Virginia Tech Anxious To Play Alabama in NIT Tonight

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Obviously, it will be a short trip for Virginia Tech. How could Tech have any hopes of beating Alabama, a team that whipped the Gobblers by 33 points earlier in the season?

"We were hoping Alabama would win," claims Tech's Duke Thorpe. 'There's no way we played well against them the first time. We didn't play good defense, had too many turnovers and didn't shoot well. We wanted another chance against them.'

Tech will play Alabama at 7 p.m. to-night in the quarterfinals of the NIT. The game will be televised by Channel 7.

The Crimson Tide is ranked No. 12 in the nation and beat the Gobblers, 108-78, in the championship game of the Dayton Tournament in December.

"They actually beat us worse than the score indicated," said Tech Coach Charlie Moir of the first meeting with Alabama. "Our guys are looking forward to playing them again. I think we're a better team. I know our guard play has improved."

Alabama is tall and quick. "We were playing well in the first eight minutes of that game. Then we turned the ball over five straight times. They capitalized on all five. We sort of panicked and took some bad shots," said coach Moir.

The burden will be on Tech guards Marshall Ashford and Ron Bell. The Crimson Tide likes to press and guard as well as any team in the country. "Their guards are much bigger than ours are," Moir observed.

Bell has had problems with turnovers this year. In 28 games, he has lost the ball 81 times. In Wednesday's first-round NIT game, Bell had eight field goals but seven turnovers. Against Alabama, Bell had only three field goals and four turnovers. The Hokies lost the ball 27 times against the Crimson Tide.

"We couldn't get anything going against Alabama the first time," remembered Tech starter Phil Thieneman. "We just caved in. They're definitely not 30 points better than we are."

Alabama is 34-4 on the year. The Crimson Tide has lost only to Kentucky twice, and Tennessee twice. Just three men are scoring in double figures for Alabama and as a team, The Crimson Tide is shooting only 47.5 percent from the floor.

"They're going to have to play them differently this time," Thieneman said. "They're big and strong inside. They did get the ball inside and power it up, and there was nothing we could do about it. We're going to have to front them so they don't get the ball."

In their 83-79 win over Georgetown Wednesday night in the first round of the NIT, the Gobblers didn't play well. They had 10 days off before they knew they would be playing after the end of the regular season and they looked rusty.

"We're going to be back in shape now," Thorpe remarked. "The first two days when we came back, it was rough. Our legs better be up to par, or we won't do any more."

"I don't think we were really in condition against Georgetown. Hopefully, we'll play better against Alabama."

It was back in the 1973 NIT that Tech upset a highly favored Alabama team by a point in the semifinals of the NIT. "I imagine we'll remember that," Thorpe noted.

The Gobblers surprised the basketball world by winning that NIT. The Gobblers won four games by a total of five points, including a 95-91 overtime victory over Notre Dame in the championship game.

But this will be the first time any of Tech's present players have ever played in Madison Square Garden. Tech will be playing the first game with Houston playing Illinois State in the second game.

Two more quarterfinal games will be played Tuesday night. The semifinals will be played Thursday night with a consolation game and the championship game set for Sunday afternoon.

"I don't know if our players will be awed by the Garden. I certainly hope they aren't," Moir said.

"I've never been to Madison Square Garden," remarked Thorpe. "This is like a dream for me. At first, I believe we might be awed. But we'll get over it. It won't take us long to forget where we're playing."

For some Tech players, it isn't a matter of where they will be playing, but who they will be playing.

"Against Alabama, we were in the game and then something we tried to do didn't work," said Thieneman. "That was our worst, most humiliating game. We won't forget that."