It gets worse for Gobblers

(A Staff Dispatch)
TUSCALOOSA, Ala. — If you wanted to fool around with cliches, you could say Virginia Tech went on a temporarily fraying run into the fire here tonight.

Or you could say the Virginia Tech basketball team is in hot water, then there’s Leon DeVoe’s basketball team is in danger of dropping below the .500 mark when the Hokies meet talented and angry Alabama here tonight.

Tech dropped one it was supposed to win, a 76-74 loss to Auburn, Saturday night as the Hokies record fell to 1-1. But Alabama is so much better than Auburn they aren’t in the same league, although they really are. (the Southeastern Conference).

Alabama is probably the SEC’s best team and the Crimson Tide hasn’t forgotten the one-point upset loss to Virginia Tech in the NIT semi-finals last season.

“Alabama may be the best team I’ve seen in two years,” said Sonny Smith, the Tech assistant coach who has watched the Crimson Tide this season. “They are much better than last year.”

One of the main reasons for the improvement is a player Tech tried to recruit — junior college All-American Charlie Russell. They say Russell is out of the world, especially when he jumps. Another thing going for the Tide is J.R. Dunn, a freshman guard who was a high school All-American. And then there’s Leon Douglas, the 6-10 intimidator who’s back for another season.

How does Alabama play? Very fast and very high.

“We’ll have to stop the fast break to have a chance,” Smith said.

Of course, Tech will also have to get some rebounds — a serious problem since the Hokies’ tallest starter is 6-5 — and shoot considerably better than it did against Auburn Saturday night.

Tech’s shooting against Auburn was unbelievable. It was also very bad. The Hokies took 91 shots from the field (Auburn shot 65 times) and made only 27. The Tigers made seven more field goals, and, truthfully, their shot selection was awful.

The two shots that beat Tech, the last one by freshman guard Eddie Johnson with five seconds left, were from very long range.

The Hokies were behind the entire game until the last five minutes. They battled back from a seven-point deficit to take a four-point lead, but threw it away with a series of mistakes.

Tech went into a stall in the last 2:30, but couldn’t protect the lead.

“I’m convinced we did the right thing,” said Tech coach DeVoe. “I believe you are better off trying to hold the ball away from home.”

“We played exceptionally well at times,” said senior guard Bobby Stevens. “Auburn played well together. Their guards (Johnson who finished with 26 and Mike Christian who got 21) are very good. I didn’t do the defensive job I should have.”

Tech had a remote chance to win the game. The Hokies had three seconds to send it into overtime. The out-of-bounds play was designed to give Craig Liedler the shot, but he wasn’t open. Calvin Wade got away a desperation attempt that just missed.

“I just hope we don’t see any better guards than Auburn had,” said DeVoe.

—BILL CATE