A Late Bloomer Blooms in Blacksburg

By Mike Bevans
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James "Sleepy" Johnson grabbed big headlines four years ago when he signed a national letter-of-intent to play football at Virginia Tech and that's the last time the former two-sport standout from Madison County has warranted the oversize type.

Johnson was one of the most highly recruited players in the state following the 1974 season and then-Tech coach Jimmy Sharpe forecast a great college and pro career for the Mountaineer "legend." The two-way end was expected to step in and help the Hokies immediately.

That has hardly been the case. Why, things have been so tough on Johnson during his stay in Blacksburg that his height, as listed in Tech press guides the last four years, has slipped from 6-6 to 6-4.

"It's hard to say why a person doesn't jump out and do what everybody expects," noted Tech assistant coach Terry Don Phillips. "He was playing behind some good people when he first got here, then he had some injury problems.

"But he's got a lot of pride and that's why he's starting now. He's got to do it now or forever hold his peace."

JOHNSON HAS BEEN doing it at defensive end thus far this season, which continues this afternoon at Lane Stadium when Tech (1-1) plays host to Auburn (1-0) of the Southeastern Conference. Game time is 1:30 and a sellout crowd of some 35,000 is expected to be on hand.

Johnson did not start the season opener against Tulsa, but saw considerable action and gave his teammates a chance to win the game.

Displaying the form once at his command while playing tight end in high school, Johnson made a leaping interception at the Tech 37-yard line with 5.29 to play. However, the Hokies' drive for a clinching score was stunted shortly thereafter by a fumble.

Johnson wasn't through yet. As Tulsa moved toward its eventual winning score, another leaping effort by Johnson enabled him to bat down another Tulsa pass. Four plays later, he tackled a running back for no gain.

"I was disappointed I didn't intercept that pass I knocked down," said Johnson, who reacted at the time in a rare show of emotion. "It happened so quick. I got my hands up, but the quarterback had too much power behind it."

TULSA WAS NOT to be denied and pulled out a 35-33 victory with :07 to play. Tech rebounded last week to drub Wake Forest 28-6 and Johnson turned in a good all-around performance in a starting role.

"I'm surprised and highly satisfied," said Johnson. "It's something to get him to work in.

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Late-Blooming Johnson
Hokie Headliner Again

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Now, I feel stronger than I have ever been." Johnson picked up the tag "Sleepy" while a freshman at Madison. He explained how he was singled out by a teacher on a hot day in class. He was one of several students with their heads on their desks. "It spread like a herd of locusts around school," Johnson said.

"He's a happy-go-lucky person," said Phillips. "You talk to him off the field, even on the field, and he doesn't seem like the most competitive player in the world. But he has a whole lot of pride and he wants to do well."

College Football Today

AUBURN (1-0) at VIRGINIA TECH (1-1), 1:30 — Auburn coming off 45-32 win over Kansas State in which running back James Brooks gained 230 yards rushing...Tech heads nation in rushing offense (485.5 yards per game) and tailback Kenny Tucker ranked seventh (153.5) individually...Nate Parker, JUCO transfer from Ferrum, will make first start for Tech at linebicker.