

Women

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"That's the strength of this team," Runge said. "If you're gonna leave somebody open, they're gonna step up."

Strange was very open, and she certainly stepped up. All game long.

"I don't think [Virginia Tech] knew I was on the court," Strange said. "Seriously. It was awesome. And that's what's awesome about our team — on any given night any one of our 15 people could have their night. It happened to be mine tonight."

Strange started the game by hitting her first five shots, helping the Ducks jump to a 16-6 lead six minutes into the game.

Oregon took a 17-point advantage early in the second half, but when Virginia Tech cut the lead to nine with 10:38 left in the game, Strange accepted a touch pass from forward Angelina Wolvert and drained her eighth shot of the game.

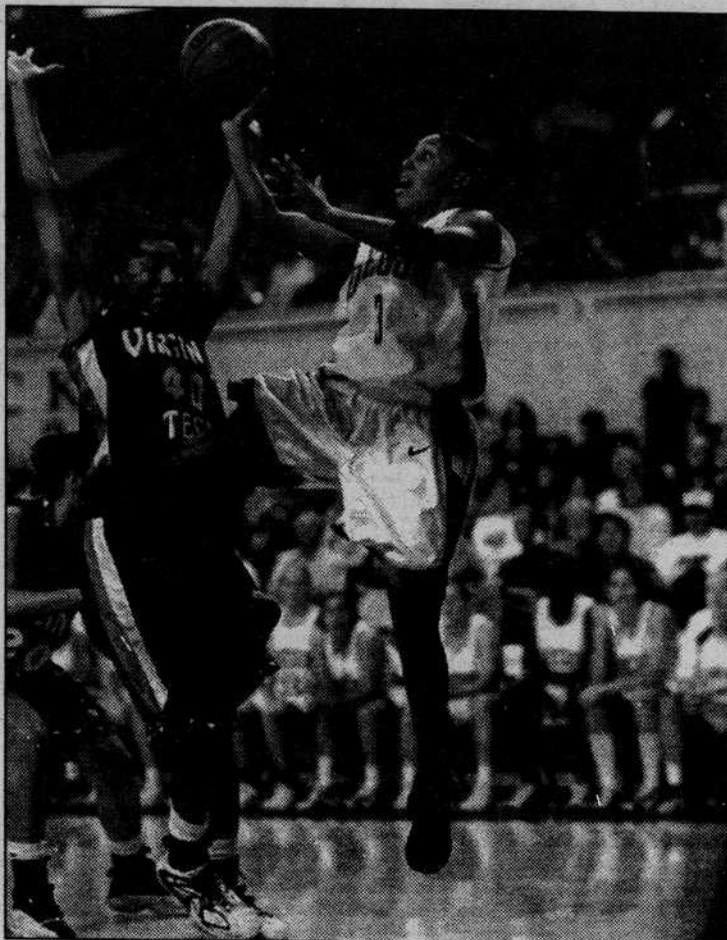
Four minutes later, Strange effectively shut the door on the Hokies' comeback hopes, kissing a jumper off the glass to put the Ducks up by 15.

Oregon held on from there, canning 12-of-15 free throws down the stretch to go up by 20 against a Hokies team that nearly upset No. 3 Georgia a week earlier in the Women's National Invitation Tournament. Saturday's win can only help the Ducks increase their stock in the polls.

"That's the hardest 20-point win that I've ever coached, I'll tell you," Runge said. "We knew it wasn't going to be easy, that's one of the top 20 teams in the country."

Indeed, Virginia Tech refused to give up, continually narrowing the score before falling further behind again. Hicks led their charge offensively. She contributed 20 points on seven-of-18 shooting, including five three-pointers.

Defensively, the seven Virginia Tech players who took the court



John Stoops for the Emerald

Shaquala Williams loses her Hokie defender as she flies to the hole Saturday night.

did their best to mix things up, switching defenses and limiting the Ducks' transition game. But they couldn't come all the way back — or stop Strange.

They had a difficult time with Oregon's dynamite duo in the post as well. Wolvert spun her way inside for 16 points and 11 rebounds. Junior Brianne Meharry added 10 points.

"It seems like when our posts do good, it opens up our outside game," Strange said. "And when [the guards] do good, it opens up the inside."

Sophomore point guard Shaquala Williams helped Strange

open things up even more, tossing in 16 points to go with five rebounds and three assists.

And the Ducks, as always, played incredible defense. They forced the Hokies into 24 turnovers on 19-of-47 shooting. They also combined for nine steals and four blocks, including an unexpectedly emphatic one by junior guard Lindsey Dion with eight minutes left.

"[Assistant coach Fred Litzenberger] Litz always says, 'Our defense will make our offense happen,'" Strange said. "That's what we did tonight."

"We did a pretty good job."

Nicole Strange

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Strange's final shot was crucial.

Virginia Tech scored on a layin by forward Tere Williams, sparking an 8-0 run that narrowed Oregon's advantage to 51-42. But as the story of the game went, a double-teamed Angelina Wolvert found Strange open on the outside. Strange buried the shot, and after that Virginia Tech never got closer than 10.

She also helped ice the Hokies by making three-of-four free throws in the final 2:19.

Oregon head coach Jody Runge complimented Virginia Tech's scouting of the Ducks. Runge said the Hokies knew of the Oregon shooters, Shaquala Williams and Jamie Craighead, along with its dangerous post game.

But they didn't expect Strange to explode on offense.

"They were doubling in on the post, and if they're going to double they have to leave somebody open. From the percentages, maybe they looked at her and thought she was the one. That was a gamble they took in their defensive strategy, and Nicole did a great job exploiting it."

Wolvert compared Strange's performance to those of last season's seniors, Lisa Bowyer and Natasha O'Brien.

"Whenever they had great games, it just picked everything up," Wolvert said. "Nicole just filled their shoes, and that's what we need from our seniors. She definitely did a good job tonight."

Perhaps the person most surprised by Strange's game was Strange. Beforehand, she said her warmup drills didn't indicate a standout game.

"I was bricking all of 'em, but sometimes that's how it goes," she said. "You miss 'em all in warm ups, and you'll hit 'em in a game. It's just amazing ... I just feel like I'm floating right now."

Bowl game

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nites a rushing attack that averages more than 239 yards per game.

Hamner averages 124 yards rushing and 10 touchdowns with his 1,362 total yards rushing. Cockerham is the team's second-leading rusher with 805 yards and 10 scores. He has also passed for 1,834 yards and another 12 touchdowns.

Defensively, Minnesota is the Big 10's best against the pass and

near the top overall, allowing just 175 yards passing and 314 total yards per game. Senior strong safety Tyrone Carter is a finalist for the Jim Thorpe award and paces the team with 127 tackles.

"A tremendous challenge one to our offense because this is a very, very good defensive football team and secondly to our defense in terms of the running threat of both the tailback and the quarterback," said Bellotti, who compared the Golden Gophers' rushing attack to Washington's.

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