Walk-ons

Overlooked Players Help Program at Tech

By DOUG DOUTHMY
Sports Writer

BLACKSBURG — As he balanced his 6-4, 240-pound frame on a narrow bench in Virginia Tech’s locker room, it was hard to believe Wayne Moon was ever considered too small for a college scholarship.

Take David DeHart, for example. Now, he’s the classic walk-on, too small to deliver your newspaper, yet determined enough to play defensive end for the Hokies the past two seasons.

“I’ve heard the question before, ‘If you have to depend on walk-ons, how successful can your program be?’” confessed Tech Coach Jimmy Sharpe. “And, for the most part, I’d have to agree.

“But, there are a lot of outstanding young people of varying abilities who we coaches tend to overlook because of their size or speed. A lot of them have something you can’t find in a scouting report—the belief in themselves.”

At last count, Tech’s roster included 28 walk-ons, 20 of whom have been playing time this season. Indeed, eight players who paid their way out of high school have started at one time or another: defensive backes Dale Babione, Gipy Belcher, Matt Mead and Dennis Windmuller; offensive linemen Blair Buskirk and Mike Heizer; linebacker Steve Cannon, and punter George Roberts.

No two players came to Virginia Tech for the same reason. Babione became a Hokie only after efforts to gain a scholarship failed at William and Mary and UVa while the 5-9, 180-pound DeHart came to Tech as a fulfillment of the New River District dream. Still, neither can top the circumstances under which the 24-year-old Moon became a resident of Blacksburg.

“I was in the construction business with a cousin in Snellville, Ga.,” explains Moon, “and there was a time when we had a wicked storm come through town. One of our jobs happened to be fixing this house where giant oak trees had been uprooted and caved in the roof.”

The owner of the house was Virginia Tech assistant Buddy Bennett, who has been known to charm the husky right off a peanut. The two got to talking, Moon inquired of the possibilities of joining Bennett at Tech, and moments later Snellville had lost a master carpenter and gained a football player.

“I was thinking about going to school anyway,” said Moon, whose playing time has been sharply curtailed by a thumb operation. “I came during the winter session and ended up paying my own way for two semesters. After spring ball, they offered me a scholarship.”

While every walk-on has visions of playing and eventually becoming a starter, the first step involves procuring a scholarship. It is a process that prepares a player for a career in business, one that involves no small amount of haggling with the coaches.

“I was headed down these very steps getting ready to pick up my equipment and leave the team,” said Babione, sitting on the main stairway in the Tech Coliseum. “Coach Sharpe saw me, asked what I was doing, and then said he wanted to see me in his office.

“A couple days later, he offered me a scholarship.”

Babione often wondered why DeHart, a classmate, didn’t press the issue and ask for a scholarship his freshman year. “My father went to Tech,” explained DeHart, a prep standout at nearby Radford. “And, he always told me that if I wanted to come here, he’d pay my way.

“The coaches told me I would get a grant as soon as I made the traveling squad my sophomore year. I didn’t want to ask for a scholarship until I earned it.”

Unlike DeHart, who had never missed a VPI game from the time he was six, Buskirk had never heard of the school until the Hokie basketball team defeated Notre Dame for the NIT championship the winter before his freshman year.

“We really had a rinky-dink program where I was from (Bryn Mawr, Pa.) and that’s what hurt me more than anything else,” said the player known to his teammates as Buzzy. “Besides, as I found out later, my coach had been telling the schools we didn’t have a major college prospect.”

Having played under Charlie Coffey his first year, Buskirk attributes the success of the walk-on program to the naming of Sharpe as coach.

“It was just a farce back then,” he recalled. “The non-scholarship players were treated like dirt.”

While the walk-ons now live in Hillcrest, Tech’s plush athletic dorm, and eat with the team rest of the team, a player who has not been recruited still experiences his share of drudgery.

“I don’t find the name ‘walk-on’ particularly offensive or demeaning,” observed Babione, “but when you come here without a scholarship, it’s seems like you’re always last in line for something, that the other guys are getting better stuff than you are.”

For the first week of his freshman year, Babione was the quarterback for the scout team. “I was getting killed,” he recalls, “and I wasn’t getting any money at all. I couldn’t see playing without a scholarship when I was working as hard or harder than anybody else.

“On the scout team, we ran the other team’s plays and sometimes they even told the defense what plays we were going to run. You’d hit a hole and there would be 11 guys waiting for you.”

Still, he wouldn’t trade his experiences for anything. “A lot of people didn’t think I could play,” Babione explained. “I always felt kind of proud that I came out on my own, earned a scholarship and eventually got to play.”

Not surprisingly, Babione and several of the other more prominent walk-ons play in the defensive backfield for Bennett, the untitled head of Tech’s non-scholarship program.

“I feel that if I can find a way to help an individual, I’ll do it,” said Bennett. “If they’ve played two years in high school and started, I’ll always encourage players to come out. We have a lot that come out that have never played before—those are the ones who really don’t have much of a chance.”

Like Sharpe, Bennett has heard criticism that a program can not be formed around walk-ons. “I feel we’ve played pretty well this year (in the defensive backfield),” countered Bennett, “I don’t think we could have done as well without them.”

There is a market for walk-ons just as there is a market for scholarship players. Freshman wide receiver Johnny Wilson was headed for Blacksburg without a scholarship until Clemson offered him a grant. After that, Bennett decided Wilson was too valuable a prospect to lose and offered him Tech’s lone remaining scholarship this fall.

The NCAA forbids the recruiting of walk-ons, a rule that Bennett consciously tries to keep from violating. “The player has to make the initial contact,” Bennett explained, “and we aren’t allowed an official visit.”

Alas, the days when a walk-on can step right in and help a club may be over next fall when the NCAA’s “95 rule” goes into effect. When it does, a school will not only be limited to 95 scholarship players (and no more than 30 in a given year), but any walk-on who plays in a game will have to count as a scholarship.

“They voted that in so a school wouldn’t go out and give money out under the table to walk-ons,” explained Sharpe. “The rule doesn’t just hurt walk-ons; it hurts your whole program.”

“What if I had to call a player in and say, ‘Well, you came in here without any money and helped us out and we appreciate that, but we’re stuck at 96 scholarships and somebody has to go’? I hope I’m never in a situation like that.”

Especially if a tornado comes through town and Sharpe ever needs somebody to fix his roof.