Henson to Size Up Tech 'Shoe' Problem

By FRED JETER

If Duke Thorpe can’t play, freshman Les Henson will have some big shoes to fill for the Virginia Tech basketball team.

The Gobblers meet the University of Virginia tonight at 9 at the Coliseum for the championship of the Times-Dispatch invitational, with Thorpe, the club’s best player, a very doubtful performer.

The 6-foot-6 senior from West Point suffered a bruised left kneecap last night in Tech’s 59-58 semifinal win over Richmond and Gobbler Coach Charlie Moir says his star will miss tonight’s finale.

"I don’t think Duke will play against Virginia, and he could be out for two or three games," said Moir.

The knee injury is complicated by the fact that Thorpe, who leads the club with an 18.8 scoring average, entered the game with a badly torn groin muscle.

"It’s my left knee and my right groin and right now I can barely walk," Thorpe said in the Tech locker room. "But I’ll play against Virginia if I possibly can. That’s a big game for me."

Dr. Virgil May, the tournament physician, indicated the knee injury was not serious and there was a good chance Thorpe would play.

If he does, the question remains: How close will he be to full strength against the tall, physical Cavaliers?

If he’s not up to par, it’ll probably be up to Henson, a 6-foot-5 forward from Benedictine High School, to take up the slack.

Henson is the first frontcourt substitute for the Gobblers. Last night, he played 31 minutes, including the whole second half, when Thorpe was sidelined.

He finished with 12 points, hitting three of five from the floor and six of six from the foul line, and grabbed three rebounds.

"I want to get more playing time," Henson said, "but not at the expense of Duke. We need him in there awfully bad for scoring and rebounding. He’s our leader."

The 31-minute stint was by far Henson’s longest playing time of the season. Thorpe, who injured his knee in a collision with UR’s Bob Boehling in the first half, played only 12 minutes, scoring eight points.

Without Thorpe’s guidance, the Gobblers had a tough time in the second half cracking Richmond’s tight zone defense.

"We weren’t getting inside, and we didn’t use very good shot selection from the outside," said Henson.

You’ve got to be more patient against a zone and not try and pass the ball through a crown to get underneath.

"With Duke in there, though, we’re not reluctant to shoot, because we know he’ll be in there for the offensive rebound."

With Henson and 6-foot-5 Phil Thienneman at the forwards, Tech will be at a big height disadvantage against Virginia, which starts Marc Tavaroni and Mike Owens, both 6-foot-8, at forward.

"Wansley (Tech center Ernest) got a piece of it," said Eastman, who led Richmond with 19 points. "It wasn’t that good a shot to take, but there wasn’t any time left."

Although it was a loss to accept, Eastman indicated he’ll be ready to play tonight against VCU in the consolation game.

"I never like to lose, but it didn’t hurt any more than any other loss," said Eastman. "I’m from New Jersey, and I’ve never really gotten into this Virginia rivalry bit."