Clutch Free Throws By Davis Win Cliffhanger For Va. Tech Gobblers

By Bill Mason

Sports Editor

BLACKSBURG—Tech Cliffhanger exploded Saturday night with hopping, shouting Gobbler basketball players and a tremendous victory shout from jubilant fans who greeted the Gobblers 83-82 win over keen-edged Auburn as if it were a national championship.

Cool headed Russell Davis, a junior college transfer forward from Raeford, N.C., sank two clutch free throws in a one-on-one situation to tie and win as baratering a game as Virginia Tech has won at home in years.

An exuberant head coach Don DeVoe summed it up simply: "We played a helluva good ball team and won a war."

The Southeastern Conference Tigers played flawless ball, getting outstanding performances from fantastic freshman guard Eddie Johnson, former high school All-American Mike Mitchell (6-8, '75), hot-shooting sophomore guard Eddie Johnson, defending SEC scoring leader, and junior Gary Redding.

Tech apted to an early lead but the smooth, machine-like Tigers went ahead, partly on sharper rebounding, and it took a comeback by the Gobblers to force a 46-46 tie at halftime.

DeVoe made some defensive adjustments that paid off in the second half. Larry Cooke (the other half of the junior college duo that has breathed new life into Tech) was assigned to guard Johnson.

The coach stated, "You can’t say enough for Johnson.”

"Kyle (Mckee) was brilliant and Mike (Collins) was brilliant in spots. Russell Davis was nothing but just cool. Prior to this game he had shot 91 percent on free throws. We had our best man at the line."

DeVoe praised his playmaker: "Dave (Sensabaugh) practiced just once this week. He hurt his ankle in the Vanderbilt Tournament, yet he got right out there and led the offense." The coach told a post-game press conference. "It may sound silly, but it was just a team victory."

DeVoe praised the play of Cooke on both offense and defense and observed that both reserves Duke Thorpe and forward Barry Jones came through with big goals the first time they had their hands on the ball.

Tech had appeared doomed when Johnson sank a long shot to give Auburn the lead with .12 seconds to play and was fouled on the play.

When Johnson missed the foul shot, "We ran an emergency scoring play to Russell Davis," DeVoe explained. When Davis was covered, Sensabaugh took the shot, missed, and Davis was fouled by Redding as both went after the rebound.

The coach added, "We were really fortunate to get a loose ball foul." He turned Davis’ clutch free throws "a real gutsy one on one."

DeVoe diagrammed a play that never had to be used of strategy in case the free throw attempt missed. "Cook was ready to swarm the boards."

The play was the same one on which Cooke got the tap-in that won the Florida game in the final seconds on Dec. 2.

Commenting on the Auburn coach, DeVoe said, "Bob Davis has done an excellent job of coaching, just letting them do what they do best."

DeVoe went on, "It’s too early to say but the boys have totally accepted the transfers—they love another on this team and they want to win."

Still climbing down from the cloud the win had left him on, DeVoe concluded concerning the winning free throws: "(Bobby) Stevens made a superb play to win the NIT, but I think this was better. This time you had to think, not just to react."

Davis and Cooke led Tech scoring with 21 each, Cooke hitting on a very warm 9 of 19 including some perfect shots from "downtown," and Davis getting 9 of 20.

Mike Collins, with a hot 7 for 10 from the floor and two out of three from the line, had 16, and Kyle Mckee, who dominated the boards with 13 rebounds, had 18 points, playing possibly his greatest home game.

Finishing up the scoring were Sensabaugh with three and Thorpe and Jones, each with two.

Auburn placed four in double figures with sharpshooter Mitchell (11 of 18 from the field) and Johnson (10 of 20) leading the way with 24 and 20 points. Redding chipped in with 15 and Mules, Patrick had 10.