Jackson Free Throw Gives Blue Raiders Dramatic Road Win

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JONESBORO, Ark. -When Middle Tennessee and Arkansas State first met this season the Indians rallied from 17 down to force overtime, only to lose 92-86 in Murfreesboro.

Middle Tennessee senior Steven Jackson made sure overtime wouldn't be necessary a second time when he hit the first of two free throws with eight-tenths of a second remaining and then missed the second on purpose to give the Blue Raiders a dramatic 70-69 win in another classic between the two teams at the Convocation Center Thursday night.

Jackson, who finished with eight points and a team-high eight rebounds, rebounded Mike Dean's miss with time running out and was fouled by Kim Adams before the horn sounded to make his way to the free-throw line.

After the three officials met at midcourt with no time showing on the clock to discuss whether Jackson was fouled before time expired, Arkansas State coach Dickey Nutt called a timeout to freeze Jackson and to question the controversial decision to put eight-tenths of a second back on the clock and allow Jackson to shoot two shots..

"There was no question I was fouled," Jackson said. "I would have been surprised if they had not called the foul because (Adams) clobbered me. That was the biggest offensive rebound of my (Middle Tennessee) career."

The win, coupled with Arkansas-Little Rock's 68-60 win against Western Kentucky, enabled the Blue Raiders (14-10, 6-5 Sun Belt) to move within one game of both of those teams for the East Division lead.

"This was a great win for our team and we showed a lot of character in getting it done," said freshman point guard Bryan Smithson, who established a career-high with four 3-pointers and finished with 13 points. "We lost the big lead, but we didn't fold. We battled back and found a way to win."

Dean led Middle Tennessee with 19 points and was one of three Blue Raiders in double figures. Tommy Gunn added 14 points to move into fifth place on the all-time scoring list, surpassing Ken Trickey (1952-55) with 1,458 points. Smithson came up big with his 13 points and six assists, reaching double figures in points for the first time since the SBC opener against Arkansas State when he tallied 10. Fellow freshman Alex Weekes added nine points and seven rebounds in 25 minutes for the Blue Raiders.

The game was very similar to the first meeting this season as Middle Tennessee lost a 16-point lead and actually trailed 69-66 with 1:11 remaining.

"We played about as well as we could play for 30 minutes, and then they made a run," Middle Tennessee coach Kermit Davis said. "Those are two of the dangest basketball games we've had that I've ever seen. You've got to give our guys credit for coming in here and winning in a great environment."

Middle Tennessee led 38-27 at the half, despite Gunn, Dean and Weekes sitting out most of the first 20 minutes in foul trouble, but the Indians stormed back in the second half behind the shooting of Antonio Rambo (19 of his 20 points in the second half), and J.J. Montgomery's 24 points.

The game was tied four times in the final 5:46, during which the lead changed seven times. The Blue Raiders shot a sizzling 52 percent (13-for-25) in the first half and 49 percent for the game, while winning the battle of the boards, 33-28.

Middle Tennessee will play its final regular season road game of the season at Arkansas-Little Rock Saturday at 7 p.m.

GAME NOTES

Senior guard Tommy Gunn moved into fifth-place on the Middle Tennessee all-time scoring list with 14 points against Arkansas State, giving him 1,458 points to surpass Ken Trickey's 1,456 (1952-55). He needs 26 points catch Randy Henry (1,484) for fourth place ... Junior guard Mike Dean hit one 3-pointer against Arkansas State to give him 55 this season, moving into a tie with Ali McGhee (1999) for No. 8 on the single-season 3-point field goals made list ... Middle Tennessee has made at least one 3-pointer in 241 consecutive games ... Freshman point guard Bryan Smithson connected on a career-high four 3-pointers and established a new SBC high with 13 points. His previous conference best was 10 points against Arkansas State. Smithson also dished out six assists, the most since he had six in a 78-75 overtime win at New Orleans ... The Blue Raiders improved to 4-0 against Arkansas State under Kermit Davis with the win ... Middle Tennessee improved to 10-5 away from home in Davis' two seasons.

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