The Hokie Problem — Getting Back to the NIT

By Harold Pearson

It wasn't long until game time. There were many, more pleasant things, Don DeVoe could have been doing.

"I hope you don't want to talk about anything," the Virginia Tech coach said. "I am not a good talker on the day of a game."

But he was, even if he couldn't get certain things off his mind. In an hour or two, the Hokies would be taking the floor against another basketball team eager to beat the NIT champions.

Only the names changed—Richmond, William and Mary, Northern Illinois, Wake Forest, ad nauseam—not the purpose. Last night it was Toledo.

Still, as teams come, fire and fall back—or succeed—DeVoe can see certain things, he keeps note of certain happenings.

Such was the case on this day, as he nervously awaited the upcoming invasion of Tech Coliseum.

"There are 35 independents," he said, "and it's been made a necessary ritual by the most unexpected turn of events.

Simply put, his Hokies, including four starters from that winning aggregation (22-5), have been having trouble hitting the proverbial barn door with shots from the floor.

Latest figures show that the Hokies are averaging 10.1 fewer points than a season ago (75.4 instead of 85.5) and shooting 40.7 percent, rather than 45.7.

Even more significant in the current plight are the individual performances. Only Charlie Thomas, last year's worst shooting starter, has gone upward (40.0 to 43.3) and is No. 1 now.

And now, in the front, are Craig Lieder (52.3 to 42.3), Bobby Stevens (46.7-39.4), Ed Frazier (44.4-37.7), and Sixth man Calvin Wade dropped from 50.2 to 36.9.

DeVoe is at a loss to explain it. "I thought that would be our strong point."

A case could readily be built for the Hokies being 16-2, if each of those regulars had hit just one more basket more just each game. There has been three losses by five points, two by two points and another six.

Still, there was that modest three-game win streak last week. Not as gaudy as a year ago when it was nine straight or six in a row at the end, including the four NIT games but "the longer we play," said DeVoe, "the more encouraging it is."

But the inconsistency of it all is enough to pale even the most ardent of the Golden Hokies. Except the coach, who has not been especially blessed with All-American in his three years at the Hokie helm.

"Maybe it could be a good sign," said the 32-year-old former Buckeye. "If we get rolling, we're not playing close to our potential."

He is certain, however, that the players will soon realize what is happening and what could happen and "salvage a respectable record."

He knows that "the task doesn't get any easier in six of the last eight games on the road," where the Hokies have won but twice in eight chances.

At the end of that road, though, there is still the flickering of the lights—ever so faintly—in Madison Square Garden.

"There are 35 independents with fewer losses..."

"Yes, but not one could be defending champion in the 37th edition of the nation's oldest intercollegiate basketball tournament."

Tech could...