Blue Raiders Can't Fight Off Cajuns, Drop 74-64 Decision

January 31, 2004 · MT Media Relations

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee fought from behind for almost the entire game against perhaps the deepest and most talented team in the Sun Belt, eventually succumbing 74-64 to Louisiana-Lafayette Saturday night at Murphy Center.

UL moved to 6-1 in Sun Belt play and 11-5 overall, with the Blue Raiders falling to 11-8, 3-3.

Both teams struggled from the field in the opening half, shooting 37 percent each, as the Ragin' Cajuns made a late run to take a 32-26 edge at the break.

The Blue Raiders battled back in the opening minutes of the second half to take the lead on a Mike Dean three-pointer, but the junior had a hard time getting open against the long and lean Cajuns and an even harder time making shots, going 2-for-11 from behind the arc and 4-for-19 overall.

A Tommy Gunn trifecta on the next possession gave Middle Tennessee a two-point lead at the 17:33 mark, the home team's last lead of the contest.

The Cajuns went on a 22-8 run over the next six minutes, expanding the lead to as many as 12 points with seven UL players scoring in the run.

But Middle Tennessee would not go away on its home floor, cutting into the deficit over the next seven minutes to get it to four at 60-56 on a Michael Cuffee jumper with 4:06 remaining.

The Blue Raiders would get as close as three after a pair of Steven Jackson free throws, but a Laurie Bridges three-pointer from the wing a minute later was one of the final nails in the coffin.

The Cajuns made 9-of-10 foul shots down the stretch to seal the victory and a two-game road sweep for the weekend after a 110-102 victory at Western Kentucky on Thursday.

Gunn scored a game-high 16 in the loss, his 21st straight double-digit game dating to last season. Dean added 13, Cuffee a dozen and Jackson 11 off the bench. The Blue Raiders shot a season-low 34 percent from the field.

The Cajuns were led by Orien Greene's 13, followed by 12 from Bridges and 10 by Brian Hamilton.

GAME QUOTES

MT Guard Tommy Gunn

"We worked Friday preparing for [UL-Lafayette's] defense. We know they are a good transition team. We just tried to make them run half court offense. I feel we played good tonight defensively. We couldn't get shots to fall, but that is part of basketball. Towards the end, they started hitting their free throws and made a few shots. We didn't box out and had a few miscues during the stretch. And, they pulled away."

MT Forward Steven Jackson

"You have to give credit to UL-Lafayette. They are a good defensive team. Whenever you go to Arizona and lose at the buzzer, it just shows you what kind of team they have. We have to get stronger around the goal and finish those balls. We need those points, and we need to knock down free throws."

MT Head Coach Kermit Davis

"I was proud of our guys effort. I thought that we competed extremely hard. We left everything on the floor. We got beat by a really talented team. One through eight, they are very good. I think UL-Lafayette is potentially a Top 40 or Top 50 team in college basketball. They have great depth, and they get better when they go off the bench. We tried like heck. They just did a good job on our perimeter players. They are athletic in the perimeter. There were a couple of key plays. We cut [the lead] to three points, and we couldn't get to the double team. The guy splits and we foul. Tommy settled for a 23 foot set shot trying to get the ball to the rim. But, I was proud of us trying to come back and be competitive at the end."

"If we would have given this energy on Thursday night, we would have won the game. But, I knew that our best tonight might not have been good enough. Were we at our best? No. I don't think UL-Lafayette was either. They just have a very athletic and very deep team. They have eight starters on their team. We have to be able to throw the ball around the goal and score. That is something that we have got to try to improve."

"It shows me how hard our team played with 19 offensive rebounds. But number two, it shows you how ineffective we are at trying to get balls back in the goal. We had some looks right at the rim. We are trying to guard their guys with two, and they are making tough shots. We weren't very good at the line either tonight."

UL Head Coach Jessie Evans

"I think it is a cliché that offense looks good, but defense wins championships. It is certainly true in our case. We held Arizona under 40 percent [shooting]. We did the same thing to Dayton and Xavier. We knew we were very capable if we stayed focused, paid attention to our assignments and mixed our defense up. We played a little zone and some match-up. We played a little box, and we played man. My guys did a good job. On the road, we did not foul. And as a result, we were able to keep our defensive players in the game."

"With Greene and Mitchell, we have three defensive stoppers. If you want to include Hamilton, who is capable of guarding on the perimeter, we have four guys that are capable of guarding perimeter players. We were doing some switching and stunted some. For the most part, we just dug in. We knew that if we were going to be successful we had to stop Dean and Gunn."

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Jan. 31, 2004; Murfreesboro, TN

STRUGGLING FROM THE FIELD: The Blue Raiders played a solid defensive game on Saturday night, but their undoing came on the offensive end. The Blue Raiders shot a season-low 34.4 percent from the field, including a dismal 5 of 20 shooting from behind the arc. Middle Tennessee's 34.4 field goal percentage went down as its worst shooting effort since making only 31.4 percent of their shots at UALR on Jan. 29, 2001 - a span of 86 games.

PLAYER OF THE GAME: Members of the media voted senior Tommy Gunn as the Alexander Automotive Family Player of the Game. Gunn led the Blue Raiders with 16 points, three steals and four rebounds.

SOLID OFF THE BENCH ... AGAIN: Senior Steven Jackson provided the Blue Raiders with another solid outing off the bench. In 18 minutes, Jackson scored 11 points, grabbed three rebounds and tallied two steals. He was also 3-for-5 from the field and a perfect 5-for-5 from the charity stripe. Over the past two games, Jackson has made 4 of 7 shots from the field, 9 of 11 free throws and scored 18 points in 32 minutes.

GUNN MOVES TO SECOND: Tommy Gunn moved past Tim Gaither for second place on the all-time steals list at Middle Tennessee after collecting three in the loss to ULL. Gunn now has 146 career steals, but is well back of all-time leader Richard Duncan (190).

TIDBITS: The crowd of 4,003 was the largest of the season for MT ... Mike Dean's seven boards against ULL was one shy of his career-best and went down as the most he has hauled in versus an SBC school ... Mike Dean and Tommy Gunn, who entered the ULL game averaging a combined 40 points a contest, were held to just 29 points in the loss to the Ragin' Cajuns ... Tommy Gunn has scored in double figures 21 straight games ... MT entered the ULL game having hit 83.0 percent of its free throws the previous four games combined, but managed to connect on only 65.2 percent against the Ragin' Cajuns ... The Blue Raiders have won the offensive board battle by a combined 30-15 over the past two games.

NEXT UP: The Blue Raiders will travel to Bowling Green, KY on Thursday to take on Western Kentucky. Game time is scheduled for 7 PM.

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