

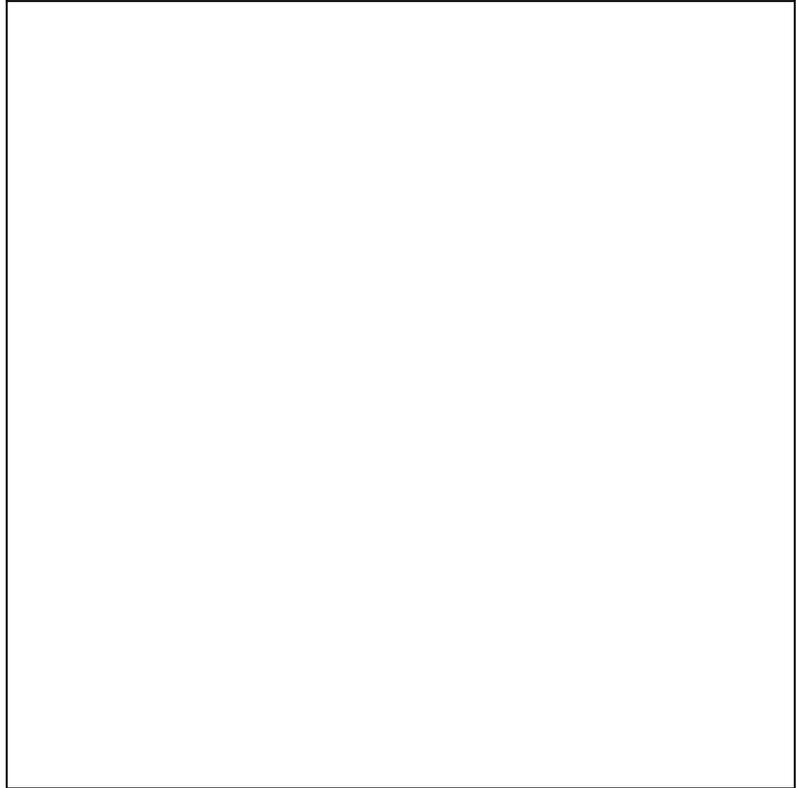
Blue Raiders Fall to NMSU, 81-76

January 29, 2004 · MT Media Relations

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. -

Middle Tennessee struggled from the field the entire night and could not stop conference preseason player of the year James Moore, who finished with 24, to lead New Mexico State to an 81-76 victory in Sun Belt action Thursday night at Murphy Center.

The Blue Raiders shot just 40 percent from the field for the game yet scored 76 points, right at their average in conference play this season. But the visiting Aggies were just too good offensively, making 60 percent in both halves and knocking down 17-for-24 from the foul line.



Moore had struggled in SBC play until Thursday night, averaging a little over 11 points per game in his first six outings. But the senior was 8-of-9 from the field and made all eight free throw attempts to score 24 against the Blue Raiders. Moore netted 25 against Middle Tennessee in last year's outing in Las Cruces.

The Aggies (9-9, 3-4 SBC) led almost the entire game and one brief sequence late in the second half told the story of the contest.

Middle Tennessee (11-7, 3-2) trailed 63-60 and had the ball, setting up senior Tommy Gunn with a good look from behind the three-point line, but Gunn's shot was short. The Aggies rebounded and hustled the ball up-court, finding Kelsey Crooks for a three-pointer from the wing, one of three in the contest for Crooks.

Moore then stole a Bryan Smithson pass on the next trip up the floor and took it to the rack, slamming it home for NMSU's biggest lead of the contest at 68-60.

But still the Blue Raiders would not go away, chipping away at the lead as junior Mike Dean finally started to knock down some shots.

Dean nailed a trio of three's in the final three minutes of the game, scoring 11 of his 22 points during the time span. Middle Tennessee cut the deficit to three with under a minute to play and ran a play

for Dean, who got tangled up in traffic and fell down as the pass floated by the junior and out-of-bounds.

Still the Blue Raiders had a chance in the final 14 seconds after Dean's last three and Crooks made just 1-of-2 free throws. A play was run to show Gunn off a staggered screen and then bring Dean in behind him, but Gunn was stripped of the ball by Moore, who was fouled and put the final nails in the coffin with his last two fouls shots.

Crooks had a dozen and Allen Haynes scored 13 off the bench for the Aggies, who won their second straight after four consecutive league defeats.

Gunn scored 18 points with six rebounds and five assists, while Michael Cuffee added 11. Middle Tennessee was 17-for-22 from the foul line but made only 25 of 62 field goal attempts in the contest.

The Blue Raiders return to action Saturday at 7 p.m., hosting Louisiana-Lafayette (10-5, 5-1), who defeated Western Kentucky, 110-102, Thursday night.

MIDDLE TENNESSEE 76 NEW MEXICO STATE 81

Jan. 29, 2004; Murfreesboro, Tenn.

DUO STAYS STRONG: The potent backcourt scoring duo of Tommy Gunn and Mike Dean put together another strong effort on Thursday night. The pair scored 40 of the team's 76 points and hit eight of the nine three-pointers. After accounting for more than half of the team's points just one time in their first nine games together, the duo has accomplished the feat three times in the past five outings. In conference play, the combo is averaging an even 40.0 points a game to lead the Sun Belt.

PLAYER OF THE GAME: Members of the media voted junior Mike Dean as the Alexander Automotive Family Player of the Game. Dean had a team-best 22 points and hit five three-pointers to lead the Blue Raiders.

TAKING ADVANTAGE: Over the last four games, Middle Tennessee has done an excellent job of converting at the charity stripe. During that span, the Blue Raiders have made 73 of 88 attempts for a percentage of .830. The pinpoint shooting has increased the team's overall percentage from .652 to .694. MT went 17-for-22 at the line against NMSU.

BOMB THREAT: Junior guard Mike Dean has been scorching the nets from three-point land over the past six games. During that span, the Rome, Ga., native has connected on 57.1 percent (24-42) of his trifecta's. For the year, Dean leads the Sun Belt Conference with an overall percentage of .531 and Middle Tennessee's single-season percentage record is 50.5 set by Jonathan Whitworth during the 1999-2000 campaign.

TIDBITS: NMSU shot 60.9 percent from the field, which was its best effort since hitting the same percentage against Valparaiso in 2001 ... MT has now had single-digit turnovers six times this season after registering only nine against the Aggies ... Five of MT's seven losses has come when giving up 80 or more points ... The Blue Raiders are now 0-3 all-time against NMSU at home ... Middle Tennessee's last three losses have been by a combined 12 points ... The Blue Raiders had just nine assists on their 25 baskets in the loss to NMSU.

BLUE RAIDERS GETTING VOTES: In this week's CollegeInsider.com Mid-Major Top 25 poll, Middle Tennessee received 43 votes to put them at No. 36. Louisiana-Lafayette (77 votes) and Arkansas State (62 votes) are the only SBC schools rated ahead of the Blue Raiders. MT, however, defeated the Indians earlier this year and will face the Ragin' Cajuns for the first time on Saturday night. The Mid-Major Top 25 consists of a voting panel of 31 head coaches and is in its fifth year of existence. Some of the notables who are on the panel are Belmont's Rick Byrd, Morehead State's Kyle Macy, Florida International's Donnie Marsh, Denver's Matt Woodley, and Utah State's Stew Morrill. Gonzaga is rated No. 1 in this week's poll followed by Utah State, Southern Illinois and Creighton.

REUNION REMINDER: The Middle Tennessee athletic department will host the second annual Legend's Basketball Reunion on Friday, Jan. 30 and Saturday, Jan. 31. The weekend will get underway on Friday at 7 PM with a reception at the "Tennessee" Miller Foundation House on Thompson Lane. Cocktails and hors d'oeuvres will be provided. Guests will also be invited to the Murphy Center at 11 AM on Saturday to view Head Coach Kermit Davis' pre-game practice and at 7 PM to attend the men's basketball game against conference foe Louisiana-Lafayette. The group has also been invited to attend the BRAA pre-game reception beginning at 6 PM.

NEXT UP: The Blue Raiders will entertain SBC West Division leading Louisiana-Lafayette on Saturday. Tip-off is scheduled for 7 PM.

MT Head Coach Kermit Davis:

"Absolutely the tougher team, the most unselfish team and the most physical team won tonight. I would have been a shamed if we had won at the end. It wouldn't have been a shame. I would have liked it. But, we didn't deserve to win that game.

"I sensed it in practice yesterday with our team. We just played like a team that is not used to having any success. That was it. We went to South Alabama. They weren't used to having any success, and they came out a little soft. We just played like a team not used to having the little bit of success that we had.

"[NMSU] is the worst shooting team in our league field goal percentage wise. We give up 61 percent on our floor. That is just unheard of. Our effort was disappointing in front of a really enthusiastic crowd. So, we will just try to get it right tomorrow and start back with some physicalness in practice."

MT Guard Mike Dean:

"We have to get better defensively. When we double down on the post, we have to find a man on the perimeter. Sometimes we wouldn't find a man and leave someone open."

MT Guard Tommy Gunn:

"We ran a play trying to get on open shot. I was the first option and Dean was the second option. [Smithson] chose to take the first option. On the double team, [NMSU] played good defense and slapped the ball away."

"I felt we could have done some different things offensively to get some better looks at the basket. That really didn't matter. It was mostly the defense. We didn't get down and grind defensively like we know we need to do. We just didn't put the things we worked on in practice into the game."

"We fell we disappointed a lot of people, the fans, the team and the coaches. We know we have a

quick turnaround playing Saturday. Hopefully, the fans will come back and keep supporting us knowing that we have a good ball club that will give effort and try to come out with wins every night."

NMSU Head Coach Lou Henson:

"First of all, we haven't played like this all of the time. I think we are getting a little bit better. The last couple of games we have played pretty well. We shot the ball extremely well tonight, and of course, that always helps. You look good when you shoot the ball well, and it gives you a chance to win. Kermit [Davis] has done a tremendous job with this program. He has got an excellent ball club. But, we shot the ball really well. We played a terrific ball game. When you run into a hot ball club that shot like we did tonight, you are going to have to play extremely well to win. We just had a terrific night."

"For three or four games, we just didn't score. We played very well against North Texas. We had balanced scoring. And then, we just could not make any shots. Basically we just didn't score any points, and you have to score to win."

"We wanted to try to do as good a job as we could on Dean and Gunn. But, we also felt that we had to do a good job on the other players. Because, [Dean and Gunn] are going to get points. You don't know how many, but they are going to score because you are not going to hold them down completely. Gunn had 15 points at halftime. So, I think we did a pretty good job on the others. You have to defend everybody. Even though they are two tremendous guards, you still have to cover all five of them."

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