Virginia Tech’s Buddy Bennett just might have more worries than one company has hamburgers.

With less than half of the season over, the defensive backfield coach is facing a mangled secondary.

“Of course I’m concerned that they’re getting hurt,” lamented Bennett over the phone yesterday. “You’re always concerned when one of your players gets injured.”

But when you have eight injured players as Tech does, a coach begins to scratch his eyebrow a little more than is comfortable.

“You know we’ve been hurting,” conceded the coach. “They’ve (opponents) completed some passes that they shouldn’t have. The thing we’ve been able to do is keep them from getting the long one and if you do that, you can win.”

Going into this Saturday’s game with victorious, but air prone Virginia, the Virginia Tech secondary will probably own only one of its regular starters. A freshman walk-on, a former tight end and a former linebacker will join sophomore cornerback Gene Bunn in the Tech defensive backfield.

Freshman Matt Meade will hold down the free safety slot until sophomore Gary Smith’s partially separated shoulder improves. Another sophomore Chip Keally will probably miss this Saturday’s game at the expense of a bruised shoulder with junior linebacker Steve Scott replacing him.

Even sophomore Bunn’s back-up cornerback, John Booty, fell to the injured list for the season yesterday with a knee injury.

But don’t stop now, the list goes on and on. At the other cornerback slot senior Tom Cooper is replacing injured Gippy Belcher who was replacing an injured Henry Bradley. Southern Mississippi sent Belcher to the hospital for a knee operation while Bradley sat on the bench with a sprained ankle arch and a stress fracture left over from last season when it didn’t completely heal.

Sophomore Nick Rapone and junior Ricky Harmon remain on the Tech bench with early season injuries. Another junior, Dennis Windmüller, closes out the long list of Tech injuries with a hip-pointer he suffered last week against Virginia Military Institute.

These pains are certainly destined to hurt the Tech secondary. In case you haven’t caught on by now, the Hokie defensive backfield doesn’t claim a wealth of experience. Even with transplanted defensive backs, the Gobblers have only one senior in the secondary.

“We’re inexperienced as far as the college level,” explained Bennett. “Some of them have never played back there before. We don’t have any depth at all. How many more (injuries) can we get before we’re out of folks I don’t know. We take one from the offense and may end up getting more.”

According to the coach, VMI and Texas A&M were the only two schools that have challenged the Hokie secondary this season. But Bennett expects the defensive backfield’s biggest challenge to come this Saturday against Virginia.

“We’re going to have our hands full,” warned the backfield coach. “They’re going to throw the ball and they throw it well.”

Despite his own warning, Bennett expressed little worry about his backfield because, as he put it, “They’ll play a little better than they’ve played.”

The coach said the inexperienced secondary’s major problems are anticipating the quarterback’s action and following the football. He lauded the unit’s ground support, but expressed disappointment over its number of interceptions this season — only three.

Bennett can’t understand the incredible number of injuries his secondary has suffered this season. It’s a new problem to him.

“The only other time I have ever had anybody injured was in 1972,” he recalled. “At Arkansas I lost two strong safeties in one ball game. That cost us a tie and the Southwest Conference championship because we didn’t carry, but two with us in that game.”

The price tag for Tech’s injuries still remains questionable and probably won’t get an answer until a few more games are played.

“Certainly we’re not where we would have been if each one (starting defensive back) had started the ball games,” admitted Bennett. “I think the young people we have playing these positions will respond. You know they’re going to make mistakes, but what we’re trying to do is eliminate those mistakes and if we do that we’ll play pretty good.”

Exactly how well the Tech secondary fares will probably depend on three things — future injuries, player recovery and individual adjustment.

If the Hokies fail these three criteria then they may have to use the old trick the New York Jets employed several years ago. That would mean going to a used car lot and convincing a salesman his abilities are needed more on the gridiron than in the economy. The Jets talked him into protecting the football instead of moving cars.