Tech's NIT Win Stole Recruiting Time

By BILL BRILL
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The last-ditch shot by Bobby Stevens had barely landed in the basket when Virginia Tech fans everywhere were exclaiming, "Boy, that will help recruiting!"

Stevens won the NIT for the Hokies. But his corner shot that whipped Notre Dame did not win the recruiting war for Tech.

In fact, strange as it may seem, it may have hurt. Not the winning shot, actually, but the fact that Tech stayed in New York for 10 days.

The benefits from winning the NIT doubtless will come in the future. Now a lot of people who didn't know what a Virginia Tech was are well aware. The national publicity should help, but not this year.

Tech Coach Don DeVoe and his recruiters, Sonny Smith and Jim Hallihan, have spent countless hours on the road in search of their greatest need. The Big Man.

They have not signed him, and now it looks as if they will not.

"Realistically, I have my doubts," said DeVoe, who did one of the nation's great coaching jobs this year as Tech went 22-5. "Optimistically, I'd like to say yes we will."

Some of the big boys are left, including a few great ones. But Tech is not leading on any of them, with the possible exception of one junior college center.

DeVoe and his staff gambled this year. "We went after quality," said DeVoe. "We went after some of the best players in the country."

The major disappointment had to be the loss of 7-foot Jeff Crompton of Burlington, N.C., to North Carolina. Not only did Crompton fail to sign with Tech, but he failed to visit after promising that he would.

"That bothered me," DeVoe admits. "I can't believe a boy would go into a situation where he'll have to compete with four others who are 6-9 or better." But Crompton did just that.

"We set our sights high," DeVoe said. "We got bumped by so many of the really good players. But I still think we did the right thing. We'll need players of that category if we're going to compete with the schedule we have the next three or four years."

Tech is scarcely destitute. No less than eight of the top nine return next year, with only Allian Bristow graduating. Add to that group transfers Dennis Shrewsbury and Mark Cartwright and promising freshman Mike Collins, who missed most of the year with a leg injury.

The problem, though, is lack of height and the fact that next year's team will be senior oriented. Four of this year's starters, guards Stevens and Charlie Thomas and forwards Ed Frasier and Craig Lieder, were juniors. So was No. 6 man Calvin Wade.

That means there will be a tremendous void a year from now, which will have to be filled with freshmen or junior college transfers who can play immediately.

The other problem is lack of sophomores on this year's club. None played. Thus next year's team will have no juniors not a problem but the year after that there will be no seniors. That can definitely be a disadvantage.

Tech's NIT stay actually cost the Hokies two weeks with the prospects they were after. "It definitely changed our plans," said DeVoe. "We couldn't stay on top of the kids we had recruited all year during that period."

Smith made a point recently that most Tech fans have overlooked. "We were only recruiting the boys we have been after all year long. You can't win the NIT and then start looking for some others."

"You can't get in late on a kid you haven't recruited," DeVoe seconded. "If he knows you weren't after him all year, you aren't going to get him."

Actually, that wasn't necessary anyway. Tech was after the players it needed, and wanted. It simply, up to now, has not gotten the center.

The two prospects signed thus far, Kentucky guard Denny Fugate and West Point forward Duke Thorpe, are good ones. All the other 11 returnees are good players. But The Big Man is not on campus.

"We just can't sign a guy because he's big," DeVoe said. "He has to be able to play, too."

Tech knows who those players are. The trouble is, so far none of them has decided to spend the next four years in Blacksburg.

"We'll keep trying," DeVoe said. "I feel we're doing what we should be doing. With the freshmen now eligible, as soon as you get one of these big men, you can play him."

Nobody is certain exactly when the that will be, but each day the chances diminish that The Big Man will be in a Tech uniform next season.