Blue Raiders push No. 10 Alabama to the limit in Paradise

Upset bid falls short in tournament opener

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ST. THOMAS, Virgin Islands - Middle Tennessee gave No. 10 Alabama all it wanted in the opening game of the Paradise Jam Tournament but the Crimson Tide and their All-American point guard, Ronald Steele, was too much down the stretch as the Blue Raiders suffered a hard-fought 71-62 setback here Friday afternoon. The Blue Raiders (1-2) pulled to within 62-57 on Kevin Kanaskie's 3-pointer with 6:32 remaining and they had a chance to dent the lead even more seconds later when Desmond Yates toed the free-throw line with 6:17 remaining. Yates missed the front end of the one-and-one and Steele nailed a 3-pointer on the other end to extend the lead to 65-57. Middle Tennessee would get to within six with four minutes remaining; however, it couldn't get key stops and Alabama (2-0) was able to escape with the win. "We made marked improvement but it's disappointing because I really thought Alabama was kind of ripe today," Middle Tennessee coach Kermit Davis said. "I thought we made some progress offensively. We had better ball movement and we were much more patient. We held our own on the boards. Overall, I saw some signs of progress and that's a positive." Middle Tennessee will play either Iowa or Toledo Saturday at 5 p.m. in its second game of the event. Tim Blue came off the bench to provide a spark with a team-high 13 points and six rebounds, while Kanaskie continued his fine play running the point with 12 points, five assists and no turnovers. Kyle Young was also strong with nine points on 4-of-5 shooting to go with his five boards. Sophomore Nigel Johnson also enjoyed his best game as a Blue Raider with seven points and a team-high seven rebounds. "The competition here is going to make us better and I thought we took strides in that direction today," Kanaskie said. "We executed our offense better. We didn't take bad shots. We gave ourselves a chance against a very talented team and that's signs of progress." Steele led three Alabama players

in double figures with 20 points but Johnson held him to 5-of-13 shooting from the field and just two second-half field goals, but the big blow was his long trey with less than six minutes remaining. After turning the ball over 41 times in its first two games, Middle Tennessee had just five against the Crimson Tide, while shooting a season-high 42 percent from the field. The Blue Raiders did not help themselves at the charity stripe, though, connecting on just eight-of-16 attempts. Aside of an offensive lull midway through the first half, coupled with some defensive lapses, the game was virtually even throughout. Johnson's jumper at 15:02 in the first half made it 12-10 but Alabama followed with 13-4 run over the next four minutes to stretch its lead to 25-14. Young's dunk out of a timeout ended the run and Middle Tennessee battled to a 38-31 deficit at the half. Strong inside play from Theryn Hudson and Young enabled the Blue Raiders to cut into the lead and stay with Alabama throughout the second half but another scoring lapse not only hurt Middle Tennessee's chances, but it came with little time remaining to overcome it. Kanaskie's jumper with 6:32 remaining to cut the 'Bama lead to 62-57 would be Middle Tennessee's last field goal until Darren Avery connected for a layup with three seconds remaining. The Blue Raiders were 0-of-10 from the field during the 6:29 stretch. Led by Blue, Hudson, and Young, Middle Tennessee enjoyed strong inside play. The Blue Raiders produced 36 points in the paint and their bench contributed 22 points.

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