UALR Takes Out Blue Raiders, 68-66

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Arkansas-Little Rock's Zack Graber buried a long three-pointer as the shot clock expired with 21 seconds remaining in the game to put the Trojans ahead, as visiting UALR defeated Middle Tennessee, 68-66, Saturday night in Sun Belt action at Murphy Center.

In a game that had 13 ties, including eight in the second half, UALR's Graber knocked down a trey from 23 feet as the shot clock expired to put the visitors up 68-64 in the final minute. A pair of Bryan Smithson free throws cut the deficit to two and two missed foul shots by UALR's Justin Stuckey gave the Blue Raiders one last chance.

Smithson drove to the goal but missed a short jumper in traffic, but the rebound fell out of bounds off UALR, leaving Middle Tennessee one last chance with 0.8 second remaining. Mike Dean's three-pointer bounced off the rim, giving the Trojans (9-7, 3-1 SBC) their fourth straight victory over the Blue Raiders and their sixth in seven meetings since Middle Tennessee (9-6, 1-1) joined the Sun Belt.

UALR's Jamal Holden led all scorers with 19, while Brandon Freeman added 15 and Richard Hardman had 12 for the winners. For the Blue Raiders, Michael Cuffee netted 17 points, while Dean had 15 and Gunn added 13.

The Blue Raiders struggled mightily offensively for the entire contest, committing 11 first-half

turnovers after having just six in the whole game on Thursday against Arkansas State. The game went back-and-forth in the second half, though Middle Tennessee led for most of the opening 20 minutes before the Trojans came back to make it a two-point game at the half.

Both teams battled foul trouble, as the two clubs were whistled for 59 fouls in the contest and combined for 53 free throws.

For Cuffee, it was his best overall game of the season. Cuffee netted a career-best 17 points to go with a team-high seven rebounds, hitting double figures in scoring for the first time since the IPFW game. He also played a personal-best 36 minutes

The Blue Raiders hit the road for the first time in conference next week, traveling to South Alabama Thursday and New Orleans Saturday.

MIDDLE TENNESSEE 66
ARKANSAS-LITTLE ROCK 68
Jan. 17, 2004; Murfreesboro, Tenn.

FIRST HOME LOSS: Middle Tennessee suffered its first home loss of the season in a 68-66 setback to Arkansas-Little Rock. The Blue Raiders entered the UALR contest as the only team in the Sun Belt Conference to own an undefeated home mark. MT is now 7-1 at home for the year.

PLAYER OF THE GAME: Members of the media voted junior Michael Cuffee as the Alexander Automotive Family Player of the Game. Cuffee scored a career-high 17 points on 6 of 10 shooting in a personal-high 36 minutes.

STRONG WEEK FOR DEAN: Junior Mike Dean enjoyed a solid week in games against ASU and UALR. Dean averaged 22.5 points, 2.0 rebounds and made 10 of 16 three-pointers. Overall, Dean went 12-for-25 from the field.

CUFFEE BREAKS OUT: Junior Michael Cuffee netted a career-best 17 points to go with a team-high seven rebounds against Arkansas-Little Rock. Cuffee, who hit double figures in scoring for the first time since the IPFW game, also played a personal-best 36 minutes. Cuffee has now scored in double figures seven times this year.

GUNN PASSES GAITHER: Senior Tommy Gunn scored 13 points against UALR and surpassed Tim Gaither for 11th place on the all-time scoring list. Gunn now has 1,321 career points and stands 81 shy of taking over 10th place from Jerry Beck.

TIDBITS: After committing just 18 turnovers in its previous two games, Middle Tennessee gave it away 15 times in the loss to UALR ... In the Blue Raiders' previous three games - all wins - they averaged 36.7 free throw attempts, but went to the line just 22 times against UALR ... With three steals against UALR, Tommy Gunn surpassed James Johnson for fourth place on the all-time list. Gunn now has 138 career steals and needs only two more to pass Gerald Harris for third place ... Middle Tennessee lost for the first time this season when leading at the half ... The Blue Raiders were outrebounded 20-11 in the second half against UALR, but won the overall board battle, 30-29 ... Bryan Smithson is averaging 7.0 assists in conference play ... The Blue Raiders had a season-best crowd of 3,917.

NEXT UP: The Blue Raiders travel to South Alabama on Thursday to take on the Jaguars. Tip-off is scheduled for 7 PM.

GAME QUOTES

MT Guard Tommy Gunn:

On the late play coming out of time out

"If [Bryan Smithson] couldn't get to the rack, he was going to dish it off to one of the other players for them to create. But, [UALR] didn't pick up the ball, so [Smithson] kept going. There was some contact down there, but in the last seconds of the game, the refs aren't going to call close ones like that."

"We broke down a lot on the defensive rebounding area. They got a lot of offensive rebounds towards the end of the game. That is really what keyed their win tonight."

"It is real frustrating for everybody because we expected to win. We expect to win every game we go in to. Tonight, we just didn't execute defensively like we usually do. We could have put them away, but things like that happen. That is the game of basketball."

MT Forward Michael Cuffee:

"We knew the game was going to be physical. In the second half, we just missed some block outs. [UALR] got three or four straight offensive rebound, which led to free throw opportunities. We knew the game was going to be tough. But, we should have played harder than what we did."

"We probably got out of our offense. But, that is what teams do. You can't stay in your offense all of the time. Things happen during the course of the game. Whatever we do, we depend on making shots."

MT Head Coach Kermit Davis:

"The game was kind of a grinding game. I thought both teams competed really hard. I thought during the last 12 minutes, [UALR] was a little more physical than our team. We would guard them and could not get rebounds. For a few straight possessions, we caused air balls, and then they would go in and score. During the late game, they got stops and we didn't. We couldn't stop Freeman late game. He either tied it or put them up one. Cuffee gets cross screened and was kind of soft. Then, they lay it in the goal. We were down one and went zone. Then, a guy who doesn't shoot the ball all night and is two for 19 from the three makes about a 25 footer at the buzzer. But, we competed. We just made one less play than they did tonight.

"There were two big factors. Kyle Young and Steve Jackson need to be good in that game. Kyle just wasn't very physical in the game. Steve Jackson struggled with foul trouble all night. Playing Alex [Weekes], he is just not physical enough for that right now, and Cuffee is undersized. We only got one rebound and two points in 22 minutes from Kyle Young and Steve Jackson, which we need to do better. Mike Dean getting in foul trouble hurt our team. [UALR] did an excellent job on Gunn. They just sucked right into Tommy Gunn and climbed right into him. He couldn't free himself. At times, he wasn't as patient as he needed to be. He missed some mid-range shots. He is our guy in those kinds of games. We have to have him to make baskets. But, I don't think we were patient enough to get the ball to him."

UALR Head Coach Steve Shields

"Any time you get a win on the road, it is big in the Sun Belt Conference. This is a very difficult place to play. Kermit [Davis] does a tremendous job. His offense is one of the most difficult to guard with all of the counters he has to every set. We have got the most respect we can have for Dean, Gunn, Cuffee, Smithson and all of those guys.

"I thought our guys gave a good effort defensively. I thought we did a good job of blocking out. Fortunately for us, there were a couple of missed shots. It wasn't a perfect defensive game by any stretch. It is just a great win for us in a very difficult place to play."

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