

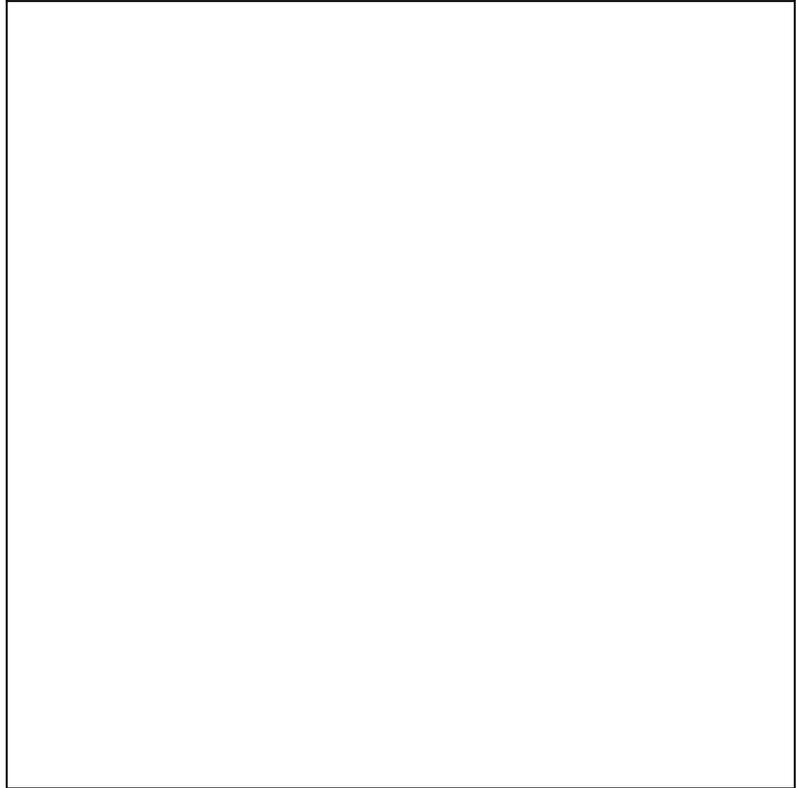
Blue Raiders Fall 70-66 at WKU

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BOWLING GREEN, Ky. -

Middle Tennessee's comeback in the second half at Western Kentucky fell short as the Blue Raiders dropped a 70-66 decision in front of 5,212 at Diddle Arena Thursday night.

The Blue Raiders (11-9, 3-4 Sun Belt) fell behind by 13 points, 56-43, with 8:45 remaining but they didn't wilt and found themselves within a field goal with under one minute remaining. Senior guard Tommy Gunn knocked down a 3-pointer with 42 seconds remaining to trim the deficit to 65-63.



"I thought both teams competed hard," Middle Tennessee coach Kermit Davis said. "Like so many times this season our team never quit and battled back and gave themselves a chance."

Western Kentucky; however, salvaged the win between the league rivals by connecting on 5-of-8 free throws in the final 27 seconds to win the game that was a rematch of last year's Sun Belt Conference title game.

Gunn led the Blue Raiders with 17 points and moved into 10th place on the all-time scoring list with 1,410 points, surpassing former Middle Tennessee great Jerry Beck, who scored 1,401 points in his career. Gunn, a native of Syracuse, N.Y., is 11 points shy of Sleepy Taylor's 1,421 career points.

Junior guard Mike Dean finished with 15 points and junior forward Michael Cuffee finished with 14 for the Blue Raiders, who shot 47 percent for the game.

Western Kentucky (11-10, 5-4) was led by Anthony Winchester's 18 points, while Nigel Dixon and Mike Wells each finished with 15 points for the Hilltoppers.

Middle Tennessee trailed 15-7 with 11:41 remaining in the first half but put together a strong run, regrouped and found itself leading 31-28 at the half after Dean converted consecutive shots and then Bryan Smithson knocked down a pair of free throws with two seconds remaining before the break.

The second half started as a see-saw affair, but the Blue Raiders were only able to hit two of their first 10 shots and found themselves down 48-40 with 12:01 remaining. The Hilltoppers used a 21-8 run from the 15:55 mark to the 8:45 mark to go on top 56-43, the largest lead of the game for either team.

Middle Tennessee turned up the defense down the stretch and held the Hilltoppers without a field goal for 5:48 - from the 9:00 mark to 3:12 - to get back in the game, but Wells knocked down two clutch baskets in the waning minutes to turn back the Blue Raider comeback.

The Blue Raiders travel to play Florida International in Miami Saturday at 6 p.m. CT.

GAME NOTES

Senior Tommy Gunn moved past Jerry Beck (1979-82) into 10th place on the all-time scoring list at Middle Tennessee with his team-high 17 points. Gunn now has 1,410 career points as a Blue Raider in 104 career contests ... Middle Tennessee used a different starting lineup for the first time in 15 games. The fivesome of Smithson, Dean, Gunn, Cuffee and Young had started the previous 14 outings, compiling an 8-6 record. Due to injuries and shaking up the lineup, head coach Kermit Davis used a different starting five for the first time since December December 17 at Alabama State ... Freshman Alex Weekes drew his first career start, playing 18 minutes ... Tommy Gunn did not start the contest after an injury kept him out of practice for most of the week. Gunn's stretch of 38 consecutive starts came to an end. His last non-start came against Kennesaw State on December 27, 2002 ... Freshman Bryan Smithson tied his career-high with five rebounds in the contest, the third time Smithson has pulled down five boards ... Middle Tennessee led at halftime, 31-28, but lost the contest, only the second time this season and fourth time under Kermit Davis the Blue Raiders lost when leading at the half. Middle Tennessee is 8-2 this season and 22-4 under Davis when leading at the half ... Tommy Gunn was 4-of-6 from three-point range in the game, his best outing from behind the arc since the first two contests of the season when Gunn was 4-of-5 (vs. Covenant) and 4-for-7 (at Wyoming) ... Senior Steven Jackson pulled down a team-high seven rebounds in the contest in 17 minutes, scoring six points and once again giving the Blue Raiders a much-needed spark 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. In the last three games, the Memphis, Tenn., senior is 7-for-11 from the field and 9-of-12 from the foul line in almost 50 minutes of action.

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