

Blue Raider Seniors Go Out In Style

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. -

Middle Tennessee's quartet of seniors went out in style as the Blue Raiders pummeled Florida International, 60-42, in the regular-season finale at Murphy Center Monday night.

The Blue Raiders' four seniors - Keith Connor, Tommy Gunn, Steven Jackson and Marcus Robinson - combined for 25 points, 21 rebounds, 11 assists and three blocked shots to help the Blue Raiders improve to 16-11 overall, 8-6 in the Sun Belt Conference.

Middle Tennessee will carry the No. 5 seed into the Sun Belt Conference men's

basketball tournament and will face No. 4 seed Western Kentucky in the quarterfinals at Diddle Arena Sunday at 5 p.m.

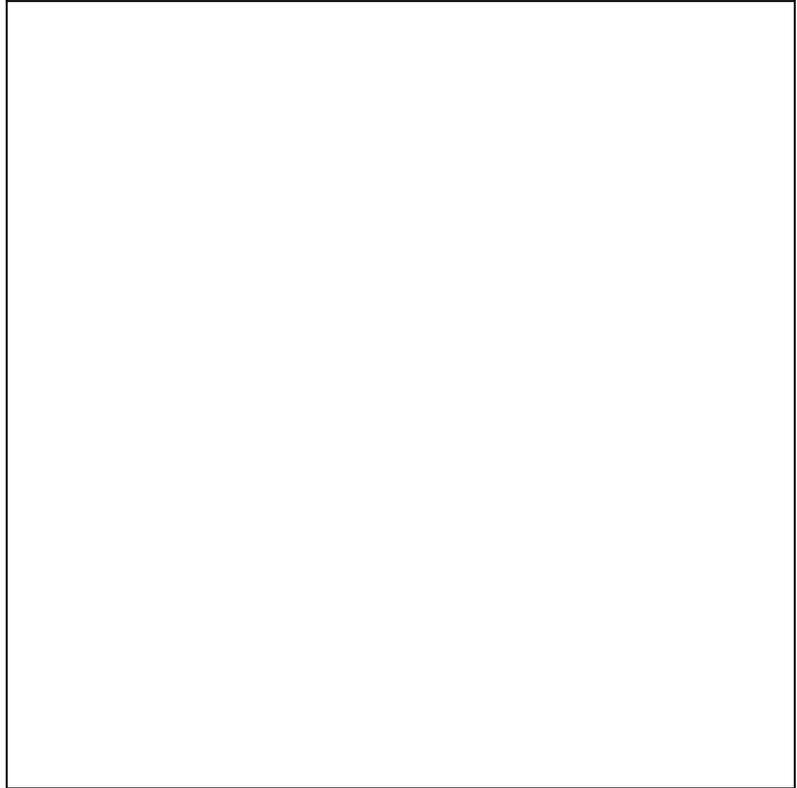
While seniors highlighted Middle Tennessee's win, junior forward Michael Cuffee continued his outstanding late-season work with a career-high 19 points and six rebounds. Gunn added his second career double-double with 12 points and 10 rebounds. He surpassed Randy Henry for fourth on the all-time scoring list with 1,495 career points and is 30 away from No. 3 on the all-time list.

While offensive prowess was evident, Middle Tennessee put the game out of reach early with its strong defensive push. The Blue Raiders trailed 9-8 with 15:45 remaining, but went on a 25-5 run over the next 12 minutes, including shutting the Golden Panthers out for a 9:45 stretch in the first half.

The Blue Raiders allowed a season-low 42 points, which were the fewest in a game since giving up 38 against Austin Peay on Jan. 15, 1998 - a span of 185 games. The Golden Panthers also were held to 34.1 percent shooting from the field. Middle Tennessee has held its previous six opponents to 40 percent or less from the field.

GAME NOTES

TOURNAMENT SEED SET: With tonight's win over Florida International, Middle Tennessee finished 8-6 in league play to gain the fifth seed in this week's Sun Belt Conference Tournament. The Blue



Raiders will face host Western Kentucky (#4 seed) on Sunday at 5:30 PM in E.A. Diddle Arena.

PLAYER(S) OF THE GAME: Members of the media voted Middle Tennessee's four seniors as the Alexander Automotive Family co-Players of the Game. The seniors accounted for 25 points, 21 rebounds, 11 assists, and three blocked shots.

GUNN PASSES HENRY: Senior Tommy Gunn scored 12 points in the win over Florida International and surpassed Randy Henry for fourth place on the all-time scoring list. Gunn enters the conference tournament with 1,495 career points and only 30 points from moving past Willie Brown for third place.

GOOD ATTENDANCE YEAR: Middle Tennessee ended its season with the best attendance figure for the program in four years. The Blue Raiders averaged 3,743 fans in 2003-04, which was their best average since 3,907 fans were clicked per game during the 1999-00 season. The Blue Raiders' average attendance this season was 48 percent more than last year's mark of 2,526. In the seven conference home games, the Blue Raiders averaged 4,744 fans.

GUNN TIES RAINEY: Senior Tommy Gunn connected on two three-pointers against FIU to give him 180 for his career. That total ties Chris Rainey (1987-89) for second place on the all-time three-pointers made list. Gunn is now 180-for-460 (.391) all-time from behind the arc.

WINNING WITH "D": The Blue Raiders are entering the conference tournament with momentum on their side and that is mainly due to the defensive effort the past two outings. In the win over FIU, the Blue Raiders allowed a season-low 42 points (fewest in a game since giving up only 38 against Austin Peay on Jan. 15, 1998 - a span of 185 games) and held the Golden Panthers to only 34.1 percent shooting from the field. Over the past two games, Middle Tennessee has allowed the opposition to shoot only 31.8 percent (35-110) and has given up an average of just 50.5 points.

CUFFEE SETS CAREER MARKS: Junior Michael Cuffee scored a career-best 19 points and hit a personal-high eight field goals against Florida International. Cuffee, who had a previous high of 18 points, has now tallied 18 double figure games including 12 in the last 13 contests. The Philadelphia, Pa., native also equaled his career-best in three-pointers made (2) and steals (2).

WEEKES RESPONDS: Freshman Alex Weekes, who set a new school record with eight blocks against Western Kentucky last Saturday night, followed that effort with four more rejections tonight against Florida International. The 6-8 Weekes now has 24 blocks on the year to rank tied for 12th on the single-season list.

TIDBITS: The 16 regular season wins is the most by a Blue Raider team since the 1997-98 squad had 18 ... The Blue Raiders have not entered a conference tournament on a winning streak since the 2000 OVC tourney (3 wins in a row) and will head into Sunday's tournament game with two straight victories ... Reserve walk-on guard Wes Durrant scored his first collegiate points when he nailed a three-pointer in the final minute of the game against FIU ... Mike Dean and Tommy Gunn have both hit 62 three-pointers this season to rank sixth on the single-season list ... Freshman Kyle Young did not dress out tonight due to a foot injury ... Tommy Gunn recorded just his second career double-double when he tallied 12 points and 10 rebounds in the win over FIU ... Eight different players saw at least 21 minutes of action versus FIU ... Marcus Robinson equaled his career-high with four assists against FIU ... Senior Keith Conner's five points off the bench was his most in a game since

tallying six in the season opener against Covenant College.

GAME QUOTES

MT Head Coach Kermit Davis:

"The only way senior nights are really successful is if you win them. It was good for our seniors. Tommy Gunn has played tons of minutes since he has been here. I was really excited that Steve [Jackson], Marcus [Robinson] and Keith [Connor] all played 20 plus minutes. They all contributed. Was it our best game? No. For about 12 minutes in the first half I thought we played really well. Then, we just kind of hung on and played. We weren't real good offensively in the second half, but it is a win. We will have a good week of practice and get ready."

"I like the way we are playing. We have won five out of our last seven games. We are playing as well as anybody in the league right now. I like the way we are defending. I still don't think we have shot the ball for 40 minutes like we can shoot it. We are all still waiting for everybody on one night to make a bunch of baskets. We have been able to win five out of seven because we have been defending as well as anybody in the league. It is going to be a great tournament. Our guys are excited about playing Western Kentucky. The tournament has to probably run through them anyways. We might as well catch them in the first round. I do think the pressure goes on Western Kentucky trying to win the tournament at your own place."

"We had a 48 percent increase in attendance this year. In league play, which was aided by the 11,000, we averaged almost 5,000 fans for conference play. I would dare to say that the 48 percent increase is one of the largest increases in college basketball. It is going to be a little tougher next year."

MT Guard Tommy Gunn:

"We just didn't defend as well as we could have. It made the game a little close. Towards the end of the first half, we just locked down on defense which opened up more things for us on offense."

"We are just going to live for the moment right now. We are going to start focusing on Western Kentucky sometime tomorrow. We have the whole night to celebrate on this one. It is good to face them in the first round of the conference tournament. If we can get the tough ones out of the way first, it is smooth sailing for the rest of the conference tournament."

MT Forward Michael Cuffee:

"We came out kind of sluggish in the second half when we should have really picked it up. But, we picked it up, kept our composure and just kept playing throughout the game."

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