Blue Raiders' Valiant Effort Falls Short in SBC Semis

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BOWLING GREEN, Ky. - A season in which Middle Tennessee exceeded expectations came to an end with a 70-66 loss to No. 1 seed Louisiana-Lafayette in the semifinals of the Sun Belt Conference Tournament at Diddle Arena Monday night.

The Blue Raiders, who returned just one starter from a year ago and played as many as four freshmen this season, completed the 2003-04 season with a 17-12 worksheet and provided the program with its first consecutive winning seasons since 1996-97, 1997-98.

Middle Tennessee was led by senior Tommy Gunn, who poured in 20 points on 7-of-9 shooting from the field to move into No. 3 on the all-time scoring list. Gunn finished his Blue Raider career with 1,528 points. Michael Cuffee added 15 points, while senior Marcus Robinson finished with 13 points and a career-high nine rebounds.

One night after shocking three-time defending champion Western Kentucky in the tournament quarterfinals, Middle Tennessee fell behind early, but came storming back to put a scare in the regular-season Ragin' Cajuns (19-8). The Blue Raiders trailed 19-5 less than seven minutes into the game and 41-30 at intermission, but they put together a furious second half rally to get as close as one before succumbing to the favored Louisiana-Lafayette squad.

Middle Tennessee shot 58.5 percent from the field for the game, knocking down 24-of-41 shots and got as close as 58-57 when Gunn drilled a 3-pointer from the corner with 5:43 remaining, but the Blue Raiders didn't hit another field goal until Bryan Smithson connected for a trey with 1:38 remaining.

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