January—a Crucial Month for Virginia Tech

By DENNIS LATTA
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Now the real season begins for the Virginia Tech basketball team. The preseason warmup is over.

With a poor 4-5 record, the Gobblers open the crucial month of January tonight with a home game against Eastern Kentucky. It had better be the first of many wins if Tech is going to get out of Blacksburg at the end of its regular season this year.

During this month, the Gobblers play nine games, but seven of them are in the Tech Coliseum. The visitors will include St. Bonaventure, Oral Roberts, West Virginia, and Richmond.

"We haven't hit the panic button because of our record," says starter Craig Lieder. "If our record isn't improved, we'll be in trouble February 1. But we can still see a really good record.

"We have to make our move now. Playing seven out of nine at home is a big help. It's a big relief coming home."

The Gobblers are 1-5 on the road and 3-0 at home this year. Coach Don DeVoe has lost only one game at home as head coach at Tech.

The Hokies lost their first two games in the All College Tournament last week before swamping Southwestern College to win seventh place in the eight-team event.

"We played sub-par in the first two games, that's all there was to it. I think maybe we just played so poorly against Houston that it carried over into the second game," Lieder explains.

We were beginning to question what was wrong. We just didn't click until the last game. That win really helped us. It turned things around. We played together."

"Lieder scored 34 points in the final game for one of his best performances of the season. But look for him to come out shooting tonight.

"We weren't really keying to me. It just worked out that I had the chance to score so I did. If everybody plays well together, everybody will score. We don't need for me to score that much to win."

And winning is important to the Gobblers right now. Even though they aren't saying it, they're working for the chance to get back to the NIT to defend their championship. A losing record won't get them back in the tournament.

"I don't think anybody feels any pressure to get back in the NIT, but it is in the back of our minds. We were planning to be 5-4 so we're behind schedule. We know we can't take any team lightly and take a chance of getting beaten. We need to win them all this month."

Eastern Kentucky is a team that could be taken lightly, unless you take a closer look. It is 1-5 now, after winning its first game and losing its next five. But those five losses have been to Maryland, Florida State, Oral Roberts, Louisville and South Carolina.

"I don't think we'll have any trouble getting prepared for Eastern Kentucky. We know they can play well," Lieder says.

Now that only leaves Tech to prove that it can also play well, a month at a time.