Tech Launches 'Tough' Run Against Buckeyes Tonight

By Bill Millsaps

Virginia Tech's basketball team tonight embarks on a five-day, four-game run that coach Don DeVoe calls "tougher than what we faced" in winning the National Invitation Tournament two seasons ago in New York.

The Hokies take on Ohio State's Buckeyes (3-1) tonight in Columbus. Friday night, they meet Michigan (3-1) in the first round of the Michigan Invitational. If they can somehow get past the Wolverines, they'll likely play unbeaten Washington (6-0), ranked 13th in this week's UPI national basketball poll, in the tournament final Saturday night.

Monday night in Blacksburg, the Hokies will play host to unbeaten (4-0) Alabama, currently ranked eighth in both national polls.

DeVoe is, however, confident the Hokies are going to give a good account of themselves during their five-day "exam." Tech has won four of its first five games in what has to rank as one of the major surprises of the young college basketball season.

What bodes especially well for the Hokies is that they've won three of four on the road, where independent teams of uncertain potential seldom fare well.

Last year, the Hokies finished 13-13 and lost four starters. They looked like easy meat for 1974-75—until assistant coaches Sonny Smith and Jim Hallihan went down to Louisburg (N.C.) Junior College and signed 6-6 Russell Davis and 6-4 Larry Cooke.

"That turned our season around right there," said DeVoe.

Both Davis and Cooke are superior players. Davis, a JC All-American forward who "has a world of ability," according to DeVoe, is Tech's leading scorer with a 21.8 points-per-game average. Cooke, a smoothie who is at home at either guard or forward, is averaging 15.2 points per contest.

When the two got to Tech Coliseum, they encountered no problems in adjusting to their new teammates. "The boys we had in the program just accepted them right away," said DeVoe.

While they were accepting the new stars, some of the holdover players made great improvement. Kyle McKees, weighing 13 pounds more (205) than he did last season, is a much more physical player inside. The 6-9 junior center is averaging 10.8 points and 9.2 rebounds per game, and he's playing tough defense. Equally great strides have been made by 6-8, 215-pound junior Mike Collins, who is scoring an 11.8 clip at the "other" forward spot.

Junior point guard Dave Salsibough has been doing a first-rate job quarterbacking Tech's offense, and DeVoe said he is now fully recovered from the ankle injury that hampered him last week. The All-America did not prevent Salsibough from playing the full 40 minutes in the Hokies' 83-82 victory over Auburn Saturday night in Blacksburg.

Backup point man Mark Cartwright is recovering from back spasms that kept him out of the Auburn game and should be available against Ohio State tonight. DeVoe also said he expects sixth man Duke Thorpe to be much more effective than he was in a 13-minute appearance against Auburn.

The Hokies opened the season with victories at VMI and Florida. Then they took 40 more shots, won the boards and outscored Vanderbilt by 12 from the field — and lost, 75-72, in the first round of the Vandy Invitational tourney. Tech downed Austin Pesy in the tournament's consolation game, and the Hokies finally came home Saturday night to beat Auburn on Davis' two free throws with one second on the clock.

"I have to be honest with you," said DeVoe. "I am shocked that we are 4-1 at this point. I figured we'd be 2-3. I even thought we could be 1-4 and still have played very well.

"I thought before the season that if we could somehow get out of December with a 6-4 record, we'd be in position to have a super season. Since we only have to win two of our next five to be 6-4, I'd say that is within our reach."

After the first of the year, the Hokies play eight of their remaining 16 games in Tech Coliseum, where Tech's record over the past four years-plus is a handsome 50-4. None of Tech's road games in January and February are in the impossible category. A 6-4 record at the end of December would put the Hokies in excellent position to win 18 games, a number which would almost certainly earn them a berth in the NCAA tournament field.

"All of that is a long, long way off," said DeVoe. "While I am very, very pleased with what we've done so far, we still have to prove ourselves. These next five games will have a lot to do with how we finish the season."

At least the Hokies go into tonight's game at Ohio State with history on their side. Tech has never lost to a Big Ten team in basketball. The Hokies are 2-0 vs. Purdue, 1-0 vs. Indiana and 2-0 vs. Ohio State.