Hokies Start Big Week With No. 10 Syracuse

By Mike Bevans

Having been outmuscled and held at bay the entire game at South Carolina just Saturday night, Virginia Tech will have its tolerance for pain tested when the Hokies play host to another physical opponent, 10th-ranked Syracuse, tonight at Cassell Coliseum.

Tech and Syracuse sport identical 14-3 records following losses on the road Saturday night. The Hokies recovered from a miserable start, but never gained the lead in bowing to the Gamecocks 71-70, while Syracuse was beaten 77-73 at Rutgers.

"We're quick, but we're not that physical," admitted Virginia Tech Coach Charlie Moir. "We were batted around pretty good early on, but we battled back in the second half... actually outrebounded them in the second half, but it took a great effort on our part."

Great efforts will be a must for the Hokies this week, if they are to escape it without serious damage to their season and pride. Syracuse is the first of four opponents in six days with Tech meeting N.C. State and North Carolina in Charlotte Friday and Saturday.

The Hokies should get well Wednesday night, when they duel Arkansas-Little Rock at Cassell Coliseum.

"Right now, we need a five-man pickup, similar to what we had in the second half against South Carolina," said Moir, who put his club through a workout yesterday afternoon. "It was a real good practice, a spirited one. The players are looking forward to the challenge."

Syracuse offers up 6-11 sophomore center Roosevelt Bouie, 6-9 Louis Orr and 6-7 Marty Byrnes in the frontcourt. Dale Shackleford (6-6) and Ross Kindel operate in the backcourt and the Orangemen turn to some talented freshmen in reserve.

"Anytime you beat a nationally-ranked team it's a feather in your cap," Moir noted. "Everybody we've played knows they've been in a ballgame, but we'll have to play well this week in order to win." For sure, the Hokies can use one of those feathers in their cap. Of their 11 wins over Division I competition this season, only three have come against teams with winning records — George Washington (12-5), St. Bonaventure (11-5) and Oral Roberts (10-8).

Tech has come up short against its two most formidable foes to date in nationally-ranked Duke (86-79) and Virginia (66-62), in addition to tradition-rich South Carolina.

"Coach [Frank] McGuire said it was probably their [the Gamecocks'] best game all year," recounted Moir. "They were certainly better than we saw in the game we scouted and on film. They played with a great deal of emotion.

"We played poorly in the first half and they dominated the boards. They spread their zone more than we anticipated and it forced us to operate our offense about two steps farther away from the basket than we usually do."

"Everytime we'd tie the score or try to go ahead in the second half, we'd make a defensive error or do something else poorly."

A win at Columbia, S.C., would have made the upcoming week a little easier to face. Losses to Syracuse, N.C. State and North Carolina would assure Tech's being among the missing when the NCAA filled out its 32-team tournament field.

"It would be awfully tough, if we wound up losing all three," said Moir. "It would be tough to recover, too. Losing all three is quite possible. I realize that and I'm sure the players realize that."

"Still, if we have a great week, we will have a great season. If we have a bad week, the season may not be so good, but I won't say it will be a bad season."

Elsewhere on the state and area slate tonight:

Randolph-Macon at Loyola (Baltimore), Virginia State at N.C. Central, Lynchburg at Washington and Lee, Norfolk State at Hampton Institute, Saint Paul's at Maryland-Eastern Shore, Eastern Mennonite at Virginia Wesleyan, Maryland-Baltimore County at George Mason, Clinch Valley at Milligan, Liberty Baptist at Elizabeth City and Mercer at North Carolina.