Ghost of ‘73 follows Virginia Tech

By BOB TEITELBAUM
BLACKSBURG — Virginia Tech seniors Phil Thiemann and Blake Thorpe remembered the NT stories they used to tell about the Hokies in New York.

It was four years ago when Tech went to New York and stormed through four games by the magnificent total of five points.

"I remember the players talking about it the next year," said Thieman, who was a freshman the following season. "It got off-loaded and it's on reason that I came here.

"Yeah, I remember that following year," said Thorpe, another Tech recruit from the NT.

"There were four starters coming back then, a lot of pressure on us that year to go to the NIT or NCAA."

Well, Tech's return to the NIT four years later has started off the same way that 1972 ended — a close win. The Hokies' first Tech Georgetown 19-70 loss since Wednesday night in a first round game to win a spot in the NIT's round of eight starting Monday night in New York.

In a way, Tech players can see the Hokies all over again. One of the club's Tech beat on its way to the title that year was Alabama, and the year's edition is expected to meet the Crimson Tide Monday night.

Alabama still must beat Missouri State in another first round NIT game tonight at Birmingham, but the Hokies, who played both teams, feel that will only be a formality.

"I would think it would be Alabama," said Thorpe, "but anybody can beat anybody this year."

"I sort of expect Alabama to win," said Tech Coach Charlie Moto. "Both teams have tremendous personnel, but I give them the nod because they're playing in Birmingham."

No matter, Tech players and coaches agree it will take a better game on the Hokies' part if they are to survive the quarterfinal round.

Tech and Georgetown were both sloppy. Between them, the two clubs committed 49 turnovers. It appeared as if the teams were playing in an opening game instead of one that was so near the end of the year.

Tech's guards were the saving grace. Ron Bell kept the Hokies' close in the first half when he drained five field goals in 16 tries on the way to an 18-point lead. After an interruption, Marshall Ashford took over. He hit seven of eight shots and wound up with 16 points. Oddly, it was Thorpe and Thiemann who put the Hoyas away. They hit four free throws in the final 20 seconds to keep Tech control of a lead it took early in the second half.

The Hokies, trailing by three at intermission, gained the upper hand when 6-61 Edmond Wander came out to start the second half.

The Hokies' first two field goals and eight points in 16 minutes at the Hokies took a 57-57 lead. All this was a come-back for Wansley who, embarrassingly, missed a dunk shot in the first half that led to a Hoyas fast break.

"I wanted to see the rim down," said Wansley about his missed dunk, "I think I redeemed myself. I sure didn't want to blow it again."

That Ashford and Bell performed so well was remarkable as both had had trouble with pressure defense this year. Hoyas Coach John Thompson said his halftime instructions included "keeping the pressure" on the Hokies with a tenacious press.

"We sort of expected they would press," said Moto, "but not as much as they did (to 38 per cent of the time)."

Ashford noticed the pressing defense.

"They play like (North Carolina)," said Ashford. "They use pressure defense and change their defenses.

The two teams also played a running game. This was a surprise because Georgetown had top players at Tech (who didn't play) and Craig Sullins (who was used sparingly) behind at point guards.

We laid back in a zone against Old Dominion and got killed," said the Hokies coach. "That's why we decided to push it up and down the court tonight and just take our chances.

Tech will use the time between now and Monday to regain his playing legs. The Hokies had been off for over a week and none of the players had picked up a basketball.

"I thought I was in shape," said Thieman, who had just returned from Florida. "But I paid for it tonight. I must have inhaled too much sand and beach water."

Tech hopes now that it can soak up some big city atmosphere. There is no way the Hokies can get too much of New York next week.