Gobblers Win in Last Second 83-82

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HARRINGTON — In the superlatively moment of need, Virginia Tech gratefully turned to its coolest hand Saturday night and eked out an 83-82 victory over a surprisingly good Auburn basketball team.

Trailing by one point with one second left in the game, Russell Davis was fouled, calmly stepped to the free throw line and tossed in both ends of a one-and-one situation. With that, 8,500 partisan fans went berserk. It was the 17th straight time the Hokies won their home opener.

"We stood there and just concentrated on putting in that first shot," Davis said after handing the Hokies their fourth victory in five games. "It was the most important free shot of the year, and I knew it was up to me."

Fortunately for Tech, Davis is deadly accurate from the line. Going into this game, he had made just one of 15 free throws.

"Thank God he was the one up there for us," Tech Coach Don DeVoe said. "Any time you’re in a position like that, something upstairs is looking out for you when your best man hits the line."

Davis, who transferred to Tech this Fall from Lansing (N.C.) Junior College, said he had confidence in his own ability, and in retrospect was glad he got the chance to score those winning points.

"My percentage is the highest on the team," he said, "so I probably would have wanted to be the one up there. Sure, there was a lot of pressure on me. But if you missed after I made the first one,"

Davis got his opportunity when a shot by Dave Sensabaugh was partially blocked by Auburn’s Mike Mitchell. During the scramble for the ball, Gary Redding went over Davis back and was called for the foul.

"Because of the noise from the crowd I didn’t even hear the whistle," Davis admitted. "I knew it definitively was a foul, but I wasn’t sure if the official saw it."

"I’m just happy things worked out the way they did, because I sure didn’t expect Auburn to be this good. I really didn’t."

The War Eagles, using three freshmen in their starting line-up, forced 14 ties and 16 lead changes during this game. And if it hadn’t been for a couple of adjustments by DeVoe, would have registered their fourth straight triumph.

"They hurt us in the first half by releasing Redding," DeVoe said. "They let him get some easy baskets. And at halftime, we told Larry Cook to back off instead of going to the board. We had him come back and had Sensabaugh pick up the ball and stop that quick release."

"Another big adjustment came with about 16 minutes left in the game, when we shifted Sensabaugh off onto Sam Pickowski and had Cook cover Eddie Johnson. That gave us more strength against Johnson, who was the top scorer in the Southeastern Conference last season as a freshman."

Despite his strategy changes, DeVoe was taking even further precautions. With 12 seconds left in the game and the Hokies trailing, 82-81, DeVoe called timeout and called for an "emergency scoring play" for Davis.

"Johnson had just scored and had a free throw coming," DeVoe explained. "If he missed the foul shot, was to double screen and flash the ball to Davis. If he missed the shot, then we were going to foul our poorest free throw shooter, who was Wayne Bray."

Johnson did miss the free throw and Tech did try the double screen, but Davis was blocked out along the baseline so Sensabaugh took his foul shot and the rest is history.

"We got a couple chances there at the end of Auburn coach Bob Davis said, "but Tech just wouldn’t bend a lick. They just got much better play than that, but even though I’m disappointed we lost, I’m real proud we could take three freshmen and stay with Tech the way we did."

"Anytime you’re using that many kids, you have to expect mistakes. Tonight, we had a few too many turnovers and not enough rebounds. But we didn’t lose our poise."

DeVoe summed up Davis’ selection of Auburn when he said we feel we played a hell of a great basketball team and we

Auburn’s Glen Moon Struggles Against Russell Davis (34) as Mike Mitchell Hits Deck

Times Photo by Wayne Deel