BLACKSBURG — For a full half Wednesday night, Virginia Tech played as if the basketball season really did end 10 days ago.

Then the Hokies, sparked by the shooting of guard Marshall Ashford, got their act together and staved off Georgetown, 83-79, in a first-round National Invitation Tournament game before a near sellout of 9,400.

Both teams played under serious handicaps, and after that rather horrendous first half, NIT chairman Pete Carlini, who was in the audience, was probably glad the game wasn't being played in Madison Square Garden.

Tech had not practiced in nine days until hurriedly regrouping Monday after getting the post-season bid. The Hokies never were able to display the smoothness on offense that characterized their play much of February.

Georgetown, which was embroiled in a controversy, not of its own making, on whether it should have been here at all, played without its second leading scorer and rebounder Al Dutch. The 6-7 Dutch had a sprained ankle. Starting guard John Duren played with a bad ankle, but lacked stamina and had to be rested often.

Faced with such adversity, nobody should have expected a cage classic. But the first half deteriorated into a battle of turnovers (25) and outside jumpers. Neither team worked its offense well, but Georgetown's rebounding and Tech's poor foul shooting (59) gave the Hoyas a 45-35 margin.

Still trailing 50-47 early in the first half, Tech went on a sudden spurt, ignited by Ashford and guard running mate Ronnie Bell, to score eight straight points. The Hokies never trailed again, but it wasn't over until Tech converted six free throws in the final minute after Georgetown had cut an eight-point deficit to two, 77-75.

By winning, Tech gets to go back to the site of its greatest basketball hour, Winners of the dramatic 1973 NIT, Tech plays in Madison Square Garden Monday night against either favored Alabama or Memphis State.

"I don’t know who we'll play," said Coach Charlie Moir, "but we played them both and they’re both tough." Alabama beat the Hokies by 39 in the Dayton Invitational and Tech registered its best win of the year by rallying from 25 points down to defeat Memphis State, 70-69.

Both coaches, Moir and Georgetown's John Thompson, praised the effort of their teams. Indeed both teams battled hard, if ineffectively on occasion.

"Under the circumstances, I’m really pleased," Moir said. "We scrapped and worked hard."

In the first half, said Moir, "We got a lead, then we took some bad shots and made some turnovers. I wasn’t pleased with the way we ran our offense."

What helped the Hokies more than anything was the way Georgetown crashed the offensive boards. The Hoyas, winding up a 19-9 year, got numerous offensive rebounds, but when they didn’t, Tech wound up with breakaway layups. The Hokies got four of those and missed a few others.

The winning burst for Tech came as the Hokies suddenly found the range, inspired by the friendly crowd. Ashford couldn’t miss, and that was fortunate, because after falling behind 69-61, Georgetown rallied behind the shooting of guard Derrick Jackson.

With Dutch out, Thompson elected to go to Jackson, a quick 6-1 guard. At one point, Jackson took 12 of 17 shots attempted by the Hoyas, and he was making most of them.

In an eight-minute stretch, Jackson scored 16 of Georgetown's 20 points.

"We wanted to set screens for Jackson because we didn’t have Dutch," said Thompson. "We knew we had to get more scoring out of Derrick. What he got was a game-high of 28 points, Jackson's best ever."

But Georgetown couldn’t handle Ashford at the end. Sporting a new Marine boot camp haircut, Ashford netted seven shots in a row, the last a jumper from the corner at 2:12 that made it 77-73.

Jackson countered with his final goal with two minutes left, and the Hokies decided to stall.

They ran off 43 seconds, then Moir finally called for the four corners. "I didn’t want to do it earlier with a two-point lead because of the trouble we’ve been having handling the ball," he said.

With a minute left, the Hoyas fouled Ashford, who made both shots for a four-point spread, 79-75.

Tech got a break when Larry Lott missed one of two free throws for the Hoyas, and then derisive Georgetown deliberately fouled Phil Thieman. Since Thieman is the nation’s leading free throw shooter, that scarcely qualified as a smart move.

"We would have loved to foul the big guy (Ernest Wansley)," said Thompson, "but the clock would have turned out while the ball was getting to his hands."

Actually, Thieman missed his first one, but his ninth failure in 167 attempts; but the one conversion made it 80-78 and Georgetown was out of time.

Steve Martin made one of two free throws for Georgetown, Duke Thorpe the same for Tech with 19 seconds left. It really didn’t matter that Thorpe made two more fouls for Tech or Martin a pair for Georgetown, except Moir almost had apoplexy when the Hoyas fouled so late in the game.

The Hokies, now 19-9, shot a slaming 68 per cent in the last half, which is why they are on their way to New York and Georgetown is finished for the season. Most of the shooting was done by Ashford and Bell, who combined for 42 points.

"It was a tremendous effort on our part," said Moir. "We played on guts. Now we’ll have some time to smooth things out for New York."

Did Georgetown miss Dutch? "It would be unfair to Al if I said we didn’t," said Thompson. "It would be unfair to Tech to say we did."