Time Running Short
For Tech's Thieneman

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BLACKSBURG — If Virginia Tech's Phil Thieneman had another year, a quicker step and three more inches in height, he would undoubtedly be a super basketball player.

But the Louisville, Ky., native is running out of time. His organized basketball career is terminal. It is likely to end two weeks from today when Tech closes its season against Marquette here.

What is it like for a player who grew up in a hothed of basketball to suddenly have his main interest snapped away? That will happen to Thieneman, a player who has always had to work super hard just to be a part of the game.

"It will be weird," he said, in a voice that betrayed little emotion over losing the game he loves.

"It seems like I've played all the time. Everything was built around basketball." While a select few continue as pro basketball players, Thieneman will return to Louisville. He'll join his father in running the family fruit market, a venture Thieneman likes and one that provides an ample living for the family.

"This summer, when I work 10 to 12 hours a day at the fruit market, I won't miss basketball," said Thieneman.

"But this spring, it will be different. I'll miss working with weights and looking forward to next season."

Just how much did basketball mean to Thieneman? Enough so that he gave up some of the common pleasures of life.

"Basketball and school have been 90 per cent of my life the last four years," he said. "I haven't dated anyone particularly. Just a few dates here and there, or I'll go downtown and check out the movies.

"Really, I don't call basketball work. It's a lot of fun. I dated quite a lot in high school. But now it seems that so many other things have come up. If it's not basketball, it's tests the next day.

"I could have had time to date if I had wanted. But it's a matter of putting first things first. Maybe in the spring I'll have time for extracurricular activities."

Thieneman's swan song isn't coming at the best of times. That's because the 6-4 forward is playing his best basketball. In the last six games, Thieneman has averaged 17.7 points and carried most of Tech's offensive load.

Last year, former Tech Coach Don DeVoe boldly predicted before the season that Thieneman could well be the Hokies' top scorer. With Russell Davis and Larry Cooke, the top two scorers from 1974 returning, the prediction was strange.

Now Thieneman is finally doing all the things DeVoe predicted for him. Thieneman says his college career is almost a duplicate of what happened to him in high school.

After starting in basketball in the fifth grade, Thieneman was cut from his school's seventh grade team.

"I made the freshman team at Trinity (in Louisville) and played very little," he said. "It was the same as a sophomore."

But he was used to it. At Tech, he played very little as a freshman and as a sophomore was 13th man on a 13-man squad. He almost transferred, but didn't.

"Every summer I went back to the drawing board and said, 'Man, what am I not doing?'"

"Between my freshman and sophomore years (in high school), I ran and lifted weights. I was so light, they used to call me 'Thin-man' instead of Thieneman."

Things fell into place for Thieneman as his junior team posted a 21-4 record and his last team was 18-5.

"It was just like Tech. We had a super year as a junior at Trinity (Tech won 21 games during Thieneman's junior year) and in the final season at Trinity we lost some games we shouldn't have," he explained, comparing that year to Tech's present 14-7 mark.

To reach the heights in high school, Thieneman worked every day of the summer between his sophomore and junior years. Eventually, it earned him a scholarship to Tech.

"I'd even watch a pro game on TV in the spring on Sunday," he recalled. "I'd get fired up over a new move and go out to try it. Mom would yell about me playing seven days and I'd just say, 'How do you expect me to do well? Everyone else is working.'"

"I've put a lot into basketball, but if it fails, then I can say I've put all I could into it," he pointed out.

When Thieneman had some bad games earlier this year, such as the one against Oral Roberts where he scored just four points while trying to guard Titan star Anthony Roberts, it spurred him on to do better.

"I'd just say to myself that I've worked too hard to play like that," he reflected.

Thieneman thinks about being a little taller and a little quicker.

"You've heard a lot of people say if I was six so and so, I'd be doing this and that. But if I was three inches taller and a little quicker, Anthony Roberts wouldn't have dotted my eyes (13 field goals) so often," Thieneman added.

But he won't give up the game entirely. Pro basketball might be out, but Thieneman will cling to whatever he can.

"I'll help my old high school coach next winter and scout," he said. "I've got a couple of teams lined up back home to play for in independent leagues. I might try to get in a semi-pro league."

"I can't see myself not being in basketball some way. If I exercise, instead of running, I'll shoot baskets."

Like a thirsty man in the desert, Thieneman will grab at anything resembling basketball. That's what happens with a man who loses the game he loves.