Neglected Tech
Now the Champ

BY STEVE GURACK
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NEW YORK — The Virginia Tech basketball team is an unlikely gang of heroes. The Gobblers finished the regular season uninsured in the national polls and with their coach wondering if they had reached a plateau.

For years they have been bypassed by the Atlantic Coast Conference, which could have used them as the eighth team to balance out the league. They went into the National Invitation Tournament carrying the label of being too small, too white and too Virginian to win anything big.

“We’ve just told our kids never to count themselves out until it said zero, zero, zero on the clock,” Coach Don DeVoe said after VT captured the NIT championship yesterday with an implausible 92-81 overtime victory over favored Notre Dame.

TECH COMPLETELY rewrote the script. Underdogs are supposed to win occasionally, but Tech pulled off its NIT coup by winning four games by a total of five points.

Even in the desperate final 12 seconds of overtime against the Irish, Bobby Stevens, who sank the game-winning basket, wasn’t supposed to take the shot. He wound up taking two.

“I was supposed to pass off to Craig Lieder,” Stevens said, “but he was covered, so I nailed it on my own. When I missed that first shot, I didn’t have time to think about it. At 5:19, I’m not supposed to be getting the rebound, but it came back to me. I took two dribbles and put it up again.”

Then Stevens paused and smiled. “The Good Lord was on my side,” he concluded.

WELL, MAYBE somebody up there does like the Gobblers. They could be an inspiration to all underdogs. One of their cheerleaders, Cathy Downing, hobbled around on a sprained ankle. High-scoring Allan Bristow took a blow on the nose. And when Tech was down by 12 points with six minutes left, there wasn’t more than a handful in the Madison Square Garden crowd of 13,103 who weren’t ready to count them out.

Tech had to pull off its buzzer-sounding desperation shots twice, defying all the laws of probability. With five seconds left in regulation time and two points behind, Tech called time out and set up a pass to Lieder, who sank a one-hander from the key for a 79-79 tie.

At that point Lieder thought he had lost the game. “We had a pick and I wanted to drive for a three-point play,” he explained, “but I couldn’t penetrate. I had to shoot and when I did, I didn’t think it was going in. I thought it would be short.”

Once in the overtime Tech promptly fell behind by four points. The Gobblers still trailed by four, 91-87, with 43 seconds left when Stevens hit on a three-point play. When Gary Brakow missed a free throw for Notre Dame with 18 seconds left and Bristow rebounded, Tech had the last chance it needed.

“SOME PEOPLE have a hangup that Virginia doesn’t produce good basketball players,” said DeVoe, who has nothing but Virginians on his starting five.

The victory gave Tech a 20-5 record, its most victories ever, and with all starters returning except Bristow, DeVoe thinks he’ll have the makings of another competitive team next season. He’s on the prowl for another big man and concedes that the NIT title should help his recruiting.

The pepper-pot Stevens, benched for a spell in the first half for poor ball-handling, had seven of Virginia Tech’s 13 overtime points. However, it was Lieder (26 points) and Bristow (28) who carried the burden early.

When Tech trailed 79-78 with six minutes left in regulation time, DeVoe ordered a full-court press (code name: Dynamic) that gradually chopped away at the Notre Dame lead. The Irish were hurt down the stretch when John Sham- mate, their nearly perfect scoring machine, missed three free throws and a successful one by Brakow with 22 seconds left was canceled as Pete Crotty prematurely stepped into the lane.

Shamate, scoring 28 points in the finale and 85 for the tournament, was picked as the most valuable player, but he was glum.

“That’s life, full of misfortunes,” he sighed, referring to the loss. “We beat ourselves with crucial mistakes. It’s not the plays at the end of a game that lose it.”

North Carolina won consolation honors by crushing Alabama 88-66 behind George Karl’s 21 points.

Wearing the traditional knot necklace, Virginia Tech’s Allan Bristow hoisted the NIT championship trophy after the Gobblers scored a dramatic overtime victory over Notre Dame yesterday in New York. The equally happy player next to Bristow is Charlie Thomas.