Foggin: Resurrection From the Bench

BY JERRY VERNON
Sports Writer

Sam Foggin owns no interest in the airlines industry, but he does have one thing in common with a prop plane. When the two time-veteran and once prep All-American cager from Parkersburg, W.Va. hit Blacksburg three years ago he came down hard.

"You come down with a lot of speed when you get to college," warned the 6'9" cager whose success in high school sent his head into the clouds. "After coming to Tech you find out everyone on the team has been a high school star. You find out what it's all about!"

Maybe, from the way he was recruited, Foggin should have known it would take him longer to reach his college expectations than he had anticipated. Former Tech Assistant Coach Sonny Smith spotted Tech's reserve center almost randomly during Foggin's sophomore year of high school.

"We were playing a team called George Washington and he (Smith) was looking at this senior guard who was supposed to be pretty sharp," recalled Foggin. "He came down after the game and talked to me. It made me feel pretty good. I was a sophomore then and pretty naive about recruiting."

After eight visits to Blacksburg over the next two and a half years, Foggin chose Virginia Tech as his school over such names as the University of Southern California, Penn State and Purdue because, as he put it, "Sonny told me they were going to be hurt by graduation."

"I came here wanting and expecting to play a lot," admitted Foggin, who averaged around 13 minutes of court time until an ankle injury sidelined him.

Smith neglected to tell his recruit that Tech had three top junior college transfers coming to town the same year and Foggin soon found himself on the bench nursing a sore ankle and injured feelings.

"You know it didn't do much for my head," he said. "But then I thought if I wanted to do it anywhere else I should re-examine myself. I don't think you should let this game get to you like that. Somebody has got to sit on the bench and it's all a matter of who it will be," Foggin explained. "If you can't take that attitude you shouldn't be playing anyway."

His intermittent play during the first two years did little for his reputation. When he entered a game the big question arose. How long will it be before Sam fouls out? Most fans offered the same thoughts on Foggin's introduction this year until two weeks ago.

"You know, when you don't get much playing time you really get stiff sitting on the bench," he said. "It's hard to get the tempo and rhythm and you feel if you don't produce you'll come out."

Foggin's resurrection from the bench to the court came last Saturday night when the Hokies upset Atlantic Coast Conference leader and nationally ranked Wake Forest. He earned star status for a few minutes when he hit a bucket.

"You know, it (not playing) didn't do much for my head. But then I thought if I stoodo so low as to get bitter at anyone else I should re-examine myself. I don't think you should let this game get to you like that. Somebody has got to sit on the bench and it's all a matter of who it will be. If you can't take that attitude you shouldn't be playing anyway."

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(P) put Tech ahead with seconds remaining. Then Deacon guard Skip Brown popped a midcourt jumper at the buzzer to send the game into overtime and to downgrade Foggin's winning basket into just another field goal.

"Man, I thought it was my moment," laughed the junior. "I could see everybody talking to me after the game and then he (Brown) had to hit that shot. Oh, man."

The star role never came for Foggin in the game, but he proved against Wake's All-American prospect, forward Rod Griffith, that his reputation for awkward movement was ill-conceived.

"As far as getting it all together when it mattered it was in the Wake game," offered Foggin. "Just the fact that I was going up against pro material was something. He is no awesome."

Foggin will argue with anyone that his and Tech's performance against Wake was no fluke. His double figuring scoring statistics for the past four games prove a little playing time makes him the most likely candidate for the starting center job which becomes vacant upon Ernest Wamsley's graduation this year.

"I hope and plan to be starting next year," he promised. "After three years I know all the aspects. I feel the advantage (for starting) is with the veterans. For some freshman to come out and beat anyone they'll have to be really good."

Foggin has a lot of feelings these days on Tech basketball which he explained, "I play for fun. I can't eat, sleep and drink basketball like some of these guys. I catch a lot of rough stuff for it - you know, joking - but it's worth it. I have as much fun as anyone will out there."

Enjoying the sport does not take any of the competitive edge off basketball for Foggin. He plays it, his words. "Just for fun," but he also wants this season to last beyond the regular season finale which was played against Maryquette this past Saturday night.

Foggin wants a trip to the National Invitational tourney and figures the organization's decision last week to hold regional playoffs for berth's raises the Hokies' chances."

"I think that's just great," he said. "I think if they see how rowdy the crowd gets at Maryquette and if we beat them we'll have an excellent chance (of beating a playoff)."

After a bumpy landing in Blacksburg three years ago, Foggin has settled into a gliding force at the post position on the court. The old notion of 'awkward Sam's' passing and he intends to leave it that way.

"You figure when you come off the bench you're cold," he said. "You get pretty stiff and it's hard to produce. Everybody feels a little awkward when that get out there."

As the season draws to a close, Foggin is spending more time enjoying his sport and about all he does now is shrug his broad shoulders, smile and say, "Oh boy, I'm getting some time now. This is the most I've played since I've been here and I plan for more next year."

(VIRGINIA TECH'S SAM FOGGIN)
Former Prep Star Came Down Fast