Nothing certain

By BOB TITTELBAUM
Sports Writer

BLACKSBURG — Either West Virginia Coach Joedy Gardner isn’t very smart or Virginia Tech’s basketball team has him fooled.

Said Gardner, “I’m a dumb coach, but I think Tech played much better tonight than they did the first time.”

Not many people would agree with Gardner after his Mountaineers disposed of Tech 86-78 here Tuesday night in a game that really was no contest most of the time.

Tech lost by one point in early December to the Mounties at Morgantown. Because of that, according to Tech players, the Gobblers had the idea the second meeting with West Virginia would be a blowout in favor of the Hokies.

But the fact is that this Tech team isn’t assured of winning against any decent team—even if the game were played in the middle of downtown Blacksburg.

“This is a bad loss,” admitted Tech senior Phil Thieme, who led what effort there was for the Hokies with 24 points.

“I thought we’d win this one. But we got our butts kicked pretty good.”

Thieme traced Tech’s troubles to the early part of the game when West Virginia got a lead that it continued to widen most of the second half. It reached 16 points on several occasions and caused fans, who were mostly silent from disbelief, to begin leaving with five minutes left in the game.

“It was a matter of confidence. We should have taken it to them,” said Thieme.

“They hit their first few shots and started to jump up and down saying, ‘Hey, we’re hot tonight.’ Against this type of club, you can’t let them do that. You have to keep them down.”

The fans had to be content with venting their disgust on officials Jim Pinkerton (Atlantic Coast Conference) and Gene Steratore (Tri-State).

At the end of the game, Tech Coach Charlie Moir chased the pair into the dressing room.

“It upset me that a guy who came with the official from over there (Steratore) went over and hugged West Virginia players after the game. It’s not very ethical,” said Moir.

The Tech coach also added, “I didn’t think we got any breaks. I told them that too.”

But Moir wasn’t trying to blame the loss on the officials. No jury in the world would convict them after the way Tech played basketball.

Thieme said the officiating was no factor and Tech players never seemed to voluntarily disagree with the calls. In fact, the rather emotionless Gobblers were willing to let the Mounties do as they pleased most of the night.

“The officiating was decent,” said Thieme. “A couple of their guys (West Virginia players) called him (Steratore) Gene and said, ‘Come on, Gene, call this.’ But that was just because they probably had him in other games.”

“We just got beat. They made a few calls for us and a few against us.”

Tech’s Duke Thorpe continued to have his problems. He got 17 points, but most of his scoring came in the second half when Tech was chasing the Mounties with little hope of winning.

Thorpe’s defense lacked something as the man he was guarding scored 12 first half points.

“Duke’s guy was wide open on the baseline,” said Moir. “His knee (which has slowed Thorpe this winter) isn’t an excuse. He played a very poor defensive game.”

The question is what will Tech do for an encore in its eight remaining games? With a 12-7 record, the Hokies are virtually out of post season competition barring a miracle.

“I’m concerned about the rest of the year,” Moir admitted. “This team doesn’t have a whole lot of character if it doesn’t work hard to improve.”

As Thorpe left the gym, though, he was one of the most pathetic figures in taking the loss hard.

“I thought we would get it going, but there were too many turnovers and mistakes,” he said.

“We were psyched up. I thought we would blow them out. In the end, they (West Virginia) were kind of cocky.”

“When you win, you can do that. I wish we could play them a third time so I could talk back to them.”

But if Tech continued to show the same strides as it has since the last meeting with West Virginia, Thorpe wouldn’t be doing very much talking.

The Hokies proved that point Tuesday night.

Mounties’ Maurice Robinson blocks out Ernest Wansley.