threat, rounding the left end at the VMI 46 yard line and taking off for the goal line. The run capped a great day for Barnes, who had to operate under a lot of pressure lately due to the Tech wishbone problems. This TD made the score Tech 30, VMI 7.

The VMI cadets had evidently had enough at this point, for they all poured onto the field to beat up on about five VPI cadets. The kickoff was delayed for about five minutes, reminding one of the Tech-VMI military rivalries of old.

The game wound down at this point, with the Hokies giving their offensive subs some action. The Tech defense never let up, though, with the defensive line having a banner day. Hokies Keith McCarter and Tom Beasley seemed to be listening in on the VMI calls, for they spent most of the day in the Keydet backfield. McCarter led the team in tackles, piling up 7 tackles and 3 assists. The Hokie rush made up for any defensive backfield mistakes as the VMI quarterback never had sufficient time to throw the ball.

Tech's final score came 4:53 left in the game. Substitute halfback Dennis Scott rounded the left end at the VMI 37 yard line and turned his 9.5 speed to outpace the Keydet defenders to the goal line. Paul Engle's extra point made the score 37-7, ultimately the final tally.

One fourth pass was attempted by Tech in the game, as the Hokies showed what ball control really means. Roscoe Coles had his second 100 yard game in as many weeks, collecting 111 yards on 24 carries. The other three members of the Tech backfield also had a good day, with Paul Adams gaining 86 yards, George Heath, 67 yards, and quarterback Barnes rushing for 46 yards. When asked about the lack of passing after the game, coach Jimmy Sharpe commented, "We don't care whether we pass or run, as long as we win." And as far as Coach Sharpe and the Hokies are concerned, winning is all that matters.