Tech Meets Spiders

By JERRY VERNON
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Charlie Moir had a hectic day Tuesday. He said so last evening.

It's a good bet the rest of the night was probably restless for the Virginia Tech coach who spent Tuesday preparing his cagers for tonight's first round of the Times-Dispatch Invitational Tournament in Richmond Coliseum. With the tipoff against the University of Richmond at nine approaching, Moir must have felt much like the father waiting for the next day's report on his injured son's health.

In this case Moir's concern did not center around a relative, but was pointed at someone just as important. "The disturbing thing is that Duke Thorpe has been saddled with a groin injury," admitted the Hokie coach over the telephone. "He's been hurting a little bit, but we'll start him. It's the type of thing that would have to take about three weeks to completely heal and we don't want him out that long. We don't want to use that as a crutch either."

Tech would indeed miss Thorpe's abilities if he watched his teammates from the bench. The 6-6 forward is Tech's top scorer (18.8) and rebounder (8.5). Even with the injury Thorpe stands as a big threat to the Richmond squad which has backslid over the past year.

The Spiders have all five returning starters back from last year's 14-14 squad, but only one of the players has shown any improvement statistically. Senior Craig Sullivan is Richmond's top scorer this season with a 13.6 average. Even the 6-7 forward's rebounding has risen to a 6.4 game mark.

But like this year's disappointing 4-3 record, the rest of the Spiders have lacked what was expected earlier. Last year's top scorer (14.3), 6-8 forward Jeff Butler, has managed only 11.7 points per game while watching his board strength fall from 9.8 to 7.6. The remaining three starters, center Mike Morton, and guards Kevin Eastman and Larry Slappy, have fared even worse. The trio averages only 18 points between them. Moir expects junior college transfer Pat Hill to replace Slappy on the perimeter tonight. Spider Coach Carl Sloane needs more shooting power from outside.

"I think they (Richmond) have a good team," warned Moir who whipped almost the same squad last year when coaching at Tulane. "I know Carl has been experimenting and he has played a lot of people. That may be why they're not up to par statistically."

One Richmond player Sloane has been trying more and more with the season is 6-8 freshman Bob Boehling. Despite being handicapped with mononucleosis, Boehling has averaged six points and eight rebounds per outing in the piecemeal action he's seen this season.

He, according to Moir, is "one of several players who are capable of having a big night. I think they're capable of doing a lot of things. If they play up to their full potential we'll have to play like the devil to beat them."

The Spiders have not exhibited the poise many people expected earlier in the season. Richmond's latest off-balance act was a 63-60 surprise setback to East Tennessee State last week, but that result is not relaxing Moir.

"The only game we scouted was against Tennessee," said the Tech coach, "and they (Richmond) played poorly, but I'm sure they'll be fired up to play us."

Richmond may need more than a metaphoric bonfire against the quicker and taller Tech squad. Moir plans to stick with the starting lineup which has led the Hokies to a 5-3 record this year. Guards Marshall Ashford and Ron Bell should join forwards Thorpe and Phil Thieman and center Ernest Wansley at the game's inception.

Anticipation of this game might prove depressing to any superstitious Tech fans. After two tries the Hokies are winless on neutral courts. But against Richmond, Moir's squad will be up against no nationally ranked University of North Carolina or Alabama.

In the tournament opener at seven the University of Virginia (3-1) meets Virginia Commonwealth (4-4). The two winners of the first round meet Thursday night at nine in the championship game.