Blue Raiders Oust Western Kentucky

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BOWLING GREEN, Ky. - Against all odds, Middle Tennessee shocked three-time defending Sun Belt Conference champion Western Kentucky, 76-62, in the quarterfinals of the league postseason tournament at Diddle Arena in front of 7,243 Sunday night.

Playing without leading scorer Mike Dean, who sustained a broken left hand during Thursday's practice, the question was whether the Blue Raiders could score enough to knock out the Hilltoppers on their homecourt.

The answer was provided in the form of junior sensation Michael Cuffee, who poured in a career-high 22 points on the strength of 6-of-10 shooting, 3-of-4 from the 3-point line. Cuffee led four Blue Raiders in double figures as Middle Tennessee snapped Western Kentucky's nine-game conference tournament win streak.

The win was Middle Tennessee's first at Western Kentucky since a 54-52 triumph in the finals of the Ohio Valley Conference Tournament in 1982. The Blue Raiders (17-11) will face regular-season champion Louisiana-Lafayette in Monday's semifinals at 5:30 p.m. The surging Blue Raiders have won three straight and six-of-eight.

"When Mike got hurt on Thursday, I knew that I would have to come out and step up big tonight," said Cuffee, who also pulled nine rebounds. "Coach (Kermit Davis) put me on the perimeter, and I just did what I was capable of doing and played hard."

In addition to Cuffee's 22 points, freshman point guard Bryan Smithson added 16 points and dished out another eight assists in 36 minutes. Marcus Robinson was absolutely outstanding making the start in place of Dean. Robinson played a career high 34 minutes, and scored 13 points, while senior Tommy Gunn also added 13 to give him 1,508 for his career.

"Both teams played extremely hard," Middle Tennessee coach Kermit Davis said. "It's a great win for us considering our leading scorer, Mike Dean, did not play. It's one game and now we need to focus our attention on UL-Lafayette.

"Bryan (Smithson) was a key factor for us tonight. He made plays; he made free throws at the end, and he controlled the game. That's hard to do for a freshman in this kind of environment." The Blue Raiders answered two major Western Kentucky pushes to advance into the semifinals for the second time in as many years under Davis. The Blue Raiders were up 10-9 with 14:51 following an Alex Weekes dunk, but the Hilltoppers (15-13) used an 11-0 run to go up 20-10 with 10:40 remaining in the first half and had everything going their way, or so it seemed.

Middle Tennessee responded with a 27-7 run to close out the half and carried a 37-27 cushion into the locker room at intermission.

The Blue Raiders led by as many as 14 in the second half before Western Kentucky put together a run of its own, sparked by Sun Belt Conference Player of the Year Mike Wells.

The Hilltoppers closed to 63-58 on Wells' trey with 3:23 remaining, but they would never get closer as Middle Tennessee knocked down a series of clutch free throws down the stretch.

Middle Tennessee was 13-of-18 from the free-throw line in the final 2:30 with Smithson knocking down 6-of-8.

"This means a lot, Western has a good team and we knew they were going to come out and play hard and the environment was going to be in their favor," Gunn said. "Tonight our team dug down and a lot of people stepped up, and defensively we held them to 38 percent from the field, which accomplished our goal coming in."

GAME NOTES

Middle Tennessee was 8-of-15 from the 3-point line, equaling a season-high 53 percent it shot against South Carolina State in the consolation game of the Dr Pepper Classic in Chattanooga. The Blue Raiders were also 8-of-15 in that game. The Blue Raiders have advanced to the semifinals of the Sun Belt Conference Championship in back-to-back seasons, marking the first time they have reached the semifinals of a conference tournament in consecutive seasons since 1998-99, 1999-2000 (Ohio Valley Conference). Michael Cuffee scored a career-high 22 points to lead Middle Tennessee. The junior forward has scored double figures in 13-of-14 games. The win was Middle Tennessee's first against Western Kentucky at Diddle Arena since 1982 and snapped a six-game road losing streak to the Hilltoppers. It also snapped a nine-game conference tournament win streak for Western Kentucky. The Blue Raiders improved to 14-2 when leading at the half, and they won for the 15th time win holding the opposition below 50 percent from the field. The defensive minded Blue Raiders have not allowed an opponent to shoot better than 40 percent for eight consecutive games, winning six of those.

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