Blue Raiders Battle Back for 72-65 Victory

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee's Bryan Smithson knocked down a three-pointer with just over a minute to play and senior Tommy Gunn made four straight free throws, as the Blue Raiders scored the final 11 points of the game for a 72-65 victory over IP-Fort Wayne at Murphy Center Tuesday night. IPFW's Terry Collins made a short jumper with 3:37 to play to give the visiting Matadors a 65-61 advantage in a game the visitors led all but twice from the opening tip. But Gunn made two straight jumpers to knot the score on a night when the senior struggled from the field, going just 4-for-11. After another stop the ball ended up in Michael Cuffee's hands on the block. After a double-team Cuffee kicked the ball out to Smithson on the wing, who knocked down the three-pointer to give the Blue Raiders just their third lead of the contest. The Matadors missed a pair of jumpers on the other end before Gunn was fouled and knocked down two foul shots with 19 seconds remaining, giving the Blue Raiders a four-point lead. Gunn sank two more free throws with nine seconds left for the final margin. Cuffee played one of his best games of the season, netting 12 points and grabbing a season and team-high eight rebounds. Smithson struggled with foul trouble for most of the night but scored 13 of his 15 points in the second half, adding a season-high five boards as well as three assists in 24 minutes. Mike Dean and Gunn struggled from the field, combining to go just 6-for-23 from the field, as Dean scored 10 and Gunn 14. But the Blue Raiders made 26-of-32 from the foul line, a huge difference in the contest, as well as holding the Matadors to just 32 percent shooting from the floor in the second half. IPFW controlled play in the first half, taking a 40-36 lead thanks to 52 percent shooting from the floor, as Collins netted 12 in the opening half and center David Simon scored 11. But as has been the case several times this season, Middle Tennessee played much better in the second half, especially in the final 10 minutes, making a comeback to get the victory. "The 36 points we got in the first half offensively is fine," Blue Raider head coach Kermit Davis said. "During the second half, I commend our guys. We held that team to 32 percent shooting and 25 points in the second half, and that is what won the game." Collins finished with a game-high 23 points and Simon added 13. Middle Tennessee plays its final nonconference game of the season Thursday at 8 p.m. versus Wyoming. The Cowboys defeated the Blue Raiders, 84-63, earlier this

season in Laramie. **GAME NOTES**

MIDDLE TENNESSEE 72

IPFW 65

Jan. 6, 2004; Murfreesboro, Tenn.

BLUE RAIDERS REMAIN PERFECT AT THE GLASS HOUSE: Middle Tennessee's comeback victory over IPFW on Tuesday night allowed the Blue Raiders to keep their home winning streak alive. The Blue Raiders ran their record to 5-0 in the Murphy Center this season after bouncing back from a seven-point deficit with seven minutes remaining. MT is now 14-5 all-time at home under head coach Kermit Davis. **PLAYER OF THE GAME:** Members of the media voted freshman Bryan Smithson as the Alexander Automotive Family Player of the Game. Smithson equaled his career-high with 15 points, including a game clinching three-pointer with 1:05 remaining in the game. The Kennesaw, Ga., native also added three assists and five rebounds in 24 minutes of action. **FREE THROWS THE DIFFERENCE:** After suffering through a miserable shooting night from the field, Middle Tennessee used the free throw line to pick up the non-conference victory over the Mastodons. The Blue Raiders, who made 26 of 32 charity tosses, were successful on more than twice the number IPFW attempted (11) and outscored their opponents by 19. MT also made five more free throws than field goals. **TAKING CARE OF THE ROCK:** A big key for the Blue Raiders against the Mastodons came in the turnover department. MT had just eight miscues on the evening, which is the fewest by a Blue Raider team in the Kermit Davis era. Overall, it was the fewest turnovers in a game since the Blue Raiders had eight against Southeast Missouri on Feb. 7, 1998 - a span of 153 games. **CUFFEE STEPS UP:** Junior Michael Cuffee added a much-needed spark on Tuesday by scoring 12 points and grabbing a personal-best eight rebounds. Over the team's last six games, Cuffee has hit in double figures five times and is averaging 10.5 points during that span. **GUNN BEATS THE ODDS:** Against IPFW on Tuesday, it seemed like everything Tommy Gunn did just wasn't working out. The team's leading scorer struggled with his shot and simply could not get into any kind of rhythm. But like all good players, Gunn never dropped his head or got discouraged. The senior scored eight of his 14 points in the game's final 3:17, including an 18-foot sideline jumper to tie the score at 65-all. **SHOOTING WOES:** Middle Tennessee, which entered the IPFW contest leading the Sun Belt Conference in field goal shooting, shot a season-low 38.9 percent from the field including a dismal 34.8 percent in the second half. It marked the Blue Raiders' worst shooting effort since making just 38.3 percent of their shots against Florida International last year at home in a 60-58 victory. **TIDBITS:** Over the Blue Raiders' last two home games they have shot a combined 83.3 percent from the free throw line (45-54) ... MT has now hit at least one three-pointer in 229 straight games ... Middle Tennessee's top two scorers - Tommy Gunn and Mike Dean - were a combined 6 of 23 from the field against IPFW and the Blue Raiders still won the game ... Dating back to last season, Tommy Gunn has now scored in double figures 14 straight games ... Middle Tennessee won for the first time this season when trailing at the half and are now 3-16 under Kermit Davis when falling behind at intermission ... The Blue Raider bench combined for 19 points, 10 rebounds and made seven of 14 shots from the field. **NEXT UP:** The Blue Raiders will host Wyoming on Thursday night at 8 PM. This will be the second time the two teams have met this season as the Cowboys took an 84-63 decision in Laramie on Nov. 29. **GAME QUOTES**

MT Head Coach Kermit Davis:

"First, I would like to commend Doug Noll and Fort Wayne. I thought their team came out, especially for the first 25 to 28, with so much more energy than we did. They chased loose balls down better than we did. Offensively, it was just one of those games where the ball just didn't go in the hole. For us to give up 40 points in a half and 52 percent from the field is ridiculous. The 36 points we got in the first half offensively is fine. "During the second half, I commend our guys. We held that team to

32 percent shooting and 25 points in the second half, and that is what won the game. Tommy Gunn came out casual and cool with no energy and couldn't guard anybody that Fort Wayne had. So, I didn't start him in the second half. We just have to be better than that. If that shows up in the game on Thursday, it is going to be a long night for us." **MT Guard Bryan Smithson:**

On his 3 pointer to take the lead

"We were running a play to kick it to the post and just options out of that. They collapsed on Cuffee, and I slid down to the wing. [Cuffee] found me with a good pass. It was just options out of offense." "I got in foul trouble and made a couple of turnovers early. But really, I just wanted to get back in the game during the tough stretch and make sure I did everything right. [Coach Davis] gave me the ball at the end of the clock. We just ran our offense and kept taking care of the ball. We did a good job."

MT Forward Michael Cuffee:

"We came out physical, but we weren't physical enough. We could have played harder down the stretch at the post, but we held our composure. We did what we had to do and pulled out a win." **On playing inside and outside**

"I am just doing what I can do to help the team. Now, I am just been having fun. During the last couple of practices I have been having fun. Really, that is what this game is all about is having fun."

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