Harrier A Hokie Bonus

By JIM MCDONALD
Sports Writer

Jim Elmlinger almost didn’t attend college at Virginia Tech.

The freshman cross country star entered school here in September with the attitude that he could always transfer if he didn’t like the atmosphere and surroundings of Hokiesland.

Even before fall quarter began, Elmlinger, at the urging of one of his high school professors, was thinking seriously of enrolling at Duke University. “That was a mistake though,” he said.

Fortunately for the Hokies the honor student from Dobyns Bennett High School in Kingsport, Tennessee, made Virginia Tech his final choice. And although he’s not ready to call his dormitory room in Vawter Hall home yet, Elmlinger is adjusting to life in Blacksburg.

“I don’t think I’ll be completely settled until the end of the year,” Elmlinger said. “But I think coming to school here was a good decision.”

Even in the transition, Elmlinger’s cross country performance has been nothing short of spectacular.

All he has done since his arrival is smash the frosh record for Virginia Tech’s course each time he has run in competition, and finish first for the Hokies in every race except the West Virginia match October 30.

In the Virginia State College and University meet Elmlinger led Virginia Tech with a 13th place finish, good enough for runner-up honors among freshmen behind William and Mary’s Jim Shields who came in 12th.

Characteristic of himself, it was the quality of the academic, not the track, program that finally convinced Elmlinger to enter Virginia Tech.

“I came to Virginia Tech because of the high quality engineering and math related programs,” said the engineering major. “I also considered Tennessee Tech, but Virginia Tech had more to offer. I never even thought about the University of Tennessee (a school noted for having one of the top track programs in the nation).”

Elmlinger averages running 15 miles a day in early morning and afternoon workouts. He doesn’t have much time for socializing. The price of success has been the sacrifice of his social life.

“As for girls,” Elmlinger sadly said, “I just don’t have time to meet any, but they’re pretty nice around here.”

Elmlinger pictures himself as a quiet, intellectual type who likes playing the guitar. The 6’3 athlete runs because it refreshes him and requires individual effort and achievement to be good at it.

“Running relaxes me. It’s school and studying that make me tense,” said the student who carries a 3.1 quality point.

Virginia Tech cross country Coach Russ Whiteneck described his young star as being unlike a usual freshman.

“Jim’s developing into a real leader,” Whiteneck said. “He takes the initiative at workouts. He’s always up front of the pack running as hard as he can.”

Elmlinger doesn’t see himself in that capacity—at least not yet. “The people I look up to and have helped me most are Alan Carville, Gene Crane and the rest of the seniors,” he said.

Elmlinger’s two major goals this season were to break the 30-minute mark in a race, and be one of Virginia Tech’s top five runners. He accomplished both easily. But it may be more difficult for him to attain the heights he hopes to reach in the future.

Elmlinger is striving to put himself in a position to make All-American. Pole vaulter Keith Neff who was named to the A-A team in 1973 has been the only Virginia Tech trackman so honored. According to Whiteneck, Elmlinger has the potential to become the second.

When asked if making the United States 1980 Olympic team was also in the back of his mind, Elmlinger wasn’t quite so determined or sure of himself.

“Will I go to the Olympics in 1980,” he responded. “I’ll just have to wait and see if I can continue to improve. But my best shot would be in 1984 or 1988 because distance runners usually reach their peaks in the middle to late twenties.”

Elmlinger was the second ranked harrier in Tennessee behind Dale Short of Murphysboro his senior season in high school. If he is that successful as a college runner, the Hokies will be more than satisfied with the career of their young prospect—All-American or not.