Steve's Faces 'Challenge'

By Harold Pearson

When it comes to basketball, Virginia Tech's Bobby Stevens doesn't start leaving through scholarly tomes in search of an answer to the complexities that many believe are a part of the game that had its beginning with the hanging of a peach basket on a YMCA wall.

To the littlest Hokie, such complexities are for others. To Stevens the game is spelled out simply in one word—C-H-A-L-L-E-N-G-E.

"That," he said, "is what basketball is all about—the challenge."

That is not from any book, either, but experiences on the playing courts of a hundred or more basketball emporiums. The greatest came on the court when the world's most famous sports emporium—Madison Square Garden.

With more than 13,000 watching in the cavernous environs of that mecca off Broadway and millions more on TV, Stevens missed one shot that would have given Virginia Tech the National Invitation Tournament championship.

Then, with 0:02 remaining, the little blond retrieved his miss, took another jumper that dropped through the nets in perfect synchronization with the red light and horn that ended the championship overtime against Notre Dame.

Stevens—and Tech—had again met the challenge. The NIT title was theirs.

Things haven't been the same since. Busby would be the best way to describe the time lapse since for Stevens, who has been to "quite a few banquets and dinners."

It's a great memory. An impossible dream that came true—by a margin of five points spread over four games. The feeling always returns.

"I like to tell the people how I felt," Stevens said yesterday as he was asked again to go back to that Sunday afternoon last March. "I really get the feeling I had then. As far as the emotions and adrenalin goes, I do go back to that time."

It was something you had to experience to believe. Five Virginians—the Tech starters—just don't do such things to the likes of New Mexico, Fairfieid, Alabama and Notre Dame. When your tallest man is 6-7 in a world of big men, you aren't even supposed to get the chance.

Unless you meet and beat the challenge. "A lot of times we get together and think back," admitted the Norfolk native, who is one of four returning starters from that dream. "The thing that really made it all possible (getting there and winning) was that we matched the bigness with our quickness, our execution, our togetherness.

"We did what we had to do to win."

In doing so, the challenge of this season was made harder.

"We're looking for a good one," said Stevens of the campaign that gets started Saturday night when VMI invades the Hokie Heaven that is Tech Coliseum. "We're looking for a rough season because people will be taking a second look at us and that's what we want them to do.

That is not to be taken to mean that the program. That's what last year helped do.

"It'll be a rough season, mentally as well as physically. We will just have to work harder on execution and teamwork. Where we may be had 80 per cent last year, we will need 90 this year."

They will be missing Allan Bristow, the Richmonder who was their "big" man at 6-7. Craig Lieder, who "busted out in the Old Dominion Classic and really came on strong the rest of the season," will move to the middle. Where it was an eight-man (almost six-man) operation last year, Stevens feels it can be a 12-man deal this time.

"Our staff (coaches) went out and recruited the type player who would fit our style—unselfish," he said of the additions. "And that's what they got, the same type players we won with."

That is not to be taken to mean that the former Norfolk Catholic and Ferrum Junior College ace is predicting another post-season title.

"Right now," he said, "I'm just worried about the regular season. We can worry about post-season afterwards, when we get to the end of the regular season."

It's going to be harder, of course. Stevens doesn't think his shot, one of the most famous now in basketball, will make him any more the target of the opposition.

"They'll be looking more at Craig," the senior floor leader said. "They're not going to ignore a 20-point man for a nine-point man. He's the player."

Lieder, a 6-5½ native of Norfolk, averaged 16.5 on the season, but after his 5 in the Old Dominion Classic, he hit 20 or more II times and had 26 in that championship game with Notre Dame—including the 18-foot jumper at 0:01 that forced the overtime.

"Then maybe they'll worry about me," Stevens continued. "But that doesn't bother me. If I can't do it, Charlie (Thomas) will or Ed (Frazier) will or...right on down the line.

"Whoever has to do it, will do it."

For Stevens—and his fellow Hokies—that's what it's all about—the challenge.