18-9 Good Enough For NIT

Gobbler Cagers Split Final Regular Season Games

VTSL—The Virginia Tech basketball team split its final two regular season games—beating state-rival Virginia, 71-61, and losing to 18th ranked Marquette, 75-70—to finish its regular season with a very respectable 18-9 record.

The 18-9 record was respectable enough for Tech to gain an invitation to the NIT. The Hokies, sputtering in mid-January with a 9-6 mark, won nine of their final 12 games (including two against nationally-rated teams) to make new head coach Charlie Moir’s initial season a successful one.

“We’re certainly pleased that we were able to win 18 games our first year, and we are looking ahead with optimism,” Moir pointed out. “We had a super group of young men this year, who gave us tremendous effort.”

That effort was evidenced against Virginia in Roanoke, as the Hokies managed to keep their composure through a scoreless stretch of 6:53 during the first half, then broke open the game in the final seven minutes for a 10-point triumph.

“We kept our composure, despite having to struggle early in the game, and were able to establish our tempo in the second half,” observed Moir. “When we started zone pressing it made them turn the ball over and helped us get into our game. That was the turning point.”

During the first 12 minutes, however, things were all going Virginia’s way, as the Cavs jumped to an 18-8 lead.

“I didn’t think we were ever gonna score,” Moir noted. Then came the press, and by halftime Tech had closed the gap to three, 36-33.

Led by guard Marshall Ashford, who hit eight of the Gobbler’s first 16 points in the final 20 minutes, the Hokies took the lead just 52 seconds into the half and never trailed during the remainder of the stanza. Virginia closed to within two, 59-57, with 7:35 showing, but Tech retaliated with eight unanswered points to settle the issue.

Ashford finished the contest with a game-high (and career high) 21 points. Fellow guards Ron Bell added 16 points and reserve center Sam Foggia came off the bench to add 10.

The victory was Tech’s second in three meetings this season with Virginia. The momentum from that victory wasn’t quite enough to carry them through, three nights later against Marquette. Cool and poised, the Warriors came from six points behind in the first half, throw back a series of Tech challenges in the second half and upped their record to 18-6.

“We key to the game was the way they beat us on the boards,” said Moir, noting Marquette’s 42-33 edge in rebounds.

The Hokies also did little for their cause by shooting a paltry 40.9 percent from the field.

Still, Tech had chances to build a solid lead in the first half. The Gobbler led by six three times and it would have been more had they not missed several layups.

“The way Marquette plays,” said Moir, “every possession is so important.”

In less than two minutes late in the first half, the Warriors had a 9-2 spurt that gave them a 28-27 lead. They were ahead, 34-33 at intermission.

For the first 11 minutes of the second half, the teams swapped baskets until a three-point play gave Marquette a five-point advantage with 8:34 left.

Tech, led by seniors Phil Thieman and Duke Thorpe, cut the margin to two, 63-61, with 4:38 remaining, but never managed to get closer.

Thieman finished the contest with 19 to lead the Hokies. Thorpe, who saw only six minutes of playing time in the first half after drawing three quick fouls, contributed 16 points, Ron Bell added 10 and Sam Foggia had nine.

Though the final game was a “tough” one to lose, Moir was happy to point out that “the kids played hard, and gave all they had.”

Playing before a packed house, Duke Thorpe pulls down one of Tech’s relatively few rebounds against Marquette University.

Marquette’s Butch Lee fouls Marshall Ashford here, but he took control at the end of the game to help the Warriors win 75-70.

(Staff photo by Frank King)

(Staff photo by Carla Pierson)