Tech has a ‘Payne’ killer

By BOB TEITLEBAUM
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Virginia Tech's Greg Payne is sort of the unused player.

He has languished in relative obscurity at Tech for four years: But in that time, he has had some amazing statistics.

He has returned four kickoffs in actual games. Three of the four have been for touchdowns.

First, Payne returned a punt in each of the past two spring games for touchdowns.

That failed to impress his coaches. Then Henry Bradley was injured and last Saturday, against VMI, Payne got his chance. He nearly broke the first punt return, but was stopped after a long run.

Then he went all the way for a touchdown on his second attempt and was buried by a mass of humanity as the entire team ran to greet him in the end zone.

"I wasn't getting crushed or anything, though, because I was lying in a position where I couldn't get hurt."

Still, this wasn't Payne's happiest moment. Nor was it his first long return.

"When I was a sophomore," Payne recalled, "I intercepted a ball at Florida State and returned it 40 yards."

That night the Hokies won the game 56-21 and Payne, who is also a defensive back, was in there to help mop up the Seminoles. So if that was his happiest moment, last Saturday was more important as it clinched Tech's win over VMI.

Payne's career has been checkered to say the least. Last year he didn't play varsity football. This season he was moved from defensive back to wide receiver, but he's not listed on either the first or second units at this position.

"I've never gotten down," said Payne about his relatively obscure use as a football player at Tech.

"I really didn't think about it. If I got up there, good. If I didn't, then I would get an education."

Payne doesn't emphasize speed as being the main factor in his return of punts.

"You just have to have a knack for it. You have to have good blocks, follow your blocks and put on some moves. It's a combination of having blocks and making the right moves. It's like instinct," he said.

Payne says the punt return for a touchdown is always a big play.

"It's something that can get a team up. It's a quick six. It's like a home run in baseball," he emphasized.

When Bradley returns, Payne isn't ready to surrender his job returning punts: If the results are as good as in the past, the Tech specialist feelz he will hang on to his spot.

"It's up to the coaches whether he replaces me," said Payne. "But if I'm doing the job, I don't see why they should."

So Saturday will see Payne returning punts against Virginia. But it's doubtful if his average of 75% touchdowns on punt returns will go up. If they do, he ought to be examined as a true athletic rarity.