Blue Raiders Hang On, 92-86

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Visiting Arkansas State made a furious comeback to force overtime, but Middle Tennessee outscored the Indians, 13-7, in the extra period to take a 92-86 victory in the conference opener for the Blue Raiders at Murphy Center Thursday night. Arkansas State's Dewarick Spencer knocked down a 35-footer at the buzzer to force overtime. The Indians made 11 three-pointers in the contest and four in the final 15 seconds of the contest, cutting an eight-point lead to none on Spencer's buzzer-beater. But a season-high crowd of 3,784 helped the Blue Raiders take over the OT period, with Mike Dean's three-pointer midway into the period giving Middle Tennessee the lead and freshman Bryan Smithson's long jumper as the shot clock was running down put the Blue Raiders ahead for good. Dean poured in a season-high 30, the first Blue Raider to score 30 points since William Pippen netted 32 last February at Florida International. The Blue Raiders played one of their best halves of the season in the opening 20 minutes, taking a 43-29 lead at the break behind 15 points from senior Tommy Gunn and 12 from Dean. Arkansas State committed a dozen turnovers in the first half and scored just 29 points despite shooting 59 percent from the field. And the shots just kept on falling in the second half and into overtime, with the Indians making 57 percent from the floor for the game. The Sun Belt Conference's leading scorer, Spencer, scored 22 points to go with teammate J.J. Montgomery's 24, and Tevoris Thompson added 16 off the bench. Kim Adams had nine points and a game-high 14 boards for Arkansas State. The Indians cut the 14-point halftime deficit to two almost eight minutes into the second half by going on a 18-6 run. Spenver's jumper with 12:23 to play in the second period cut the Middle Tennessee lead to 49-47. But the Blue Raiders continued to play hard and really hit the glass, picking up 21 offensive rebounds in the contest to offset 39 percent shooting for the game. Middle Tennessee also committed just six turnovers, a season-low. The Blue Raiders extended the lead to as many as eight

five times and nine twice, only to watch ASU make shots from everywhere on the floor and with defenders in terrific position. In the final two minutes ASU took the strategy to foul and shoot three's, and it paid off. The Blue Raiders made 11-of-16 foul shots in the final 2:29, but the Indians knocked down five three-pointers during the stretch to force the extra period. In overtime a Kyle Young put-back put Middle Tennessee up before Thompson made the last of his four three's in the game to put ASU ahead for the first time since 12-11 at the 13:38 mark of the first half. A Young dunk cut the deficit to one before Dean's three from the left wing put the Blue Raiders up two. But it was Smithson's two-pointer off a pick-and-roll as the shot clock was running down put Middle Tennessee ahead, 88-86 with 34 seconds left in the game. Spencer then missed a three and Dean and Smithson made the final four free throws of the contest to seal the victory. Gunn ended the game with 22 points, eight rebounds and four assists, while Smithson played well again, handing out eight assists with just one turnover in 37 minutes in addition to scoring 10 points. Freshman Alex Weekes also gave the Blue Raiders a spark off the bench, scoring 11 points with three rebounds in just 17 minutes, including a five-point personal run. When the Indians cut the lead to two at 49-47, Weekes converted an old-fashioned three-point play and the next time down the court was fouled again and hit both free throws. Weekes entered the game shooting 33 percent from the line but made 5-of-6 in the contest. Middle Tennessee finishes its current four-game homestand Saturday with a 7 p.m. contest against Arkansas-Little Rock. **GAME QUOTES**

MT Guard Bryan Smithson:

On his shot in overtime "Coach [Davis] was calling in the play from the sidelines. We got mixed up, and we went to the wrong side. We tried to set it up again, and we went to the wrong side again. The clock was winding down, so we had to get a shot off at least. I called for a ball screen, their defender backed off and I took the open look. Luckily, it went in." MT Guard Mike Dean: "It was very important to get the win. We wanted to come out and go 2-0 at home to start out the conference. We knew we had a big lead and didn't want to disappoint anyone." On his improved shooting "I am going to continue to shot it. Sometimes it is not going to go in. You can't score if you don't shoot it. I really wanted to come out and go at [Dewarick] Spencer. Coach [Davis] has been in my ear all week saying [Spencer] was going to come at me. So, I just wanted to be aggressive." MT Guard Tommy Gunn: "We have to credit their guards. They were throwing up some shots, and they were going in. That really set the tone going into overtime. We knew their were going to have some momentum on their side. We just had to come out, buckle down and get some stops defensively. Mike Dean took over in the overtime and we came out with a win." "Going into overtime, we knew we had to get this win. We were up all game. We played well. We worked hard all week preparing for this game. We knew we had to come out with win." MT Forward Alex Weekes: "When you come into a game, you have to produce. I have been practicing hard trying to make sure I get better during the game. Every time I hear my name called, I try to come out ready." MT Head Coach Kermit Davis: "First, I would just like to say how impressed I was with Arkansas State's team and Dickey [Nutt's] ability to get those guys to hang in there. That was the best shooting exhibition that I have seen. My dad was a college coach for a lot of years, and I have been a college coach for 22 years and I have never seen anything like that. We tried everything. [ASU] just kept stepping back and making shots. So, hats off to them. On the other hand, I thought our team in the first half played defensively about as good as we can guard. To go to overtime and come back was a nice gut check for out team. It showed a lot of character." "I thought the balance of our team was good. Alex Weekes, Steve Jackson and Marcus Robinson all gave us nice minutes. Mike Dean just got on a roll, which he can do. If you are just a fan of college offense, it doesn't get much better than that right there. I don't care what television channel you turn it on and what big game you watch. 20 threes were made. We made tough threes. They made tough threes. However, I thought the balance was good." On the crowd "It

was outstanding. Our numbers are going to continue to improve. I was really excited about the student turnout. That was big time. In the overtime, I thought the crowd had a lot to do with us winning the game. I really believe that. They got up in the overtime, and they knew how to act. I thought it was outstanding and I hope we can improve on that Saturday night." ASU Head Coach Dickey Nutt: "I want to start off by apologizing to Kermit [Davis]. In our last timeout, I told Dewarick [Spencer] that he would hit the shot to win the game. When he hit that shot, I thought we went up by one. But, I failed to remember that last free throw that [Middle Tennessee] made because I was so consumed about making the inbounds pass and trying to get a shot up. So, my apologies to him. I went running down there to shake his hand, and he very nicely told me it was a tie game." "I am really proud of our team. In the first half, I thought we dug ourselves into a hole. [Middle Tennessee] is a very athletic basketball team. We knew coming into this game that we had to put a body on them or they would just hammer us on the boards. And, they did that. I was glad to see that we neutralized that in the second half. I felt like the tempo of the game was going in our favor. When you are on the road, it is not uncommon to shoot less shots than the home team just to control the tempo. Give Middle Tennessee credit for winning the game. They did what it took in overtime. I thought their crowd was a good factor in the overtime." **GAME NOTES**

MIDDLE TENNESSEE 92

ARKANSAS STATE 86

Overtime

Jan. 15, 2004; Murfreesboro, TN

DEAN GOES FOR 30: Junior Mike Dean scored a career-best 30 points, including 18 in the second half to key Middle Tennessee's win over Arkansas State. Dean's point total equaled the 16th most ever scored in a game at MT and was the most by a Blue Raider since William Pippen rattled in 32 points at Florida International on Feb. 22, 2003. Dean connected on 7 of 18 shots from the field and all his field goals were three-pointers, which tied for the fourth most in game at MT. WHAT A STAT!: Despite dismal shooting from the field and at the line, Middle Tennessee defeated the Indians on Thursday night because it took care of the basketball. The Blue Raiders committed only six turnovers in 45 minutes, which equaled the second-best effort in school history. The mark for fewest turnovers in a game was set on Dec. 22, 1988 against Arkansas State when the Blue Raiders had just five miscues. Ironically, that game went into double overtime before the Blue Raiders came out on top, 93-92. Over the past three games, the Blue Raiders have committed just 26 turnovers, which average out to only 8.6 per contest. GOOD START: For the second straight season, Middle Tennessee opened Sun Belt Conference play with a victory by downing Arkansas State, 91-86, in overtime. Prior to Kermit Davis, the Blue Raiders had not won a league opener since the 1998-99 season. FRESHMEN COME UP BIG: A huge key in Middle Tennessee's win over Arkansas State on Thursday was the play of freshmen Bryan Smithson, Kyle Young and Alex Weekes. The threesome combined for 28 points, 16 rebounds, nine assists, only three turnovers, and hit 10 of 14 free throws. PLAYER OF THE GAME: Members of the media voted senior Tommy Gunn as the Alexander Automotive Family Player of the Game. Gunn scored 22 points, grabbed a season-high eight rebounds and handed out four assists. It was the 16th time in Gunn's career he has topped the 20-point mark. SMITHSON IMPRESSIVE ... AGAIN: Middle Tennessee freshman Bryan Smithson was impressive in his conference debut Thursday night. The Kennesaw, Ga., native had 10 points, matched his personal-best with five rebounds, and dished out eight assists against only one turnover in 37 minutes of action. Smithson, who has now scored in double figures five straight games, hit the game-clinching jumper with 34 seconds left in overtime. With the shot clock running down and the score tied at 86, Smithson called for a ball screen and nailed an 18-foot shot to put the Blue Raiders ahead for good. GETTIN' TO THE LINE: Middle Tennessee connected on a season-high 31 free

throws in 44 attempts in the win over Arkansas State. The 44 attempts matched a Murphy Center record, while the 31 makes was the most by a Blue Raider team since MT hit 34 against Chattanooga on Dec. 14, 1996. ATTACKING THE IRON: For the year, Middle Tennessee has gone to the line 350 times for an average of 25.0 attempts per game but that statistic is even more impressive during the Blue Raiders three-game winning streak. During that span, MT has gone to the line 110 times for an average of 36.7 free throw attempts per game. TIDBITS: Middle Tennessee is off to a perfect 7-0 start at home, which is the best home start by the Blue Raiders since the 1996-97 began 7-0 (the last team to start 8-0 was the 1990-91 squad) ... Tommy Gunn went over 1,300-point mark with 22 points against ASU to give him 1,308 for his career ... The Blue Raiders remained perfect at home at 7-0 and have now won 12 of their last 13 at the Glass House ... Middle Tennessee has now hit at least one three-pointer in 231 straight games ... The Blue Raiders are now 44-30 all-time in overtime games ... The 9-5 start is the best after 14 games since the 1997-98 team began 11-3. NEXT UP: The Blue Raiders will entertain Arkansas-Little Rock at the Murphy Center on Saturday, Jan. 17. Tipoff is scheduled for 7 PM.

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