It's 'Do-or-Die' For Ex-Gobbler Arrington

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As the Asheville baseball team got off the bus at Salem's Municipal Field Wednesday, at least one of the players had to feel a little strange when he called himself a Tourist.

After four years at Virginia Tech, pitcher Mike Arrington admitted it felt good to be in familiar surroundings.

"Blacksburg isn't really my home; I'm from Hampton," said Arrington, who signed with the Texas organization as a free agent in 1974. "But, I have a couple friends coming up here from Tech and it's something I've kinda been looking forward to.

Tanned—and with the beginnings of a dark red beard—Arrington looked none the worse for his three-month sojourn with the Tourists, who won the first half of the Western Carolinas League race and are currently leading in the second.

Indeed, as he viewed the mountains that ring Municipal Field, Arrington remarked that Asheville actually reminded him of Blacksburg. "The mountains all look the same," he explained. "Right down, to the same blue tint and all."

Just 14 months ago, Arrington had no idea that he would be playing for Asheville, much less playing baseball at all. "One day they called up," he recalled Wednesday, "and asked if I wanted to sign. I said, 'Yeah, sure, what else do I have to do.'"

Hokies' teammate Gene Fornash signed with the Braves and Dave Halstead hooked on with the Tigers, but neither has enjoyed the success Arrington has. In his first 49 games this year, he has a 2.66 ERA, with a 9-5 record and 15 saves.

During one stretch, from June 17 through June 26, he appeared in six games and saved all six. And, he has not given up an earned run since July 11.

Through it all, the righthander views his success philosophically. "What good does it do me if I rot down here for three years," he said. "Texas told me they'd send me to Double A last year and look what happened.

"I sort of lost interest after that," Arrington continued. "Let's just put it this way: I'm 23 and if I don't go up to at least Triple A after this season, that's it."

There seems little chance that the Rangers won't promote the Tourists' ace. Although there are several young prospects in the Texas farm system, the major-league roster is loaded with gray-bearded veterans (Joe Hoerner, 39; Gaylord Perry, 37; Steve Hargan, 34; Nelson Briles, 33).

"It's all politics, though," warned Arrington, who is under more pressure to produce because he's a free agent. "With me, it's do-or-die."

For the time being, Arrington has been able to enjoy himself, however. He continues to follow the Hokies and was hoping to see Tech baseball coach Bob Humphreys during his stay in Salem.

"I read all about it when they choked," said Arrington glily. "It's the same with the basketball team. They do fine during the regular season and then fall apart in the tournament.

"I guess they play that way because they've never been there before. Perhaps, one of these days they'll know."

Arrington drew a parallel between the Hokies and his own chances of advancing to Triple A. "I think I can pitch there," he said, "but only time will tell."

And, if he doesn't make it?

"I guess I'd go out and get a job," he replied, then added in jest, "Or join the Air Force. Then I could get myself a plane and bomb Arlington (Texas)."