Saint Louis tops Virginia Tech behind Bess' 22 points, 77-71

By DENIS P. GORMAN

NEW YORK (AP) — Character was the theme espoused by Saint Louis coach Travis Ford and Virginia Tech coach Buzz Williams.

Ford praised his team's ethos, as opposed to Williams, who wondered about his squad's makeup.

"What haunts me is our character was revealed in how we played," Williams said after Saint Louis topped Virginia Tech, 77-71, in the opening round of the 2K Classic on Thursday night.

"This was the first time I was caught off-guard," Williams said.

Javon Bess scored 22 points and Jordan Goodwin added 19 for Saint Louis (3-0).

"All week in practice we worked on getting back in transition," Goodwin said. "Make sure we help each other out. We take pride in our defense. Sometimes the offense might not go but every night we guard we're going to be there every play."

Despite getting a career-high 26 points from Ahmed Hill, Virginia Tech fell to 2-1. Justin Bibbs scored 15 in his first game of the season after sitting out the first two games for disciplinary reasons. Kerry Blackshear Jr. added 10 before fouling out.

"They were tougher than us from start to finish," Williams said. "I didn't think we were ever in the fight. I don't think we were ever in the mix."

The eighth all-time matchup between the Atlantic 10 and Atlantic Coast Conference programs was taut as Saint Louis' 61-49 advantage with 7:57 left was the largest lead for either team.

On the strength of an 11-3 run, though, Virginia Tech cut the deficit to 64-60. Four points is as close as the Hokies would get.

Davell Rovy's baseline layup pushed the lead back to 66-60. Bess made seven free throws and Goodwin three in the final minute to help seal the win.

"It was good to see," Ford said. "We've had some really poor performances from the free-throw line in some games — exhibition games and different things; we've had some other games where we've shot them a little bit better — it was good to see because I think that's when you're tested.

"I've seen that from Javon. I've seen that from Jordan and different guys. When it's on the line, they seem to rise to the occasion."

Benefiting an early-season game, there were areas in which Williams and Ford to work on with their teams. For the Hokies, free-throw shooting was a significant issue as they made only 23 of 36 (63.9 percent).

Saint Louis made just 4 of 18 from the arc.

"I thought they overwhelmed us," Williams said.

BIG PICTURE
Saint Louis: The Billikens' defense may already be in midseason form. Their 48 points allowed per game coming in ranked eighth nationally. While that number will rise, St. Louis' defense routinely forced the Hokies into drawn-out offensive possessions.

Virginia Tech: Generally, the third game of the regular season is not a precursor as to how a season will play out. And perhaps that will be the case for the Hokies. Still, following two season-opening wins by an average of 121.5 points, Virginia Tech was limited to 71.

NOTABLE

Saint Louis: The Billikens improved to 3-2 all time at the current Madison Square Garden. The game was Saint Louis' first at The Garden since the 1990 NIT Final Four.

Virginia Tech: With the loss, the Hokies fell to 14-7 all-time at Madison Square Garden, including 7-3 since 2004.

REPRESENTING
The first of two games at Madison Square Garden for the 2K Classic for the Wounded Warriors Project had representatives from both schools. Rob Rinkenberger and Donna Pratt, both of whom served in the Army, were present for Saint Louis while Darren McEldowney (Army) and Barbara Hawn (Air Force) were in attendance for Virginia Tech.