Tech's first Olympian brings home the bronze

By David C. Lotts

After Vernell "Bimbo" Coles led a highly charged Virginia Tech basketball team past John Thompson's Georgetown last fall, Thompson commented: "Bimbo's a most interesting player, and I think we will be seeing more of him."

That we did. In fact, the whole world did.

Coles, one of nearly 100 U.S. players to compete for 12 spots on Thompson's Olympic squad, survived five cuts and made Virginia Tech history when he became the university's first student athlete to make the Olympics, held this year in Seoul, South Korea.

The Olympian's hopes for a gold medal were dashed, however, in a disappointing 82-76 loss to a bigger, more experienced Russian team in the semifinals. The Americans then played for the bronze, convincingly beating Australia, 78 to 49, on Sept. 29.

Coles, who shared point-guard responsibilities with Georgetown's Charles Smith, averaged 19.2 minutes of playing time—the most of any non-starter on the Olympic team. He averaged 7.1 points in Olympic play and tied the team's best free-throw percentage with 84.6 percent. Coles also led the team in steals with 11.

Before Olympic play, Coles's best game, perhaps, was against a Michael Jordan-led team of NBA players at Charlotte Coliseum. Coles led the Olympic team with 15 points to beat the pro-team 95-84.

In Olympic play against Russia, Coles, virtually an unknown outside of the Metro Conference, showed his familiar poise, speed, and determination. He played some gritty defense and made some smooth assists, and, at one point, drove the ball the length of the court and sped past the giant Russian trees for a critical, morale-boosting layup.

But it wasn't enough, as the Russians easily handled the U.S. pressure defense and shut down the U.S.'s top gun, Danny Manning, who sat out nearly 18 minutes of the first half after picking up two quick fouls in the first two minutes of the game.

During the final seconds as the Russians scored the final basket, Coles stood on the sidelines, his hands on his hips, stunned by the loss. The ultimate payoff from months of grueling practices, travel, and homesickness had just slipped away.

"We just didn't play well that night," said Coles. "We were more