How strong SEC? Tech will see tonight

By BOB TEITLEBAUM  Sports Writer

NEW YORK — If there is a way to tell which conference plays the best basketball, some people in Virginia Tech believe it might be the Southeastern Conference.

Those same people—namely Tech forward Duke Thorpe and Coach Charlie Moir—also have a chance to do something to prove otherwise.

That's because Tech takes on Alabama, the third-place team from the SEC, tonight in the National Invitation Tournament. The two teams met in the first quarterfinal round game at 7 and it will be televised over Channel 7 (WDVL-TV).

Moir knows the SEC well. His Tulane team played the likes of Tennessee, Mississippi and LSU last year. Earlier this season, Tech went up against Alabama and lost 108-78 in the finals of the Dayton Invitation.

"I think the SEC has as good a personnel as the ACC," said Moir, daring to compare this section of the country to the deep South.

"It's definitely as strong from top to bottom. I may get called back on that, but the league has good basketball players."

"I think Alabama and North Carolina (which beat Tech 81-77) are the two best teams we've played," said Thorpe. "I feel Alabama is a little better than North Carolina and I'd have to say the SEC is as good as the ACC."

Of course C.M. Newton, the coach at Alabama, isn't about to disagree.

"We like to think the SEC is the best," said Newton, "but there's really no way to compare conferences."

"But for the last six or seven years this league has come a long way. I think it's been a commitment on the part of the universities to have quality programs.

Regardless, the issue here tonight is more than which conference is best. In this age of balanced basketball teams, even Tech must be given a slight chance against the Tide. That's in spite of the first game showing.

"I don't think we'll have any trouble getting our team up for the game," said Newton. "I've told our squad Tech isn't the same team as it was in December."

"At the point we beat them, there were a lot of pluses in our favor. They were coming off an upset and we were coming off a loss. We had a super game. They had an ordinary game."

This is a pattern that has dogged Tech basketball this year. In some games the Hokies have been outstanding. In others, they have been less than mediocre.

For example, the Hokies lost to Ohio State in an upset, then came back to beat Wake Forest. There were other stretches similar to this two-game run such as a home loss to West Virginia and a road win at George Washington a few nights later.

"We talk about it," said Thorpe, "but we don't understand it.

"We weren't worried about Ohio U. at all. We thought we had it won. So we talked Wake Forest, Wake Forest on the way up. And Ohio beats us."

"What will Tech do to make up 30 points?"

"We're going to have to play one of our best games of the year," said Moir about the obvious.

"We don't want to get in strictly a run and shoot battle. We have to control the tempo. We'll have to fast break. We want high percentage shots, so we'll look to the inside.

"Alabama might laugh in to make us shoot outside. I don't mind our guards like Marshall (Ashford) taking the 18 to 20 footers as long as he's under control."

Bama won the first game with a pressure defense when Tech's guards were inexperienced. Ashford and Run Bell were fairly new since it was just their seventh game for Tech. Ashford played little last year and Bell was a junior college player.

"I think it's a case of the guards disciplining themselves. I don't feel as if we can turn the ball over as much as we did in the first game against Alabama (27 times)," said Moir.

"Defensively, they got some easy baskets on us. They were releasing down the floor quickly when they had a smaller lineup in the game and they beat our big people down more than I like for them to do."

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"We don't want to get in strictly a run and shoot battle. We have to control the tempo. We'll have to fast break. We want high percentage shots, so we'll look to the inside. Statistics indicate a close game, even if the first match between the two teams suggests otherwise.

Alabama is shooting 47 percent from the field as is Tech. The Hokies have outrebounded opponents by five while Alabama has done the same thing by two.

Alabama from the free throw line is a 79 percent shooting team and that's less than Tech's 72 percent mark.

But Alabama has played a tougher schedule. Aside from the SEC foes, the Crimson Tide has beaten Purdue, South Carolina twice, Georgetown, Marquette, South Carolina State, LaSalle, Oklahoma State and Western Michigan.

All that's compared to Texas Wesleyan, Fairleigh-Dickinson and Wisconsin-Milwaukee teams that dot the Tech schedule.

No matter, Tech doesn't plan to lose.

"We'll be so psyched," said Thorpe. "But I don't want to be too psyched."

"My teachers told me they don't want to see me rest the rest of the week and I don't want to see them.