

MT Holds Off FIU 60-58

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. -

Middle Tennessee staved off several Florida International runs and overcame a poor shooting night to win 60-58 in front of 5,135.

The Blue Raiders (10-11, 5-3) jumped out to an early lead, posting an 18-7 advantage with 10:39 remaining in the first half. Middle Tennessee kept up the pressure, leading by as many as 15 in the opening frame before the Golden Panthers (6-13, 0-6) mounted their first serious charge of the contest.

FIU put together 12-7 run to close the half and send the Blue Raiders to a 32-25 halftime advantage.

The Golden Panthers weren't done there. They opened the half on a 7-0 run to knot the score at 32 and turn the game's momentum in their favor.

Middle Tennessee seemed to withstand the run and regained control of the game with a 45-35 lead, but Florida International wouldn't quit.

FIU would rally to tie the score twice more, the second coming with 1:57 left in the game. The Blue Raiders grabbed a two-point lead at 1:42, but free throw from Junior Matias cut the lead to only one with 55 seconds left.



A missed trey attempt by MT's Marcus Robinson gave the Golden Panthers the ball down one with 18 seconds to go, but Eulias Baez missed a shot in the paint and Napoleon Rhodes grabbed a huge rebound with 1.8 seconds left.

An immediate foul put Rhodes at the line where he made one of two, forcing FIU to attempt a long 3-point attempt that fell short giving Middle Tennessee the win.

Tommy Gunn led the Blue Raiders with 16 points and Rhodes added 10.

FIU was paced by Matias' 16 points while Baez added 15 and Carlos Morban netted 10.

BIG CROWD: The announced crowd of 5,135 was the largest of the season and the most at the Murphy Center since having 7,897 against Kansas on Dec. 5, 1999.

TAKING CARE OF THE BASKETBALL: The Blue Raiders did an excellent job of taking care of the basketball against FIU by committing a season-low nine turnovers. It ranks as the fewest turnovers by the Blue Raiders since having just nine against Arkansas State during the 2001-02 campaign. Over their last six games, Middle Tennessee has committed less than 14 five times.

GETTING TO THE LINE: The Blue Raiders went to the charity stripe a season-high 29 times with junior Napoleon Rhodes leading the way with a career-high 12 attempts. Seven different Blue Raiders attempted free throws against FIU.

COLD FROM THE FIELD: The mark of a good team is finding ways to win when things are not going well, which is exactly what the Blue Raiders did against FIU on Saturday. Middle Tennessee shot a miserable 38.3 percent from the field, including just 34.8 percent in the second half, to register its worst percentage since making only 36.8 percent in an early season loss at Purdue. Despite the cold shooting, the Blue Raiders outrebounded FIU, won the turnover battle, and made more free throws.

THIS 'N' THAT: The Blue Raiders are now 9-2 on the season when holding the opposition below 70 points and 4-0 when holding them under 60 points ... The Middle Tennessee bench outscored the FIU bench, 14-7 ... MT is 3-1 at home in league play this year and 7-4 overall ... Tommy Gunn has now scored in double figures nine straight games ... Point guard Eric Parham was solid once again as he dished out three assists and had no turnovers in 32 minutes of action ... The Blue Raiders have won four of their last five games.

QUOTES

MT Head Coach Kermit Davis: "It didn't surprise me. They have played too hard on the film that we watched. What really concerned me was they went to Western Kentucky and held them to 20 at the half. I thought their team came out and played physical. We got up big and couldn't hold on. I really thought the crowd got us over the hump towards the end."

"What happens in college basketball, all over the place and in all leagues, fans can will young guys to win the game. It didn't go great for us. We didn't shoot the ball like Tommy Gunn has normally shot. William Pippen didn't get in a great rhythm offensively. I really thought the student body and the

fans were the big key to us winning tonight."

MT Forward Napoleon Rhodes: "Coach [Davis] said that they were a physical team. [Belco Bamba] played physical tonight, so I had to play physical myself. They are a good rebounding team and we had to go in there and get all the offensive and defensive rebounds. I am glad they missed the shot, and I am glad we came up with the rebound. We just need to continue to play better defense than we are right now."

MT Guard Marcus Robinson: "They played a tough zone tonight. It is difficult to drive to the middle or anywhere against the zone. We had to make open shots, which we weren't. We did pretty good getting inside and hitting the big shots that we needed."

"The fans were great. Of course, we didn't want it to come down to that. But, the fans made a lot of noise when they were suppose to. So, I thank the fans for that."

MT Guard Eric Parham: "I just think they were tough. They played us hard. They never gave up and they rebounded. Any team that plays defense and rebounds, they are always going to be good."

"Everybody on the team understands their role and knows what has to be done. I think what put our guys over the hump was our fans. It is a whole other ball game. We are used to going other places and having the fans against us. To have a lot of people come out and root for us, it felt good."

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