Students test rocket project

By DAVID ANDREWS
Collegian Staff Writer

Dozens of students in hard hats gazed up into the rafters of The Bryce Jordan Center yesterday, waiting for a beach ball hanging above to be released.

When it was, their weeks of hard work were released with it.

Immersed in a project for Science, Technology and Society 497B (Sound Rocket Science), the students were testing an experiment that will be sent into space in a year with a sounding rocket the class designed itself.

The goal: to drop the ball from the 110-foot high ceiling, equipped with an accelerometer to measure its speed, and land it in a plastic pool filled with Styrofoam directly below.

"The only uncertainty is, can we hit the kiddie pool," asked project manager Tim Wheeler.

The team worked below on final adjustments before the experiment, but the hardest work was already over, said Susan Shoup, part of the group's publicity crew. One student looked up to the stands where the class publicity crew sat, trying to start a human wave.

Then it was time for the drop. The ball was released, and as the students watched, it drifted to one side, bouncing 10 feet from the pool. It landed inside the pool after a single bounce with the accelerometer fortunately intact. The students laughed and cheered, ready to try again.

The second time, the ball bounced off a post used to measure its speed. The next time, it fell prematurely,
as it was lifted toward the rafters for another try.

No matter. The students began dropping the ball from shorter heights, using the results to measure exactly how such a ball will act in space.

Yesterday marked the culmination of this semester's STS 497B course. After the ball drop, the students were to move outside, shooting model rockets built over the course of the semester, then party together with a barbecue.

The project, however, is far from over, set to continue right up until the rocket's launch by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration in May 1999. The rocket will test the temperature of the atmosphere more thoroughly than ever before.

"Usually, you don't do it more than one way, and we're doing it in five ways," Wheeler said.

University students are designing four of the experiments, in addition to the communication system, the publicity for the project and the rocket itself.