Hokies' Comeback Against MSU Was Incredible

In a quarter-century of covering college basketball—heavens, mother, can it be that long?—I have seen some remarkable comebacks, but nothing quite as implausible as Virginia Tech's 70-69 victory over Memphis State Wednesday night.

That the Gobbler could come from 25 points back in the last 15 minutes was incredible enough. That they could come from 11 down in the final two minutes was downright shocking.

But, and get this straight, Tech did it all without shooting well.

After the smoke had cleared from Cassell Coliseum, the final statistics sheets came bunting down from the rafters. They showed that Tech, embarrassed for better than a half by a team that had won 18 of 22, had destroyed the Tigers while shooting just 41.9 percent in the second half.

When a team stages a sensational rally, and I've seen a couple of other teams come from at least that far back, it usually accomplishes the triumph by hot-shooting.

Tech shot well just twice the whole night. The Gobblers made nine of 12 shots while rallying from 51-27 to 55-48. But then they missed their next nine. Then, in wiping out that final 11-point deficit, the Gobblers got hot again.

Yet, when it was all over, Tech had shot less than 34 percent, a horrible figure. The Gobblers won more on fight than on actual performance, although they were devastating on the boards and their press completely destroyed the Tigers.

Clearly this was a game that Memphis State had won a couple of times. That they didn't win was a tribute to Tech's scrap, the enthusiasm of the late-awakening fans, and some of the worst coaching this side of Salem.

Every time you see one of these run-and-gun teams, you have to wonder. Sure they win a lot of games. They do it on talent alone, not coaching.

Bobby Knight would have killed some of the Tigers for the shots they took. Dean Smith would have been distraught. John Wooden simply would not have permitted it.

These high-scoring, jack-it-up anywhere teams always seem to fade when they put the big money on the line. When was the last time that such a team won a national championship?

Tech's press swarmed all over the Tigers who suddenly found out they couldn't dribble. Yet this same press has been ineffective all year. Can you imagine a well-disciplined team losing an 11-point lead in the final 1:53?

Memphis State couldn't get the ball inbounds. It tried two full-court passes, both of which were lost to Tech. Once the Tigers were called for a violation while trying to pass the ball from under their goal. Another time Dexter Reed was called for walking when he leaped in the air and then had nobody to pass to.

As hard as Tech fought, it was not so much that the Hokies won as that Memphis State lost.

The Tigers are tough at home, where they are 15-0. In the last six years, they are 86-9 on their homecourt. Obviously, however, Memphis State is not a pressure-proof team, and doesn't figure to last very long in the NCAA if it survives in the Metro Seven tourney.

I would discount Memphis State in that tournament, except that it is being played in Memphis.

Since I wrote a column last week asking "Where have all the students gone?", I have heard from several Tech students. While none disagreed that violently, all pointed out that they felt games with North Carolina and Virginia should have been played in Blacksburg.

While these students make a good point that such games would have been sellouts in Blacksburg, they also are not realists. The North Carolina game was played during the holiday break when the students weren't in school. And that didn't make any difference, because Smith wasn't going to bring his Tar Heels to Blacksburg in the first place.

The UVa-Tech series has been set up as a showcase around the state. The teams aren't going to play in Blacksburg or Charlottesville, but will play twice on neutral sites. It's either that or not play at all.

What the students ignore is that support for the Hokies has not been good in the big games at Blacksburg—or it wasn't until the last half against Memphis State.

Sure, there have been some weak teams playing in Blacksburg this year and, for those games, I can't blame the students if they stay at home.

But they didn't turn out for Oral Roberts, they were quiet for West Virginia, and, until the big rally, they were obnoxious against Memphis State.

What the students—and the band—did at the end against the Tigers was intimidate the opposition, much as the VMI Corps intimidates teams that play in The Pit.

Earlier, however, P.A. announcer Bill Buchanan had to tell the Tech students to quit throwing junk on the floor or a technical foul would be called.

The only sad thing about the Memphis State game, in fact, was that only 6,000 people showed up. In spite of the protests from the Tech students who wrote, this was a big game, one that should have filled the coliseum. Instead there were 4,000 empty seats.

Maybe the great comeback will inspire the students, so that the building is full for Saturday's invasion by a surprisingly good Army team.

And, hopefully, the Tech students will concentrate on cheering for their team, rather than spending the evening throwing missiles on the floor.

The Tech students can certainly claim a part of Wednesday's big win. Coach Charlie Moir said as much. The players were delighted. But 15 minutes of support isn't enough. It should happen every time out.