Gobblers Face Tar Heels, Smith Remains Silent

By JERRY VERNON
Staff Writer

Trying to reach Dean Smith during basketball season is like looking for Henry Kissinger at the onset of another Mideast crisis.

If you call him in Israel, he’s probably in Egypt.

Smith did not go quite that far with his University of North Carolina cagers at the first of this week. His Tar Heels travelled north Monday and whipped Michigan State 81-58 (not to be confused with the top ranked University of Michigan).

Due to the distance, Smith did not return to the Chapel Hill campus until late Tuesday and he was just ‘plumb’ north North Carolina tied up. As his secretary said, “Coach Smith might not have time” to talk about this Saturday’s game against Virginia Tech in Roanoke.

He didn’t. Consequently, one can only conclude that the Tar Heel mentor is either a busy or worried man.

The latter possibility holds limited appeal since the nationally-ranked Tar Heels’ next opponent, Athletes-In-Action, who roll into Chapel Hill tonight, have never scared anyone into a schizoid frenzy. On the other hand maybe Smith is looking toward the Virginia Tech game with anticipation. The Hokies have bothered some prominent teams in the past.

And at least the nationally ranked Tar Heels fit into the ‘prominent’ category. As for the ‘bothered’ area; that’s a little less sound. It’s been more than a decade since a Hokie squad beat North Carolina. In fact Tech has managed the feat only ten times out of 56 tries since the rivalry began in 1912. Last season the Heels edged the visiting Gobblers 88-75.

This time North Carolina comes to Virginia minus one starter — Mitch Kupchak — from last year’s 25-4 squad. Returning starters Walter Davis, Tommy LaGarde and John Keuster along with acrobatic dribbler Phil Ford have helped the Tar Heels to a 3-1 mark this season, 6-8 Bruce Buckley and 6-6 freshman Mike O’Koren have alternated in 6-10 Kupchak’s vacated spot. The rookie probably has the edge after four games.

Tech, idle until Saturday, will go into the game with a week’s rest. The Hokies narrowly slipped past Ohio State 84-77 last Saturday in Cassell Coliseum. They did it with four players — Marshall Ashford, Ron Bell, Duke Thorpe and Ernest Wansley — hitting in double figures. Tech also held a height advantage over the short Buckeyes. That edge should break about even this Saturday.

If the Hokies claim any advantage going into the Tar Heel clash, one would have to come under the home court category. And even that plus mark, as some local fans have suggested, might read barely over the lukewarm level. Carolina utilizes a massive number of Virginians in its athletic programs and plant a lot of Tar Heel alumni in Old Dominion soil. But if anyone has the home court edge in Roanoke it would have to go to Tech for the simple reason of proximity.

While Coach Charles Moir’s Gobblers lack overflowing vintage, they have the basic talent needed for quality. But it’s doubtful the ability has mixed with experience after only four games. The absence of three starters — Russell Davis, Larry Cooke and David Sensibaugh — from last year’s squad still hurts.

Tech’s biggest edge might come at the proverbial level with the Heels billed as Goliath and the Hokies carrying the slingshots. Inconsistency marked the giant and it’s a trademark of Carolina too.

After all, the Tar Heels expect a win and could live with a loss. This game carries the pregame excitement of practice for Carolina and the thought of championship potential for Tech.

It’s evident since Smith cannot find the time to talk about the upcoming encounter with Virginia Tech. On the other hand, Moir will pick up the phone to talk about Carolina (see related article) as an opponent almost anytime.