PRESSURE IN THE GARDEN
NEW YORK CITY — Charlie Moir won one race. He beat Alabama’s C.M. Newton to the press room in a no-contest affair. That, of course, made little difference except it threw into a tizzy those folks trying to regulate such proceedings Monday night, because the winners were supposed to show first.

Actually, there have been a lot of things Charlie Moir has done this year that caught folks off guard. Running up a 19-10 record was one. Almost beating the Crimson Tide in this opening quarter-final match of the 4th NIT was another. To be sure, losing 78-72 was no disgrace. Even more, the contest was closer than seven points.

Still, virtually everyone connected with the tray brought up pressure as the key factor. Newton explained that “pressure defense is a cumulative thing. What we tried to do was sustain our effort the entire contest and try to take them (VPI) out of their offense. We couldn’t do it in the first half.”

Most certainly the Tide, loser only to Kentucky and Tennessee (twice each), did the job — thanks to freshman guards Bob Scott and Kent Loney — after the halftime break. The two, Newton pointed out, “were fresh. The Tech guards might have gotten tired.”

Both Moir and Tech sophomore standout Marshall Ashford concealed the point. Moir also observed “we panicked a little. Certainly the pressure was the difference, though. In the second half we took too many bad shots and missed easy ones. I still think if we played as well in the second half as we did in the first (when Tech led 45-40) we would have beaten them.”

The major accomplishment, of course, was scaring the daylight out of a club that had beaten Tech by 36 points in December. Alabama guard Anthony Murray allowed the Gobblers “a lot more physical this time.” Murray also said the halftime challenge was “to stop Tech’s guards’ from penetrating the way they had been.”

What resulted, Moir said, “was too much one-on-one.” The Alabama pressure then “got us away from our offense.” It put an end to a season that wig-wagged from good to bad without much until the last 15 minutes. Then the Gobblers matured. That they did stands as a lasting tribute to Moir.

Half a dozen hours earlier in the Garden, while Houston players casually busied themselves shooting at the basket, a big, big man watched intently — as intently as one could while constantly being greeted by well-wishers.

The bespectacled behemoth was Willis Reed, the former Knickerbocker, recently named to coach the New York team in the NBA next year. Quite obviously, he was watching Otis Birdsong with a pleasant tenacity. “He never has a bad game, not even in practice,” happily exclaimed a Houston assistant.

Birdsong is the Cowboys’ 30-4 scorer who in such matters ranks with Reed. “He should be one of the first three to go,” says Reed, referring to the next college draft by the National Basketball Association.

In much of what he has seen of Birdsong, Reed wouldn’t surprise Guy Lewis, the also big, friendly Houston Coach, who has long esteemed Birdsong, not just as an athlete, but as “an extremely easy-person to coach.”

He doesn’t shoot enough (Birdsong is one of only two people in the NCAA Division I who have made 400 field goals).

“He has no superstar ego,” says Lewis. On the other hand, the Cowboys’ leader in point-scoring for the final candidate cut off last summer’s Olympic team. “Otis had something to prove,” Birdsong just turned 21 last week. “He’ll continue to improve.”

Lewis. People like Willis Reed continue to watch, too.

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If some were surprised by the way the game was decided, Alabama’s players were not. Rickey Brown (14 points and 7 rebounds) pointed out “our guards usually break the game open for us.”

Murray (11 points) put a verbal finger on “our bench. It’s the key to the season. This has been a team effort.”

It was every bit of that, although the patterns that developed was hard to discern early when the Gobblers dominated the action.

After some bouncing around of the lead, a tipin by Phil Thotenas — nursing a foot bruise — earned Tech its 11-10 advantage with 13:22. The Gobblers stayed up until that 17-2 charge. It was a layup by King with what had been a loose ball with 7:30 to play that gave Alabama the 61-60 margin that proved to be permanent.

What the pressure did mostly, according to Moir, “was take us out of our offense. I called several timeouts to get us into what I wanted to do, but we still couldn’t”.

Specifically, “we wanted to work the ball into Duke, especially with King on him and in foul trouble. We couldn’t do it. We didn’t want Alabama to control the tempo and they did.”

King wasn’t the only player in foul trouble. Tech’s Theimann and Bell and Alabama’s Don Bowmerman and Brown all fouled out. Finishing with four fouls each were Ruma’s King and Tech’s Thotenas. Wansley (11 points and 7 rebounds) and Ashford.

In all 54 fouls were called, 29 against Tech, which had to foul desperately in the waning minutes.