Big Games Have Been Hokies' Nemesis

By BILL BRILL
Sports Editor

Was it a bad pitchout from Mitch Barnes to George Heath that beat Virginia Tech last week, or was it Dame Fortune, once more looking down at the Hokies?

Whatever the reason, the cruel facts are that Tech, once more on the verge of a breakthrough, fell back in the pack with other schools desperately searching for some national attention.

Records show that since 1961, when Jerry Claiborne began a 10-year stint as the Tech coach and the Gobblers really began upgrading their program, the Hokies have failed almost every time they have been faced with a game of some national importance.

In the last 16 years, Tech has won only 15 games against winning teams. The Gobblers have not beaten a winning team since 1972.

You can count on the fingers of one hand the independents that already have achieved that national status: Notre Dame, Penn State, Pittsburgh, Georgia Tech, and possibly South Carolina.

Florida State came close and fell back. Memphis State never has made it to the real big-time despite some excellent teams. Houston was only too delighted to leave its independent status to join the Southwest Conference.

Significantly—and this is the true test—only the best of the independents ever have been considered for a major bowl.

The case of Rutgers. Possessor of the nation's longest winning streak—16 games—Rutgers has not gotten a look-see from the people who vote in the polls or the numerous bowl officials.

Even when Rutgers defeated Louisville, 34-0, last week, the Scarlet Knights still didn't get a tumble. Yet Rutgers won more easily over Louisville than did Alabama, Pitt or Tulsa.

The peril of being an independent at the Virginia Tech level are obvious. One or two losses, and you're out of business. Too often, the schedules of an independent do not include many opportunities against the "name" teams. When those opportunities arise, it is imperative to take advantage of them.

Tulsa is hardly such a team, but the Hurricanes were rated 16th in the UPI poll. At least with a victory, Tech would have been in position to campaign for a minor bowl. However, with the loss, the Hokies can do no better than 8-3, and they found out last year that wasn't good enough.

Tech needs at least a 9-2 season to have a chance at a bowl and, realistically, 10-1 is needed. Otherwise, the bowl people are going to look elsewhere.

This is not a new problem for the Gobblers. It has existed right along, and it isn't likely to change as long as Tech is an independent. Conference teams have the advantage of winning championships.

Over the years, Tech has played in three bowl games. It appeared in the Sun Bowl in 1947, although it had just a 3-3-3 record during the 1946 season. But the Sun Bowl was just a very minor game.

The Hokies appeared twice in the Liberty Bowl, in 1966 and again in 1968. Again, the Liberty had not achieved its current status, having just found a home in Memphis.

Tech lost all three bowl games, just as it has lost virtually every other game over the years that might have commanded some headlines around the nation.

A study of the records since the Claiborne era shows dramatically how the Gobblers have come close, but somehow have not crossed over that line into the true big-time.

Claiborne's 10 Tech teams won 61 games and lost 39, including the Liberty Bowl games to Miami, Fla., and Mississippi.

Yet, in that successful decade, Tech defeated only 13 teams which wound up with winning records.

Five of those 13 teams were in-state opponents, which also receive little or no national attention.

Here are the winning teams that Claiborne's Tech clubs defeated between 1961 and 1970:

1962: Richmond (6-3)
1964: Florida State (8-1)
1965: William & Mary (6-4)
1966: Florida State (8-5), William & Mary (5-4-1)
1967: William & Mary (5-4-1), West Virginia (5-4-1)
1968: West Virginia (7-3), Florida State (8-3), Richmond (8-3)
1979: Tulsa (6-4), Villanova (9-2)

The 1964 victory over Florida State was unquestionably the biggest in the school's history. The Seminoles, featuring Steve Tenis and receiver Fred Bilenikoff, came to Blacksburg unbeaten and ranked 10th nationally.

Tech won the game, 20-11, before 22,000 fans, giving up lots of yardage but few points, and capitalizing on a tackle eligible pass for a touchdown by the multi-talented quarterback, Bob Schwickert. Unfortunately, those Gobblers already had lost three games and wound up 6-4.

During those years, beside the bowl games, Tech lost:

- To N.C. State, 13-7, when the Hokies were 6-1 in 1962.
- To Miami (Florida), Florida State and VMI, in succession, after winning the first seven games of 1967.
- To Alabama in the 1969 opener.
- To Alabama again in 1970, Claiborne's final year.

Tech fared even worse in the three years under Charlie Coffey, who produced a 12-20-1 record. The only winning season was 1972, when the Hokies were 6-4-1. That team defeated SMU (7-4) and Oklahoma State. However, the Hokies also were crushed by Alabama, (6-2) 92-13.

Ironically, those victories in 1972 were the last the Gobblers have produced over winning teams although the current coach, Jimmy Sharpe, has recorded an 18-13 mark.

None of those 18 victims ended up with a winning record. In Sharpe's first year, Tech was 4-7. One of the wins was over a 5-5 Richmond team.

In 1975, Tech jumped to 8-3, one of the biggest improvements in the nation. Yet none of those eight teams that Tech defeated wound up as a winner.

The Hokies were ecstatic over defeating Auburn on the road, but that Tiger team—Shug Jordan's last—finished at 9-2. Tech also won at Houston. Normally that would have raised some eyebrows, but the Cougars had a 2-8 campaign, Bill Yeoman's poorest as coach.

Of this year's six victims, only VMI has a chance for a .500 record. If the Keydet's defeat Indiana State, they will wind up 5-6.

The big game this year was at Texas A&M, but the Gobblers were blanked for the first time in 67 outings, 18-0.

Only Richmond (3-6) and Florida State (3-6) remain on this year's schedule, so the Hokies must look to the opportunities that 1977 will afford.

The '77 schedule is the best in years. Tech meets Texas A&M, Clemson and Florida State at home and plays Memphis State, Kentucky and West Virginia on the road.

Although it hardly seems fair, the Hokies will have to win at least four, and probably five, of those games to gain the national recognition that they seek.

As Jimmy Sharpe says, "8-3 ain't bad." In fact, no Tech team in history ever has won that many games in successive years. Impressive as that is, however, it doesn't interest the bowl people or the pollsters.

In college football, it is not so much what you are but who you are. And the only way to become one of the big boys is not only to play them, but to beat them.

That is something Tech has not done.