Tech loss blamed on ‘foul’ free throws

By JACK BOGACZYK  Sports Writer

MORGANTOWN, W. Va. — For those basketball coaches who have always worried about the fact that if there is a difference between free throws and foul shots, Virginia Tech has the answer.

Yes. As the Hokies learned Wednesday night at West Virginia University Coliseum, a free throw is a gratis shot from behind a backboard 15 feet from the basket that earns one point.

But Tech suffered most of its time at that spot free foul shots—so foul that Coach Charlie Moore pointed to his team’s 5-for-14 performance at the stripe as the main reason for the Hokies’ first loss of the young season.

Tech entered the game shooting 78 percent from the free throw line. A mere 50 percent would have been enough to keep Tech under the Hokies’ head coach. But despite scoring free more field goals than West Virginia, Tech came out on the short end of a 74-73 score.

So, when the Hokies took the Cassell Coliseum floor for practice this afternoon, you can bet free shooting was high on the priority list—right behind Ohio State, which visits Blacksburg Saturday night.

Besides the fact that it’s harder to make free throws on strange baskets than on familiar ones, the Hokies also learned several other points that should benefit a young team with a new coaching staff.

• It’s possible to ride 12 hours on a box and play good, basketball in between the departing and arriving trips.

• There’s a distinct difference between the brands of basketball played by Charleston Baptist (65-50 loser at Tech Monday) and West Virginia—both Division I teams.

• It’s nice to play at home where a girl in a Gobluer suit walks the sidelines instead of a bearded man in a Daisy Crock comic cap tugging a long rifle with blanks in it.

• The Hokies led WVU—fresh from its two impressive wins in the Hall of Fame Tournament in Springfield, Mass., 71-67 with 1:00 to go, and at that point Moore thought his team “very definitely” had their third win in as many starts.

• So not, because Mountaineers’ guard Bob Higgins—who won’t make anyone forget Jerry West since he entered the game with a 5.0 average—proceeded to score the last five of his game-high 28 points, and freshman Lowes Moore converted both ends of a bonus free throw chance with 18 seconds left.

• With 34 and 26 seconds, Tech guard Ron Bell missed on the first shot of similar bonus opportunities. Then the Hokies were hurt badly by two fouls of their own, and wondered all the way home, “What if?”

• Referee Bill Hill blew both crucial whistles that Moore shook his head about and the Hokies talked about. The first came with Moore dribbling in WVU’s front court near the top of the free throw circle. Bell was charged with holding, and Moore—who is being hailed as the next Mountaineer great after scoring 14 points in each of his first two games—redeemed himself from a 5-for-13 floor performance, by hitting the tying and winning points.

And after Tech passed the ball in bounds and Phil Thieke had missed from the right side of the board in heavy traffic, a scramble for the bouncing rebound ensued. Players followed the ball to the floor, and when Hill’s whistle sounded with four seconds left, Tech center Ernest Wansley departed with his fifth personal foul for swimming.

Wansley—who who last year could have been called the gentle giant but came out last night with aggressive play that earned him a jump-shot basket, a stuff shot, an assist, two rebounds and three fouls in the first 15—couldn’t believe he was whistled out.

“I was lying on the floor,” said Wansley, whose 15 points put him, with nine points and seven rebounds in front of a booming home state crowd. “I couldn’t believe it when he called the foul on me.”

Bodies were piling on top of me.”

“I don’t want to blame the officials,” said Moir. “But I thought they called it pretty tight. That fourth foul on Ernest (with 13:26 to play) ...”

“But we lost the game. We certainly played well enough to win, and I thought this team did a helluva job considering it was our first time on the road. They played hard, and showed me something if they play this way all the time, they’ll really have something going for them.”

Moir unveiled a zone defense late in the first half, displaying both a 2-3 and 2-2-1. The Hokies managed a 25-27 halftime lead from that work, but West Virginia found its range early in the second half to pull even. The lead changed hands 14 times in the final 20 minutes.

“We made too many mistakes in the front court,” said Moir, recalling some sloppy passing by Tech’s guards that resulted in four turnovers and three WVU bounces. “The guys weren’t moving like we need to move in our offense. We didn’t execute the fast break the way I thought they would. Maybe we were just a little too cautious.”

Maybe. But you can’t question that foul shooting. Moir didn’t.