Tech Hosts VMI

'71 Upset Haunts DeVoe For Opener

By BILL CATE
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BLACKSBURG—In a little over two years, Virginia Tech basketball coach Don DeVoe has progressed from a graduate assistant at Ohio State to one of the nation's best young coaches.

There have been many outstanding victories along the way. It started with a victory over Eastern Kentucky—a 20-point victory—in DeVoe's first year. It was Tech's last game of the season and Eastern Kentucky went to the NCAA playoffs that season.

Then last year, there were victories over South Carolina, Florida State, and Ohio State (on the road). Then came the NIT championship where Tech and DeVoe reaped national acclaim.

But the game DeVoe will always remember wasn't that one-point victory over Notre Dame for the NIT title. It wasn't that victory over Ohio State in Columbus. In fact, it wasn't even a victory.

You probably remember two years ago in the ill-fated Roanoke Invitational (in the Roanoke Civic Center) when VMI, yes, defeated Tech 52-51. That's the game DeVoe will never forget.

That's also a game Tech was not supposed to lose.

After the game, DeVoe walked to mid-court to shake then VMI coach Mike Schuler's hand. DeVoe's face was white. He couldn't believe it. Neither could anybody else.

It was probably the best win in recent VMI sports history and remained so until the Keydet football team whipped Tech a couple weeks ago.

After the game, DeVoe remained in the dressing room for what seemed to be hours. His assistant, Sonny Smith, finally retrieved him to talk to the press.

"I'll always remember that game," says DeVoe, whose Tech team will meet VMI in the season-opener Saturday night. The teams have not met since that December night two years ago.

"There were a lot of circumstances involved in the game," DeVoe says, "but the big thing was that our kids weren't ready to play and evidently that was my fault. I want to make sure I don't let these kids down again.

"I was new at Tech and I didn't realize how such a rivalry can affect young kids. I have to make sure we're ready to play this time."

Bill Blair, currently the VMI coach, was an assistant when the Keydets clipped Tech. But he remembers it well.

"We're not approaching this game like we (VMI) approach the football game," Blair says. "I've told my kids it's just another game on the schedule. We have 23 more. There is no sense in getting them psyched up. The game will take care of that.

"I'm aware of how tough Tech is at Blacksburg. I know how many they've lost at their place. Frankly, we consider it a privilege to play the NIT champions. I just hope we play well."

DeVoe, as you might expect, is concerned about playing without his departed superstar, Allan Bristow.

"It's going to be interesting to see how well we play without Bristow," says the coach who has all his starters (except Bristow) returning.

"He averaged 23 points a game and over 11 rebounds a game for the last three years. We have to find out whether the other players can make up for his absence."

Bill Blair is anxious to find out, too.