Duke...Moir...Apple Pie

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BLACKSBURG — To his parents, he is Charles Elliott Thorpe III. Or just plain son.

To Virginia Tech basketball fans, he's Duke. That name cascades from the rafters to the floor for every Gobbler home game when the fans chant for their favorite player.

Duke Thorpe comes to this town with a name inspired by baseball, but with a body that is built mostly for basketball.

He is a 6-6, 208-pound senior who has rarely started a Tech basketball game. He has built his reputation as Tech's super sub, but this year the Gobblers will have to forget bygone days and build a basketball team around him.

"I loved baseball," recalls Thorpe about his childhood days in tiny West Point, which is a stone's throw from the Tidewater area.

"Everyone always seemed to cut down one Dodger player—Duke Snider," he continued. "I defended him, so the guys got to calling me Duke when I was nine or 10 years old.

"I thought I would outgrow the name. But it stuck."

While his sisters call him Duke, his parents refuse to recognize anything but their son's christened name. "I like them both," he quickly adds.

Thorpe also likes his mutton chop sideburns—another trait of his since he came to Tech. He is long-armed and this helps him against bigger players.

Thorpe says his arms are long enough for pro basketball, a career he'll consider at the end of the year. If he doesn't make the pros, though, Thorpe isn't certain he'll try European basketball.

"It's hard to leave the country and my mom's apple pie," he said in his best down-home voice.

The fact is that Duke had trouble making the big jump from his home to major college basketball.

He opted for the small time at first—if you could call Roanoke College's growing program small time in 1973.

"I thought I wasn't good enough to play major college basketball," Thorpe said, admitting he was going to Roanoke.

Charlie Moir, now the coach at Tech, was completing a successful tenure for the Maroons. He had Thorpe ready to sign with Roanoke, but then Moir left for the Tulane job and basketball history changed in the state.

"When he left," recalled Thorpe, "I thought about going to Madison."

However, Tech assistants Sonny Smith and Jim Hallihan soon changed Thorpe's mind.

"If Coach Moir had stayed," said Thorpe, "no one would have changed my mind.

"It was tough to come to Tech over Madison. I had played at a small 1-A school and we didn't play top-notch competition. Everyone convinced me I could play here, but I spent a lot of sleepless nights worrying about where to go."

Thus, Thorpe was overjoyed last spring when it was announced Moir would replace Don DeVoe as Tech's head coach.

"I guess the fates meant for us to be together," said Thorpe, an often-used smile appearing on his bright face once again.

"Coach Moir is everything I thought he would be four years ago. He's a great man to talk with if you have a personal problem."

Thorpe recalls the first meeting with Moir. He was called outside of class and introduced to the Roanoke coach.

Since Thorpe arrived, he has shared dormitory space with Phil Thiemen, a white forward-guard from Louisville. The two are almost inseparable.

"Black and white never bothered me," said Thorpe, whose attitude is completely honest.

"I wanted a roommate whom I could get along with. We hit it off the first day."

In their freshman year, Thorpe and Thiemen stayed in the room much of the time.

"We talked, talked, talked," recalled Thorpe. "We both like to stay in the room, relax and watch television. We both like the same TV shows—police."

After this year, the two seniors, who will lead Tech's program, will go their separate ways.

"I don't think it will end," said Thorpe. "We know where each other lives. I'll visit him in Kentucky, he'll visit me in West Point. I guess the first summer (between their freshman and sophomore years), we called each other once a week until our parents put a stop to it. He's definitely my best friend. He's like the brother I never had."

One of the keys for Tech this year will be how well Thorpe does as a starter. In his rare starts, he usually has gotten in quick foul trouble. But the Gobblers had enough depth last year to allow Thorpe to come off the bench.

"I have to prove I can start," says Duke modestly. "I discussed starting with Coach DeVoe last year. It was hard to take the bench at first, but when the team started winning, you accept the role.

"I'm happier starting. I'll still be aggressive, but I have to cut down on my fouls. I would like to play 40 minutes."

Without a rest? "I can rest at halftime," he said quickly.

Moir likes to have Thorpe starting. "Right now," said the Tech coach, "we have to get maximum playing time out of him. He has to stay out of foul trouble—not get the charges or little hand stuff."

There are other keys for Tech besides Thorpe. Ernest Wansley will be counted on for staying out of foul trouble at center, so Tech can take advantage of his 6-11 height.

Thiemen was moving to guard. Actually, he'll be more of a wing man with sophomore Marshall Ashford the playmaker.

The forward opposite Thorpe will be 6-5/2 Les Henson from Richmond. He's a freshman who played at Massanutten last year.

It's hard to tell who Tech's top subs will be to provide depth. If there is a weakness, it's lack of experienced players to back up the starters.

Junior college transfer Ron Bell and Ron Edwards, a sophomore, will be the main backup guards along with 6-2 Chris Scott. But Scott is only a freshman.

Wansley's help will come from 6-9 Sam Foggin, a junior who hasn't seen much action in two years. He's lost 15 pounds now, under Moir's strict orders, and could have his best season.

John Greene, a 6-8 junior college transfer, and 6-8 freshman Wayne Robinson will be the backup forwards. Foggin also could play at forward.

Tech has a rugged road schedule with Virginia (two or three times), North Carolina, Jacksonville, West Virginia, Marshall, George Washington and Wake Forest all to be played away from here.

The feeling is that Tech will shoot for 15 or 16 wins. Anything above that would be a super year and it will likely depend on how much the new players blend into the program.