Middle Tennessee Falls at UALR

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LITTLE ROCK, Ark. - Mike Dean scored 14 of his game-high 18 points in the second half, but it wasn't enough as Middle Tennessee lost a 59-54 decision against East Division leader Arkansas-Little Rock Saturday night.

The Blue Raiders (14-11, 6-6 Sun Belt) could have moved into a tie for first place in the East Division but they managed just two field goals in the final 6:55 and shot just 40 percent for the game.

UALR (15-10, 8-4 SBC) needs just one win to clinch a share of the East Division title with two games remaining, but the Blue Raiders can still share the division crown by winning out and having the Trojans lose their two remaining conference games.

"It really came down to them making shots and us missing shots," Middle Tennessee junior forward Michael Cuffee said. "They got the loose ball and took advantage of our mistakes."

Neither team could put the other way throughout the game, nor could one distance itself in a classic defensive battle. The Blue Raiders never led by more than two points, and the Trojans never led by more than eight, 39-31 with 14:52 remaining following a Brandon Freeman 3-pointer.

However, Dean started to rally the Blue Raiders, scoring nine straight points, and he gave Middle Tennessee a 43-42 lead on a four-point play with 8:25 remaining. That's when UALR went on a 7-0 run to regain control and then hit 7-of-8 free throws down the stretch to seal the win.

In addition to Dean's 18, Cuffee finished with 14 and Tommy Gunn added 10, but Gunn hit his first three shots and then went 1-for-9 the rest of the way. Dean and Gunn, the team's top two scorers and No. 3 and 4 in the Sun Belt, respectively, were a combined 9-of-27 from the field.

Middle Tennessee will return to action Thursday when it plays host to Western Kentucky at 7 p.m.

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