Blue Raiders Pound Covenant 86-53

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. -Middle Tennessee got its season off on the right foot with an 86-53 win over visiting Covenant College on Monday evening.

The Blue Raiders started off tentatively, feeling their way to a 14-14 tie with 9:13 remaining in the first half. At that point, the team seemed to jump to life, reeling off 11 unanswered points.

The run was keyed by senior Tommy Gunn, who scored eight points and grabbed two steals during that stretch, giving the Blue Raiders a 25-14 lead.

The Blue Raiders would not look back.

A trey from junior Michael Cuffee gave the team a 15point advantage at the 4:01



mark. A Keith Christmas layup off a beautiful feed from Bryan Smithson at the halftime buzzer put the team ahead 42-24 at intermission.

Middle Tennessee added to its lead with another strong spurt to begin the second period. MT opened the half with an 18-3 run that put the game completely out of reach. The team built a lead as high as 35 before settling in for the 33-point final margin.

Gunn led all scorers with 23 points. Smithson added 12 and Christmas pitched in with 10. Kyle Young led all rebounders with 10 boards and Keith Connor tallied 10 assists with no turnovers in the winning effort.

Covenant was paced by Jonathan McClellan's 15 points.

The Blue Raiders return to action on Saturday evening at Wyoming. Tip off is scheduled for 8 PM Central Time.

STRONG DEBUTS: Three Blue Raider freshmen turned in strong debuts Monday night. Bryan Smithson, Keith Christmas and Kyle Young finished in double-digits in either scoring or rebounding in their first collegiate game. Smithson scored 12 points on 6 of 8 shooting to go along with four assists and no turnovers in 19 minutes from his point guard spot, while Christmas added 10 points and three rebounds off the bench in 21 minutes. Young, who earned the start tonight, had a gamehigh 10 rebounds and four points.

GUNN PASSES HARRIS: With 23 points tonight, senior Tommy Gunn surpassed Chris Harris for 18th place on Middle Tennessee's all-time scoring list. Gunn now has 1,087 career points and needs four more to take over 17th place from Render Carden (1,090).

CONNER SETS CAREER-HIGH: Senior Keith Conner started at the point tonight and responded by dishing out a career-best 10 assists. Conner bested his previous mark of five assists set against IUPUI last year. Conner's best stat, however, was the fact he had zero turnovers in his 22 minutes of action.

GUNN OVERTAKES BAILEY: Senior Tommy Gunn recorded three steals tonight against Covenant College to move past Roni Bailey for sixth place on the all-time steal list. Gunn now has 114 steals and needs 21 more to overtake Duane Washington for fifth (134).

TIDBITS: The Blue Raiders are now 16-5 in their last 21 season openers ... MT moved to 15-2 under Davis when leading at the half ... With 23 points tonight, Tommy Gunn has now scored 20 or more points 12 times in his career ... Walk-on freshman Wes Durant saw action in his first collegiate game tonight ... Middle Tennessee's 10 made three-pointers is its most in a game since hitting 10 against Arkansas State last year in the two team's second meeting ... Twelve different players played tonight for the Blue Raiders and 11 of them recorded at least one rebound ... The Blue Raiders' 42 rebounds tonight is their most in a game since collecting 43 against Denver last year - a span of eight games ... The 44 second half points are the most ever under Kermit Davis.

NEXT UP: The Blue Raiders will hit the road to take on Wyoming this Saturday. Tipoff is scheduled for 8 PM in Laramie.

MT Guard Keith Connor

"In the locker room, no one was celebrating. We know we have work to do, we know what we have ahead of us. It was good for the young guys to get some experience out there."

"I was just trying to get my teammates involved in the game. We were able to get Tommy [Gunn] some shots because that is our best chance of winning."

MT Guard Tommy Gunn

"It was a great way to start the season. We knew they were dangerous, especially after playing tough games against Kennesaw State and Christian Brothers last year. We tried to get practice into the game, and we came out with a win."

On the game tied at 14

"The difference was Coach Davis chewing us out during the timeout. He just told us that is not what we worked on for the game. We were over playing the passing lanes, which was giving them easy shots with the back cuts. That is not what we practiced. He explained that to us. He chewed us out

and let us know the situation. We went out and put that emphasis into the game."

MT Head Coach Kermit Davis

"The offense they run, the Princeton offense, is the reason why Princeton beat Georgetown with Patrick Ewing. That is why a lesser Ivy League team talent wise can go and play really talented teams. It is an equalizer. Obviously, we are more talented than they are. I thought after the first six or seven minutes, we settled down and played with a lot of energy. Overall, I was pleased. I thought we shared the ball very well. 21 assists out of 31 baskets is a great ratio. Keith Connor was fantastic with ten assists and no turnovers."

"We talk so much about being unselfish. I really thought our whole team was unselfish. I thought we executed some set plays out of the zone offense. We did some nice things we that, and I think you are going to see that. Tommy Gunn was sensational tonight with his quality of play, 23 points in 24 minutes."

"I thought it was a fantastic crowd. For us to get almost 3,000 people for a game against Covenant College on a Monday night in November is unbelievable. It is a good start for us. I would really like to think the people for coming out. If I was an average fan, I would like to come back and watch them again based on how hard they played."

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