

# Blue Raider Rally Falls Short

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**DENTON, Texas** - Mike Dean has been just about automatic in the clutch for Middle Tennessee in late-game situations this season and he was in another pressure situation with time running out against North Texas Thursday night. Dean, who has provided the winning points in the final seconds twice in the previous five games for the Blue Raiders, saw his potential game-tying 3-pointer go off the rim with seven seconds remaining and Middle Tennessee trailing 67-64. Leon Hopkins, who scored 17 of his team-high 22 points in the second half, connected on two free throws following

Dean's miss to provide the Mean Green with a 69-64 win at the Super Pit. "We got the shot we wanted and it just didn't fall," said Dean, who led all scorers with 26 points on the strength of 10-of-20 shooting from the field. "We ran the right play, and I was still able to get a good look at it so that's all you can ask in that situation." Although Dean was able to get off a 3-pointer from the top of the key, Blue Raider coach Kermit Davis said the execution of the play was incomplete. The junior guard had two Mean Green defenders in his face when he launched the shot. "We did not execute the last play," Davis said. "Steven Jackson did not run it right. Dean was supposed to come off a double pick and he came off a single pick." The Blue Raiders (12-10, 4-5 Sun Belt) suffered just their second Sun Belt Conference road loss of the season after battling back from a 12-point deficit early in the second half. In addition to Dean's 26 points, Michael Cuffee contributed 13 for the Blue Raiders, but no other player had more than six points. In fact, senior guard Tommy Gunn, the Sun Belt's third-leading scorer at 17 points per game, contributed just six points. It was the first time he did not tally double figures this season and marked the first time in 24 games he failed to score at least 10 points. In addition to Hopkins' 22 points, Michael DeGrate tallied 17 points and 10 rebounds for North Texas (11-11, 6-4). Middle Tennessee trailed 66-56 with 2:28 remaining but put together a strong rally to have a shot at the end. Dean knocked down a long 3-pointer with 2:15 to play and, after getting a key stop on the defensive end, freshman guard Bryan Smithson nailed a 3-pointer with 1:22 remaining to cut the deficit to 66-62. Jerome Rogers made one of two free throws with 1:06 to play to stake North Texas to a 67-62 advantage, but Jackson came through with an offensive rebound and putback with 55 seconds remaining, and the Blue Raiders again came up with a stop to

give themselves a chance to force overtime. "Our team never quits," Davis said. "We battle like heck, but our margin for error is so small. The bottom line was their players made plays, and we didn't. We had a bunch of wide open looks and just didn't put them in the goal, and we fumbled a lot of balls around all game long." The Blue Raiders missed 13 shots from within 5-to-7-feet in the second half and shot just 36.5 percent for the game. A slow start at the outset of the game and to begin the second half put the team at a disadvantage throughout and they were never able to get over the hump. Middle Tennessee will return home for the first time in two weeks when it plays host to Denver Saturday at 7 p.m. **GAME NOTES** Senior Tommy Gunn had six points in the contest, moving him into sixth place on the all-time scoring list with 1,427 points. Gunn passed Greg Joyner (1977-79), Tim Sisneros (1973-76) and Chris Rainey (1987-89) ... The Blue Raiders have made a 3-pointer in 239 consecutive games ... Middle Tennessee dropped to 2-2 all-time against North Texas, 0-2 in Denton ... Senior Keith Connor returned to his homestate in Thursday's contest. About 30 family members and friends made the three-hour trip from Pflugerville, Texas, for the game ... The Blue Raiders dropped just their second conference road game of the season and fell to 9-6 away from home under coach Kermit Davis ... Freshman Bryan Smithson's 3-pointer in the final minutes of the game was his first since Jan. 15 against Arkansas-Little Rock, and just his second in the past 10 games ... Smithson grabbed a career high seven rebounds, and senior Steven Jackson tied his career high with seven boards ... Junior Mike Dean had career highs in field goals and attempts in the contest, going 10-for-20 from the field ... Junior Michael Cuffee had a career high two steals. Cuffee had seven rebounds in the game and is averaging 7.0 boards in the last four outings ... Gunn had just six points in the game, ending his streak of 23 consecutive double-figure outings. His last game without double digits was March 9, 2003, against South Alabama in the first round of the Sun Belt Conference Tournament, and his last outing with fewer than six points also came against North Texas, Feb. 6, 2003.

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