Blue Raiders Earn Tough Victory at FIU

February 7, 2004 · MT Media Relations

MIAMI, Fla. - Mike Dean is developing a flair for the dramatic. The junior guard hit the second of two free throws with two seconds remaining to lift Middle Tennessee to a 54-53 win at Florida International Saturday night. Carlos Morban's desperation shot from 35 feet was well off the mark as time expired. Dean also propelled the Blue Raiders to a last-second win at New Orleans two weeks ago when he beat the buzzer with a game-winning layup. "It was a big play by Dean, the same play we ran at New Orleans, and he took it over the top and got to the line this time," Middle Tennessee coach Kermit Davis said. "We told Mike not to settle for a jumper and to try and take the ball to the rim, and he was able to get to the line. This was a critical game for the team. We had to have it. We needed it desperately." The win ended a three-game losing streak for the Blue Raiders (12-9, 4-4 Sun Belt) and enabled them to move to within one-half game of Arkansas-Little Rock and Western Kentucky for the lead in the Eastern Division. Middle Tennessee improved to 3-1 on the road in league games this season and 7-4 away from home under Davis. Junior forward Michael Cuffee had one of his best all-around games and led the Blue Raiders with 16 points on 6-of-9 shooting from the field. He also shared game-high rebounding honors with teammate Tommy Gunn with seven. Gunn added 11 points to tie Sleepy Taylor for ninth on the all-time scoring list with 1,421 points, while Dean also reached double figures with 10 points. On a night when the Blue Raiders shot a season-low 33.3 percent from the field they were able to enjoy success because of their strong defense, limiting the Golden Panthers (3-17, 0-8) to 38 percent and outrebounding them 34-30. "A win is a win," Cuffee said. "We needed to get back on the winning track and this was a big win for us. We won because we kept competing and kept attacking. We did what we had to do. We were in a situation were we had to keep competing and grinding, and we did." Middle Tennessee managed just five field goals in the second half - three from Cuffee and two from freshman Alex Weekes, who finished with eight points, but the Blue Raiders allowed Florida International just six field goals after the half and 15 for the game. Senior point guard Keith Connor provided the Blue Raiders with a big lift off the bench, playing 24 minutes and running the team with great control. Connor dished out five assists and committed just one turnover. "This wasn't pretty but we will take it how we can get it," Connor said.

"It's a big road win for us and allows us to get back on track. We played hard and rebounded, that's the difference. Coach Davis said we needed to hold teams below 40 percent on the road and we were able to do that." Middle Tennessee's largest lead was seven on two occasions and it never trailed by more than one but the game was virtually a one-possession contest for the majority of the time. The Blue Raiders led 52-45 with 4:38 remaining when Gunn converted a pair of free throws, but FIU's Marcus Robinson connected on two long 3-pointers down the stretch - his only two makes of the game - to cut the deficit to 52-51 with 1:54 remaining. Gunn hit one of two free throws with 32 seconds to play to put the Blue Raiders on top 53-51, but Raphael daSilva's two free throws with 22 seconds remaining evened the score and set up Dean's late-game heroics. The Golden Panthers were led by daSilva and Robinson with 10 points each. Middle Tennessee finishes its three-game road swing Thursday at North Texas at 7 p.m. The Blue Raiders return home next Saturday to face Denver at 7 p.m. at the Murphy Center. **GAME NOTES**

All of the Middle Tennessee and Florida International coaches wore tennis shoes with their suits on Saturday, showing their support for Coaches Versus Cancer. The National Association of Basketball Coaches chose Saturday to show their support for the cause, with coaches around the country wearing tennis shoes ... Senior Tommy Gunn moved into a tie for ninth on the all-time scoring list at Middle Tennessee. Gunn scored 11 points in the contest to give the Syracuse, N.Y., native 1421 career points, tying him with Sleepy Taylor (1975-78) ... Gunn also moved into a tie for third on the all-time list in three-point field goals made. Gunn is tied with Freddie Martinez (1997-99, '01) with 172 three-pointers ... The Blue Raiders have made a three-pointer in 238 straight games ... Middle Tennessee used its seventh different starting lineup this season and for the second consecutive game had a different starting five ... The Blue Raiders have won four straight in the series with Florida International and moved to 6-3 all-time against the Golden Panthers ... The 33.3 percent field goal shooting was the worst of the season for Middle Tennessee ... The Blue Raiders scored just 54 points in the contest, matching their season-low (at Cincinnati) ... Senior Keith Connor logged 24 minutes in the contest, his most since December 6 at Tennessee Tech (26). Connor had played 20 total minutes in four previous SBC outings this season ... Junior Michael Cuffee has stepped up his play in league games, but especially on the road. Cuffee had 16 points and seven boards in the win and is averaging a little more than 15 points and 5.5 rebounds per outing in the four road contests for the Blue Raiders.

Printed on May 22, 2013
Original URL: http://www.goblueraiders.com/content.cfm/id/2643