Blue Raiders' valiant effort comes up short against WKU

Hilltoppers secure 73-64 win

December 29, 2006 · MT Media Relations

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. Middle Tennessee put forth a hard-fought battle against rival Western Kentucky but the visiting Hilltoppers pulled away with a late second-half surge on their way to a 73-64 win in front of 4,828 at Murphy Center Thursday night. The Blue Raiders (4-8, 0-2 SBC) trailed 33-32 with 15:53 remaining following a jumper by Tim Blue; however, Orlando Mendez-Valdez keyed a 16-2 run over the next five minutes and sealed the charge with a long 3-pointer to extend the lead back to 48-35 with 10:44 remaining. Mendez-Valdez scored 16 of his game-high 18 points in the second half, including 11 during the decisive run. He was 6-of-8 from the field, including 4-of-5 from 3-point range. He was one of several chief contributors off the bench as the Hilltoppers received 36 points from their reserves. Middle Tennessee had three players in double figures, led by Tim Blue's 15 points. Nigel Johnson scored a season-high 14 points, including 13 in the second half to keep the Blue Raiders in the game, and Desmond Yates tallied 13. Kyle Young finished with nine points, while Kevin Kanaskie continued his strong play at the point with six assists and one turnover against unrelenting defensive pressure. Through it all, Middle Tennessee stayed within striking distance but was unable to get over the hump against the Hilltoppers (10-4, 2-1 SBC) down the stretch. "I haven't seen everybody in the league yet, but there can't be anybody who's doing a better coaching job than Kermit Davis," said Western Kentucky coach Darrin Horn. "You're talking about a program that has had some departures, an injury to their

best player and has very little to back up the point guard spot, and they're still well-prepared - I thought they played their butts off tonight and really made it tough for us, especially down the stretch. They would not go away. I think you have to credit Kermit with that." Middle Tennessee's defensive preparation was key in that the Blue Raiders limited heralded Western Kentucky standout Courtney Lee to just one field goal attempt in the second half. Lee finished with 17 points and controlling him in the second half when he was 0-of-1 from the field with three free throws helped keep Middle Tennessee within striking distance - until Mendez-Valdez took the game over with a sensational demonstration over a five-minute span. "He is a very underrated player," Davis said of Mendez-Valdez. "You can put him as a starter on most teams in our league. I thought Western Kentucky played extremely hard, they always do. I think that team had a little more purpose than any of the other (Western Kentucky) teams. All of Darrin's teams play really hard, and I thought their effort was outstanding tonight. I also thought our effort was there. Our guys played hard and gave us a chance to win this game. We still have some areas where we have to improve but we made some strides from our last game to this one." Middle Tennessee went into the half trailing 31-24 and came out strong to start the second half, climbing to within one with 15:53 remaining. Western Kentucky's ability to answer the run and stretch the lead back to double figures was pivotal in that the Blue Raiders wouldn't go away but could never get closer than seven the remainder of the way as the Hilltoppers continuously had answers for everything Middle Tennessee run. Middle Tennessee will play at Florida International Sunday at noon. **Postgame Quotes:**

Middle Tennessee Head Coach Kermit Davis

On the play of Western Kentucky:

"I thought that Western Kentucky played extremely hard, they always do. I think that team had a little more purpose than any of the other teams. All of Darrin's [Horn] teams play really hard. I thought their effort was outstanding." **On the play of sophomore guard Orlando Mendez-Valdez:**

"The backup guard [Orlando] Mendez-Valdez played really well. I thought last season when he got hurt it changed their team. He is a very underrated player. You can put him as a starter on most teams in our league. We have let guys in three or four of our losses this season who have averaged five or six get career highs against us. He made some tough shots. I told our team that is what it boiled down to. They made some shots we didn't make and they made some plays we needed to make." **On the quick defensive pressure by Western Kentucky:**

"Nigel Johnson showed tonight what he could do with his quickness. I think he was our only perimeter player could really match their quickness. They crawl into you and force you to make plays on the other end. They won't allow you to run your offense. They did it to North Texas. North Texas has a lot more offensive weapons than we do and they got 86 by forcing them at the rim. We weren't able to do that." **On guarding junior guard Courtney Lee:**

"I thought for the whole game we did a good job on Lee. He jumps right over the top of you and makes great mid-range jump shots. He's the best mid-range jump shooter in college basketball in my opinion." **On narrowing the lead in the second half:**

"We made some nice set-plays and cut it to one or two in the second half. Then they decided not to play half court. They decided to go get us full court and pressure us all over the floor. We didn't have enough guys to make plays in transition, in the past we have." **On briefly playing Adam Vogelsberg in the second half:**

"He came to me at halftime and asked me to give him a couple of minutes. This guy has been through so much and is a high character guy so I wanted to give him a chance. I knew he couldn't do it and he knew he couldn't do it. I thought maybe it would spark us and it did a little bit. He was on one leg fighting it. My goal with Adam [Vogelsberg] is to be positive and it's not the end of the world. He's going to graduate in May and try to be on the first team all-league next year." **Point guard**

Kevin Kanaskie

"Their defense was intense and we didn't get stops when we needed to. We couldn't get over the hump because we couldn't get stops. They made all the big plays in the game and we couldn't make any big plays." "[Mendez-Valdez] was a huge part; he had 14 points in the second half. We knew he could shoot, but we didn't get out to him like we should have. I think we did a good job on Courtney (Lee) in the second half, but we just didn't guard their other players." "I think we need to rebound better. We need to get a win. I thought we played hard tonight but we didn't get stops when we needed to. Hopefully we can correct that in practice before we go down to Florida." **Adam Vogelsberg**

"I was ready if (coach Davis) put me in. I am just not very good right now, with my foot being bad. I am trying to get it better." "It felt good to be out there, but I couldn't play at that level right now. I have noticed a lot of improvement over the last week, but it is going slow." "The guys played their hearts out tonight. I just wanted to go out there and try to help them out. I will probably take a red shirt year unless it gets better real quick." **Desmond Yates**

"It's a fun game to be in. Everyone had been telling it was going to be a fun game. I have been hearing about him [Courtney Lee] since last year. I think he is a real good talent and maybe the best player in our league hands down right now. I can't wait to play him again." **POSTGAME NOTES:**

VOGELSBERG TO REDSHIRT:

Middle Tennessee Head Coach Kermit Davis announced that senior guard Adam Vogelsberg will take a redshirt season for the 2006-07 campaign following Thursday's game against Western Kentucky. Vogelsberg, Middle Tennessee's leading scorer from last season and a preseason All-SBC selection, has been sidelined with a broken bone in his right foot since preseason. He saw his first action of the season Thursday when he played three minutes midway through the second half before being lifted from the contest. Davis made the announcement regarding Vogelsberg's redshirt in the postgame. Vogelsberg will be put back in a cast for at least three weeks. **KANASKIE KEEPS DISHING:**

Sophomore point guard Kevin Kanaskie, who is second in the Sun Belt in assists and assist/turnover ratio, had another solid game against Western Kentucky. Kanaskie had a game-high six assists and only one turnover in 37 minutes of action. The State College, Pa., native has led the Blue Raiders in assists each game and has had six or more in 11 of 12 contests. He is averaging 5.8 assists for the season and has a 2-to-1 assist/turnover ratio. **CAREER NIGHT FOR NIGEL:**

Nigel Johnson turned in a solid showing against Western Kentucky with a career-high 14 points. Johnson nailed 9-of-10 free throws and is shooting a team-best 86 percent (24-of-28) at the charity stripe this season. He also had two assists, no turnovers, and a steal in his 28 minutes of action. **BLUE COMES UP BIG:**

Senior forward Tim Blue tied his career high for field goals made with seven against Western Kentucky on 10 attempts. His team-high 15 points is his second-highest scoring output of the season. **YATES STRONG AT HOME:**

Freshman Desmond Yates produced his sixth double figure scoring game of the season with 13 against Western Kentucky. Yates has scored double figures in six of his last seven contests. The Somerville, Tenn., native has enjoyed his best games at the Murphy Center where he averages 14.5 points and 4.2 rebounds in six home contests.