CHARLOTTE, N.C.—Second-ranked North Carolina kept waiting for Virginia Tech’s Gobblers to roll over and play dead Thursday night, but it was quite the opposite.

The Gobblers led most of the way before succumbing to the undefeated Tar Heels, 83-78.

Tech, now 2-3, was leading 41-39 at the half but ran into foul problems in the second half which forced high-scoring guard Bobby Stevens and Tech’s only big man Kyle McKee to sit out over 10 minutes each.

UNC’s Ed Stahl and Bobby Jones, two key figures for Coach Dean Smith’s ACC team, fouled out in the last five minutes of the game and for a moment Tech looked as if it might pull off the upset, narrowing it to a one-point Tar Heel lead with less than a minute remaining. But Steven’s fifth foul and another foul and two turnovers spelled disaster for the Techmen.

“This game should help us,” UNC Coach Dean Smith said afterwards. “It was close and against a good team ... it was a very physical game.”

North Carolina was down 41-39 at the half Thursday night, but got three straight baskets in the opening minutes of the second period and went as much as 10 up on the Gobblers before Virginia Tech started a late rally that moved them within a point.

But then Carolina went into its four corner offense, forcing Tech to foul, and Darrell Elston got six crucial points, four on free throws, to ice the game. Bobby Jones scored 12 points in the second half for N.C. and finished with 20 to lead all scorers. Elston totaled 18.

“Elston certainly played well for us in the clutch,” said Smith. “But Jones was magnificent throughout the game.”

Virginia Tech, which led the Tar Heels by as many as eight in the first half, was led by Charlie Thomas with 15 points and Ed Frazier with 10 as it posed its third loss in five outings.

Gobbler coach Don DeVoe called Carolina “a great team, the best pressing team we’ve ever faced.” But he praised the way his squad had come through, particularly the drive from 10 points back.

“A lot of teams would have folded,” he said. “We didn’t fold and that’s certainly to our credit.”

The Tar Heels, 6-0, now head into a Christmas vacation with the next game set for Dec. 28 against Biscayne, Fla. while the Atlantic Coast Conference spotlight shifts to Maryland, ranked No. 5, and undefeated Wake Forest, both of whom are headed for tournaments on the road.