VPI Nips Irish, 92-91, for NIT Title

By Dave Hirshy

It was too good to be true. This sort of stuff went out with Frank Merriwell and the fairy godmother; Virginia Tech has won the NIT.

In an incredible finish to a tremendously exciting tournament, little Bobby Stevens threw in a 15-foot jump shot at the buzzer to give the Gobbler a 92-91 overtime victory over Notre Dame before 13,103 hysterical fans at the Garden. Craig Linder's sensational shot at the buzzer in regulation time had sent the game into overtime and for one of the many exciting episodes.

The team that people had called "too small, too white and too Virginian," had won four games by a total of five points and the player the Virginia Tech press brochure says "occasionally misfires in trying to make a sensational play," had scored the winning points in every Gobbler triumph. The ending could not have been more fitting if it had been supplied by central casting.

The Gobbler had whirled into the finals before anybody knew who they were. They came out of the Blue Ridge Mountains, with a bunch of guys no one had ever heard of, as obscure a team as the NIT ever had.

But, there is Virginia Tech," read the banner Gobbler fans paraded around before each game. They won their first game, a two-point decision over South Dakota. Then came a one-point win over Fairfield. Another lucky break, the skeptics said. Alabama will run them back to the hills of Blackburg, Va., the reasoning went.

But Tech spoiled the script by beating the Tide by one. And then no one was laughing. "We may have surprised half the western world by getting this far," said Stevens before yesterday's game. "But we haven't surprised ourselves."

Confidence. The word describes Bobby Stevens best. "When the game's on the line, I like the ball in my hands," he says. "You might say the game was on the line when he got the ball yesterday. There were 12 seconds on the clock when Ed Frazier took the ball at midcourt with the Gobbler trailing by 91-90 and passed to Stevens. "We wanted to give it to Linder (Craig) but he was covered," said Stevens. "So I soloed on my own, which is the coach doesn't like."

Stevens spun around at the top of the key and launched a jumper. The ball hit the back of the rim and wound out to the right side. There was a mad scramble for the rebound as Tech's and Notre Dame's big men, arms flailing wildly, battled each other hard and the ball squidged free. Stevens grabbed it with three seconds left, took two dribbles and let fly.

The ball dropped cleanly through the cords as the buzzer sounded and Virginia Tech was the 30th NIT champion.

It felt even better when the ball swished through and he was engulfed by Tech's rabid supporters in a mob scene out of Bean Ball. They lifted the little guy onto their shoulders, screams of "We're No. 1" rang in the air. Dwight Clay was numb. He stood and stared at the spot where Stevens had made the winner. "I had him tough on the first shot," said the Irish's little floor leader, "but I got caught in the scramble for the ball and he was all alone. It's a way to lose."

For Notre Dame, it was indeed a bitter defeat to swallow, and an unflinching one to such a storybook ending. The Irish had come here with a 16-11 record and a reputation as good ticket sellers. But they quickly emerged as a team to reckon with, \(\text{Continued on page 62}\)

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knocking off USC, Louisville and North Carolina and had boasted as both the logical and sentimental favorite to take the title.

Including the three NIT wins, the Irish won 17 of their last 23, including seven in a row and in John Shumate, who scored 95 points in the tournament and shot an amazing .745 from the floor, they had the tournament's MVP. More importantly, they charged back yesterday from a 23-25 deficit in the first half to take a seemingly secure 70-68 lead with 6:10 remaining.

But Virginia Tech was not impressed. "There was never any question in my mind that we were going to pull it out," said Tech's brilliant 6-7 forward Allan Bratton. "I was just worried that the lead would reach 13." But the Irish had taken the lead back at 71-70. After the Gobbler's 72-73 deficit in the first half to take a seemingly secure 70-68 lead with 6:10 remaining. But the Irish had taken the lead back at 71-70. After the Gobbler's 72-73 deficit in the first half to take a seemingly secure 70-68 lead with 6:10 remaining.

The overtime belonged to Stevens. The transfer from Ferrum Junior College brought the Gobbler back twice, the first time on a hard, arcing one-hander to make it 87-85. And the second on a big three-point shot that cut the deficit to 91-86 with 40 seconds left. "Did I feel the pressure?" he asked, repeating a question. "Heck, I don't know what it is."

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And with Gary Brokaw standing on the floor line, with 18 seconds left, it looked like Stevens would keep his record perfect. But Brokaw missed, Bratton rebounded and Stevens made the big one, big one.

Frank Merriwell would have loved it.