Tech Hitters Are Eager

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Sports Writer

MINNEAPOLIS — After arriving at the University of Minnesota's Bier- man Field Friday, Dennis Duff took a look at the centerfield wall—and smiled.

"This should be a great hitter's park," said Duff, Virginia Tech's leading batsman as the Gobblers entered the NCAA Mideast Regional. "The background is super. I only hope we take advantage of it."

Tech, making its second straight NCAA trip, began play in the Mideast field this afternoon against Mid-American Conference champ Central Michigan.

And while it was work at the plate that was expected to carry the Gobblers this season, it has been an improved pitching staff that has taken Tech to its 31-game winning streak and 34-7 overall record.

The Gobblers enter the NCAA's final 34 with a .259 team batting average, a mark that is 50 points lower than any of the other three Mideast entrants. Duff's .333 mark leads Tech, and that's a figure that he's hovered around through a season of consistency.

"I really thought we'd be a lot better hitting team," said Duff, who bats fifth in the Gobblers' order and plays leftfield. "I guess everybody expected our hitting to be our strong point after last season (when Tech hit .292)."

"When we got off to a slow start this year (a 1-6 record), maybe that hurt some people's confidence. It's a good thing our pitching came around, or we wouldn't be here."

Duff went through one stretch this season where he picked up 16 hits in 23 at-bats. And after batting practice at the tournament site Friday, he was encouraged about a good tournament.

Bierman Field isn't exactly a pitcher's paradise. It's 330 down both lines, with a short 360 to the power alleys. To dead center, the distance is 380. And then there's a 10-foot high dark green wall surrounding the park—with another 15-foot extension atop the centerfield wall to help the hitters.

"They're always helping those guys out," cracked righthander Duke Dickerson, who was picked by Coach Bob Humphreys to start for the Gobblers in today's opener. "The pitcher never gets any help. A power alley of 360 might seem short, but that's five feet deeper than our centerfield fence."

Duff, a junior from Leesburg, said the Gobblers figure that NCAA jitters won't be a part of their itinerary this trip.

"Last year, I remember I was really nervous the first game," said Duff. "This time, we seem to be a lot more at ease. I figure some of us were scared last time. Like Coach (Bob) Humphreys says, this is a chance to redeem ourselves."

In today's second game (4 p.m.), host Minnesota takes a perfect 1977 home record (23-0) against Southeastern Conference runnerup Florida.

Friday's two losers meet in Saturday's first game at 10 a.m., with the two winners meeting at 1 p.m. Saturday's 4 p.m. contest puts the 10 a.m. winner against the 1 p.m. loser.