

Middle Tennessee Defense Does In Denver

February 14, 2004 · MT Media Relations

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. -

Middle Tennessee got defensive in turning back Denver, 65-48, Saturday night to end a three-game losing streak at Murphy Center and delivered coach Kermit Davis his 100th career Division I win.

The Blue Raiders (13-10, 5-5 Sun Belt) held Denver to a season-low 30 percent shooting from the field, which was also the lowest field goal percentage against Middle Tennessee this season.

Senior guard Tommy Gunn broke out of a modest scoring slump with a game-high 17 points to lead three Blue Raiders in double figures. He also pulled eight rebounds, equaling a season-high. Mike Dean and Michael Cuffee also reached double figures for Middle Tennessee with 16 and 12, respectively. Cuffee also tied Gunn for game-high rebounding honors with eight.

Middle Tennessee's staunch defense included holding Denver's top two scorers - Erik Benzel and Brett Starkey - to a combined eight points on 2-of-14 shooting from the field. The high-scoring duo entered the game averaging a combined 27points.

Gunn ignited a spark in the first half after scoring a season-low six points at North Texas Thursday night. Gunn poured in 12 first-half points to help stake Middle Tennessee to a 33-28 lead at the intermission, but it was an 18-6 run midway through the second half that allowed the Blue Raiders to put the Pioneers in their rear-view mirror for good and win their fourth straight game in the series.

Middle Tennessee led 44-41 with 12:35 remaining, but received outstanding contributions from Kyle Young, Cuffee, Alex Weekes and Gunn to break the game open and run out to a 60-45 lead with 5:16 to play. Weekes scored eight points on 3-of-3 shooting from the field and did all of his offensive damage during the second half.

Reserve Keith Connor also spearheaded the Blue Raider defense during the stretch as the Pioneers (13-10, 5-6 SBC) were held to just one field goal and that came on a breakaway lay-up

The Blue Raiders won the battle of the boards, 43-31, and allowed just eight offensive rebounds.

Middle Tennessee Game Notes:

BLUE RAIDERS DO IT WITH DEFENSE: The key to Middle Tennessee's win over Denver on Saturday night came on the defensive end of the floor. The Blue Raiders held the Pioneers to a season-low 30.0 shooting percentage, including a 17.6 percentage from behind the arc. The 30.0 percentage marked the best defensive effort by the Blue Raiders since they held IPFW to 29.7 percent shooting on Jan. 28, 2003. The Blue Raiders also held the Pioneers' top two scorers - Erik Benzel and Brett Starkey - to a combined eight points and 2 of 14 shooting. Over the past three games, Middle Tennessee has held the opposition to a combined shooting percentage of .362 (55-152).

DAVIS HITS CENTURY MARK: With Middle Tennessee's win over Denver on Saturday night, head coach Kermit Davis picked up his 100th Division I-A victory. Davis now has an overall mark of 100-73 at the I-A level, but is 166-98 overall counting his three years in the junior college ranks. Following the game, the Blue Raider Network presented Davis with a blue and white cake with 100 written on it.

PLAYER OF THE GAME: Members of the media voted Tommy Gunn as the Alexander Automotive Family Player of the Game. Gunn had a game-high 17 points and equaled his season-high with eight rebounds.

DEAN TIES DEAN: With one three-pointer in the win over Denver, junior Mike Dean moved into a tie for ninth place with Milton Dean on Middle Tennessee's single-season three-pointers made list. Dean is now 54-for-120 on the year from behind the arc and is among the national leaders in three-point percentage. Dean will enter the Arkansas State game needing one more to tie for eighth and five to tie for seventh.

GUNN'S BACK: After struggling the past couple of games, senior Tommy Gunn regained his form in the win over Denver. Gunn notched a game-high 17 points, while equaling his season best with nine rebounds. Gunn's point total matched his output of his previous two games combined.

CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARDS: Junior Michael Cuffee has stepped up his play in the rebounding department over the last two weeks. Cuffee, who equaled his career-high with eight boards against Denver, has hauled in at least seven rebounds in four of his last five outings and is averaging 6.1 caroms a game in conference play.

TIDBITS: The Blue Raiders won on Valentine's Day for the first time since the 1993-94 season when they defeated SEMO at home, 94-68 ... MT has now hit at least one three-pointer in 240 consecutive games ... Middle Tennessee has now held the opposition to below 40 percent shooting six times on the year and are 5-1 in those contests ... Forward Alex Weekes made his third career start tonight ... The Blue Raiders had just 10 turnovers in the win over Denver and have now registered eight games with 10 or fewer miscues this season (MT is 6-2 in those contests) ... Tonight's 17-point margin of victory was the Blue Raiders' largest in conference play during the regular season since downing Arkansas State, 79-55, on Feb. 13, 2003.

NEXT UP: The Blue Raiders will travel to the state of Arkansas for a two-game road swing against Arkansas State and Arkansas-Little Rock. MT will face ASU on Feb. 19 and UALR on Feb. 21. Tipoff is scheduled for 7 PM both nights.

MT Head Coach Kermit Davis:

On Watching the Standings:

"Especially in this league, you can drive yourself crazy if you look at the standings too much. I have been trying to see who is playing where. We just had to try to get our team right. I thought our team maybe played its best full game tonight. Obviously when you win, it sure enhances your chances. Going on this road trip, we have to play two teams that are slightly ahead of us. We have everybody who is ahead of us in front of us. It has been two years in a row now. Middle Tennessee has not been in a league race in a long time. Last year, we were in it right up until the last week. Now, we have a couple of weeks to go, and we are right in the league race. So, it is good. We have a young team putting themselves in position. It is fun. Hopefully, that is what we are trying to do."

On Middle Tennessee Defense

"Our goal is to always hold our opponent under 40 percent shooting. It is difficult. This is the third straight game we have held our opponent to under 40 percent. Tonight was our best overall defensive game that we have had this year. It was good."

MT Guard Tommy Gunn:

On guarding Denver leading scorer Erik Benzel

"We just had to get in to him and make him put the ball on the floor. We know he is a catch and shoot player. We know he is capable of hitting shots beyond NBA range. We just wanted to get in to him, pressure him, make him drive to the basket, and contest every shot. On Starkey, we just wanted to give him different looks and throw some double teams at him. We just tried to get his head out of the game."

On getting help from Dean and Cuffee:

"It takes a lot of pressure off of me. I love having teammates that are capable of putting up big numbers. Defensively, they help me a lot too. It is good having them out there to support me."

On Importance of the win:

"This was a game we needed to get back in the running for first place. Hopefully, some other teams will lose, and we can finish the season out winning the rest of our games. This gives us a lot of momentum. Denver is a good team. We just have to worry about the road swing we have coming up."

MT Forward Alex Weekes:

On the second half:

"In some second halves, we have come out flat. Coach Davis just gave us some positive things to think about and focus on to stay intense defensively. We did that and stayed with it throughout the game."

"Our defense created a lot for us offensively. We were able to get back and move the ball, which gave them problems rotating on defense. We were able to get the ball in to the post more."

Denver Head Coach Terry Carroll:

"You really have to give Middle Tennessee credit. In the second half, I thought they came out and took the fight to us, particularly on the boards. Normally, we are a good shooting basketball team. Tonight, we were 15 of 50. You can't expect to win games shooting the ball like that. But, their defense had something to do with that obviously. We have been winning rebounding battles all year. Tonight, they took it to us and out rebounded us 43 to 31. You are not going to win games on the road getting out rebounded and getting out shot like tonight."

Printed on March 8, 2014

Original URL: <http://www.goblueraiders.com/content.cfm/id/2668>