BLACKSBURG — Early on, Virginia Tech star running back Mickey Fitzgerald knew what his relationship would be with new Gobbler Coach Bill Dooley.

Fitzgerald, as a top high school prospect, had been recruited by Dooley at North Carolina.

"I knew what to expect," said Fitzgerald. "He (Dooley) didn't say a lot then. It's almost as if he's an introvert type as much as I am an extrovert."

While Tech might change football coaches, the school will never be able to convert Fitzgerald from anything else other than being a fun-loving football player with a disposition like the hero in a Pat O'Brien motion picture.

Fitzgerald never ceases to smile and he's hardly ever at a loss for words. Indeed, when Tech was making a decision whether to fire Jimmy Sharpe last winter, it was Fitzgerald who spoke up and threatened to transfer.

The fact is that Fitzgerald, by his own admission, never would have changed schools. Taking Fitzgerald away from Tech or vice versa, would be like keeping Romeo and Juliet apart.

You see, Fitzgerald is in love with Tech. Though he might not rack up 100 yards a game under Dooley's system like he did with Sharpe, Fitzgerald will always be a Hokie.

"I saw the light," he says with a smile. "Ever since I was a little kid, I've loved Tech."

Notre Dame and Alabama found out the hard way. If they toyed with Fitzgerald's emotions in the great recruiting game three years ago, it was the Lynchburg native who had the last laugh.

"I'm an Irish-Catholic kid with a name like Fitzgerald," he said.

"I always wanted to go to Notre Dame. I love to watch Notre Dame football."

That's the aura of Notre Dame with its vast Sunday network of televised games and the tradition of fans yelling blood and guts outside the visiting dressing rooms to psych the opponents.

"In my senior year when they came to recruit me," recalled Fitzgerald of Notre Dame, "I gave them the shaft. They came late and I didn't have a visit set up for them.

"I guess if I had to do it over again, I'd have a visit for them."

But he still wouldn't go to the South Bend, Ind., school.

"Notre Dame was a big dream. Other than that it was Tech. I lived in Virginia," he said, his