Davis’ FTs Lift Hokies Over Auburn

By Bill Millsaps
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BLACKSBURG — Russell Davis, a junior college transfer playing his first game before his new fans, dropped in two free throws with one second left and gave Virginia Tech an 83-82 basketball victory over Auburn Saturday night.

Davis’ 20th and 21st points of the night ended a furious rally that produced 18 lead exchanges, 14 ties and Tech’s fourth win in five games this season.

The 6-6 product of Louisburg Junior College and Raeford, N.C., got his chance to produce the game-winning points when he was knocked to the floor in a scramble for a loose ball at Tech’s end of the court. The Hokies’ Dave Sensibaugh had cut up a desperation jumper, and it was partially blocked by Auburn freshman center Mike Mitchell. In the fight for possession, referee Steve Honzo whistled the Tigers’ Gary Redding for going over Davis’ back.

To increase the tension of the moment, Auburn coach Bob Davis took a timeout. Then Davis finally stopped the line. He got the ball, fired it quickly, Swish. “Some of the tension left then,” he said. Davis had a Tech Coliseum crowd of 8,800 exploded cheers. “I was real confident of making the second one,” said the 68-85 percent free throw shooter. Make it he did to deliver Auburn its first loss in four games.

The Tigers, who started a lineup that included three freshmen, seemed to have won the game with 12 seconds left. After Davis had hit a layup to give Tech an 81-80 lead with .26 left, Tiger sophomore guard Eddie Johnson hit a 20-foot jumper, and was fouled, with :12 remaining.

Had he hit the free throw, that would have given Auburn a two-point lead and given the Hokies little more than a small chance to tie and force overtime. But Johnson missed, Tech rebounded and hurried the ball up the floor.

The Hokies tried to work the ball to Davis, on what Tech coach Don DeVoe called “an emergency scoring play.” But Auburn had him covered. With the game nearing its end, Sensibaugh fired and set in motion the events that put Davis at the free throw line.

Out of breath from the frantic finish, DeVoe said, “We played a helluva great basketball team and won.”

No question Auburn is a much better team than the one that finished 10-16 last year and ninth in the Southeastern Conference. Mitchell, one of the top high school players in the nation last year, scored 24 points, while Johnson, the SEC scoring leader last year as a freshman, put up 20 points. Redding had 15 points, while the other two first-year starters, Myles Patrick and Stan Pietkiewicz, had 10 each.

As good as the Tigers are, and they are going to be, they were not quite good enough.

Almost every player Tech had occasional moments of brilliance. Larry Cooke, another JC transfer from Louisburg, pumped in 21 points and had six rebounds. Center Kyle McKee went to war with Mitchell and came out with 18 points and a game-high 15 rebounds. Mike Collins played only 24 minutes but scored 16 points (7 of 10 from the floor).

Sensibaugh, the 5-10 point guard, has an ankle injury that permitted him only one day of practice for the week, yet he went all the way and dished out seven assists.

Tech twice led by seven (23-16, 27-20) midway of the first half, before encountering some brief ball-handling and shooting problems. Mitchell, who had 18 points at halftime, triggered a 10-7 Auburn charge that produced a 40-34 lead. Tech righted itself in the last three minutes and gained a tie at 46 at intermission.

From there on, it was very, very close. Tech led once by four (64-60), and Auburn once by five (80-75) with 1:45 left. Collins hit from underneath to pare Auburn’s lead to 80-78 with 1:35 left, then 16 seconds later, Patrick was called for charging. At 55, Collins was fouled on a follow-in shot and missed the first of a two-shot foul.

He made the second to cut the Auburn lead to one, then Tech went into an all-court press. Honzo whispered the Tigers for not getting the ball across mid-court in the required 10 seconds, although only nine seconds had run off the clock.

Davis shortly scored on his layup (an assist from McKee) and Tech had its next-to-last lead of the night.

After Tech had logged its 17th consecutive victory in a home opener, DeVoe said, "We were very fortunate to win. Somebody upstairs had to be looking out for us to get out best free throw shooter at the line with one second left."

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AUBURN

Redding 13-3 2 4 9 15
Mitchell 11-18 0 1 4 24
Patterson 7-10 0 0 1 17
Johnson 10-20 1 1 1 20
Pietkiewicz 5-14 0 0 0 10
Moore 1 1 1 2 12
Bracey 1 0 0 0 12
Henderson 1 1 1 2 12
Team Totals 29-57 4 18 7 83

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VIRGINIA TECH

Davis 21-0 0 0 0 42
Cooke 2-5 0 0 0 21
Collins 7-15 0 0 0 22
McKee 5-8 2 2 1 18
Sensibaugh 5-5 1 0 0 10
Rollo 5-15 0 0 0 10
Wadsworth 1 0 0 0 2
Team Totals 21-58 11-14 12 83