Pressure Is A Fact of Life in Gobblers' Secondary

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BLACKSBURG — It's more than just a sneaking suspicion. Chip Keatley admitted it. He knows for a fact that opposing quarterbacks can't wait to set their sights on Virginia Tech's secondary.

"Do I feel any pressure?" laughed the sophomore from Beckley, W.Va., who has become the veteran of the Hokies' defensive backfield in his first year of varsity ball. "How would you feel if you knew everybody was throwing at you?"

"I won't say they're picking on us. But, I think people have gotten the wrong idea about us."

While the secondary has been bidden by injuries, the Hokies have permitted just two touchdowns pass all season and a mere 115 yards per game. And, that's been accomplished with only a pair of non-letter winners, Keatley and Gene Bunn, starting all five games.

Nick Rapone and Ricky Harman were put out of commission before the season and the only returning starter, Henry Bradley, has been bobbled since the first week. Bradley's replacement, walk-on Gippy Belcher, went out against Southern Miss and a knee injury has shelved Gary Smith indefinitely.

"People seem to be falling right and left," observed Keatley, who by now must feel like the next pilot to fly in a Japanese kamikaze mission. "I hardly know from one week to the next who's going to be back there with me."

Originally, the 6-3, 185-pounder was recruited as a wide receiver by the pass-minded Charlie Coffey regime before Jimmy Sharpe came to Blacksburg and brought a running game with him.

The offense, however, was not nearly as disturbing as Sharpe's decision to switch Keatley to defense his first day of practice as a freshman.

"The old staff had told me I probably wouldn't play right away, not with Ricky Scares around. I wasn't worried about that aspect. It really upset me, though, when I had to go over," recalled the former all-state receiver.

That was only the first crisis that faced Keatley as a Hokie. The second came following his freshman year when he learned he'd be red-shirted. Again, Keatley didn't really agree with the decision, although he has come to agree it was a good move.

"I'm not sure how much I would have played last year," he said, noting that senior Chuck Perdue provided the competition at free safety. "It was on the 8-Team, which meant I got to play a lot anyway. And, there wasn't nearly as much pressure on the practice field."

The only time he had any trouble came when Keatley had to find a seat for the Saturday games. He preferred standing on the sidelines, although he was sometimes dragged into the stands to sit with friends.

"That was the only time it got to me," admitted Keatley. "A lot of people didn't know I was a football player and would stand up and yell and make derogatory comments.

"I never came to blows or anything like that, but that's not to say I didn't feel like it. I felt like standing up and saying, 'I know these guys; I've worked with them. Lay off.'"

Keatley concedes that some of those same fans may be just as critical this year, claiming all the while that Tech's secondary "has played well. It's held it's own with the rest of the defense."

"If I had to grade myself," he continued in self-effacing fashion. "I'd have to say I haven't played at all that well. On the pass interference call (that set up a touchdown in last week's VMI game), I stewed but I never hit the receiver."

There is room for improvement, then, against Virginia this Saturday in Charlottesville. Everybody will expect Cavalier quarterback Andy Hitt to come out throwing, especially since Virginia's ground game has been dormant the last couple weeks.

"I've looked at one film and Hitt seems to be a decent passer and all," said Keatley of the ACC's leading quarterback. "But, he doesn't impress me all that much. He looks at the receiver's going to throw to as soon as he gets his hands on the ball."

For many of the Hokie players who hail from Virginia, this is the biggest game of the year. Keatley, too, admits he's gotten caught up in the excitement.

"I don't think any of us will ever forget what happened two years ago," he said, bringing to mind the Cavaliers' disputed 29-28 victory in Charlottesville in 1974. "We all think we won the game, especially Bruce Arias (who many of the Hokies feel scored on a crucial two-point try).

"They're 6-5, though, and can pull out all stops in trying to beat us," said Keatley as a note of caution. "What have they got to lose?"

Keatley and his mates in the secondary finally have something to lose. It's called a reputation.

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