Tech Faces Short Knights

By JERRY VERNON
Sports Writer

One year after Virginia Tech whipped Fairleigh-Dickinson 60-48 in Blacksburg in 1975 basketball took a sharp turn upward for the East Coast Athletic Conference school from New Jersey.

After a solid recruiting year, tragedy struck the Knights last Jan. 8. An automobile accident took the life of Coach Al LoBalbo's top recruit, 6-3 guard Ben Johnson, and sidelined George Lighty and Redonia Redduck for the season.

Lighty, the Knights' leading scorer at the time with a 16.4 average, has still not returned to action at the expense of a compound fracture. Redduck, who suffered head lacerations which required 53 stitches, will be the only one of this trio hitting the court against Tech (8-6) Saturday night at eight in Cassell Coliseum.

"Our program was on the verge of turning over then," lamented Coach LoBalbo Tuesday, who stands 87-79 after eight years at the helm of the Knights. "Now we're rebuilding again. We definitely miss Lighty and Johnson was our quarterback."

The reconstruction of the Knights has left LoBalbo with one of the smallest squads competing on the college level. His front line, center Scott Edmonds and forwards Jay Jorgensen and Redduck, barely break the 6-5 mark and is a major reason for the Knights' 5-7 record going into a game with Niagara tonight.

Fairleigh-Dickinson, which has often been the point of many jokes, plays some powers among its top-heavy light-weight schedule. The Knights have been creamed this year by nationally ranked Wake Forest 99-63, Georgia 58-44, Auburn 86-59 and St. Bonaventure 83-59. These losses have come on the road where the Knights have managed only a single win this season — a 80-61 decision over Montclair Monday night.

"Every game we play we're at a height disadvantage," admitted LoBalbo who doubles as a prep athletic director at Bellview High School. "We've been outrebounded 111 rebounds a game — 48-37. That in a nutshell is our problem."

Against Tech the Knights should find the boards an even tougher challenge than usual. Tech's 6-11 Ernest Wansley and 6-6 Duke Thorpe could raise their respective individual rebounding averages, 8.2 and 7.1, against the short Knights. But that depends on which team gains tempo of the game.

"Mainly we're a disciplined team due to our height," warned LoBalbo. "We're a control team which sets up passes and we rarely take a poor shot. Everyone shoots within the 12-15 foot range."

Jorgensen claims scoring honors for the Knights with a 18.1 average while teammate Edmonds carries the bulk of rebounding (9.1 per game) and throws in his own 15.1 average despite Fairleigh-Dickinson's tendency to avoid the running game.

"We just can't let Tech get into a running game," warned LoBalbo. "We must work for the good shot and make everyone count. We can't afford any bad shots."

Speed is just the pace Hokie Coach Charlie Moir plans to establish Saturday.

"We have to get out there and run," said the coach Monday. "...if you let them stay with you for 10-15 minutes they can give you problems."

LoBalbo intends to hit Tech with, what he called, "a helping man-to-man defense. The guards will be helping up front to close the lane," the coach elaborated.

This strategy places a lot of responsibility on 6-2 juniors Howard Wilson and Steve Makwinski. The Knight perimeter duo has averaged only a combined 11.9 points an outing this season. Hokie outside starters, 6-1 Ron Bell and 6-2 Marshall Ashford, are doing almost as well individually with respective 19.5 and 19.9 averages.

If the height disadvantage does not wipe out the Knights, the Hokies should be able to do it another way — the bench. Tech's 6-6 forward Les Henson, 6-9 center forward Sam Fogglin, 6-8 forward Wayne Robinson and 6-1 guard Ron Edwards can score. That's something the Knights almost lack entirely.

"We don't score much from the bench," admitted LoBalbo. "We definitely have a lack of depth."