Blue Raiders rally for 69-60 win against defending champs

Starting guards lead way against North Texas

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee received a complete game from its three starting perimeter players when it needed them most as the Blue Raiders stormed from behind to knock off defending Sun Belt champion North Texas, 69-60, at Murphy Center Sunday.

Demetrius Green poured in a game-high 21 points, had seven rebounds, dished out five assists and collected five steals, Kevin Kanaskie poured in a season-high 18 points on the strength of four 3-pointers, and Nigel Johnson was a beast on the boards as he established a personal best with a game-high 10 rebounds to go along with five assists, two blocks and a steal.

The starting backcourt had to carry the Blue Raiders (8-11, 5-4) as they were playing without starting center Theryn Hudson for the third straight game and forward Desmond Yates, the team's leading scorer, picked up his third foul in the first half and was whistled for his fourth personal foul early in the second half.

"We haven't really had it the whole year," said Middle Tennessee coach Kermit Davis, referring to

the solid play of all three guards in the same game. "We talked about how with Theryn out, that's going to having to happen. Today they did (all play well). I thought Nigel had one of his best all-around games. He got some key rebounds, and I love having him at the line late. All three of those guys were great today, and they had to be."

Not only did Green, Kanaskie and Johnson put together their best collective game this season, but Dino Hair drew his second start of the season and came up big with a career-tying 10 points on 4-of-7 shooting.

While Middle Tennessee's offense was efficient as evidenced by shooting 51 percent (26-of-51) from the field and having assists on 13 of the 26 field goals made the team defense was a big reason for the victory. The Blue Raiders held the high-scoring Mean Green to just 60 points, 20 below their season average, and limited them to 4-of-18 shooting from beyond the perimeter.

"We had to put together a strong defensive game against a very talented offensive team in North Texas and we did that," Kanaskie said. "I thought Nigel Johnson was the player of the game with his big rebounds and timely steals. This was a team win and a game we really needed here at home."

The game, which was controlled by North Texas throughout the first half and into the second, finally turned Middle Tennessee's way for good in the final nine minutes. Josh White, who led North Texas with 16 points, provided the Mean Green a 51-42 lead with his long 3-pointer at the 9:36 mark.

From there Middle Tennessee outscored the defending champs 27-9 the remainder of the game with Kanaskie providing the hottest hand during the comeback. Green's jumper pulled the Blue Raiders within 51-44 with 8:58 remaining, followed by Kanskie's long 3-pointer that narrowed the gap to 51-47 with 8:27 remaining. Johnson collected a rebound off a missed 3-pointer by Collin Dennis and found Hair streaking down the court for a layup to close the deficit to 51-49.

After Keith Wooden's 5-footer in the lane extended North Texas' lead to 53-49, Kanaskie came up with another long-range trifecta to cut the deficit to 53-52. After Wooden hit another inside shot to put the Mean Green on top 55-52, Kanaskie dialed up another long-range number and canned a 30-footer to even the score, 55-55, with 4:14 remaining.

Yates then came up with a steal and Kanaskie closed his long-range display with his fourth 3-pointer to give the Blue Raiders a 58-55 lead at the 3:39 mark. It also gave Kanaskie 116 career 3-pointers as he moved into fifth on the career 3-point list at Middle Tennessee.

The Blue Raiders weren't finished, though.

Hair was fouled when he pulled a rebound following a big defensive stop and the sophomore nailed both charity tosses to extend the lead to 60-55 but Dez Willingham's 3-pointer pulled the Mean Green (12-7, 3-5) to within 60-58 with 1:12 remaining. Yates then provided the big blow with a 3-pointer from the right wing to put the Blue Raiders on top 63-58 with 48 seconds remaining and Middle Tennessee was 6-of-6 from the free-throw line to close out the win. The Blue Raiders were 11-of-11 from the free-throw line in the game, going 10-of-10 in the second half.

Green put together his best all-around game as a Blue Raider and it was his strong play that kept Middle Tennessee in the game during some of its first-half struggles. The Lexington, Ky., native did it with his offense, defense and passing. In fact, he was a one-man wrecking crew for the Blue Raiders

during one of the most critical points of the game.

The Mean Green had stretched the lead to 29-18 - the largest of the game - with 3:51 remaining and Yates was on the bench with three fouls. Green, along with Hair and a timely basket from Uriah Hethington; however, kept Middle Tennessee in the game. Green scored the final five points of the first half and the first eight of the second half and it was that stretch that provided pivotal.

In fact, Davis called Middle Tennessee's 9-2 run to close the first half the biggest stretch of the game as it kept the Blue Raiders within striking distance and gave them momentum heading into intermission.

Middle Tennessee will return to the road when it faces Louisiana-Lafayette Thursday at 7 p.m.

POSTGAME NOTES:
MOVING ON UP: Junior guard Kevin Kanaskie's moved past two players as he continued to climb the all-time 3-point field goals made list at Middle Tennessee. Kanaskie's four second-half 3-pointers against North Texas give him 116 for his career, which is fifth all-time. He passed Fats Cuyler (114) and Mike Dean (115) Sunday. Kanaskie connected on four straight 3-pointers during a 4:58 span late in the second half to help rally the Blue Raiders. The four 3-pointers are a season-high for Kanaskie, who also tied his season high for field goals made (5). The 18 points were a season-high for the junior point guard.

LITTLE BIG MAN: Nigel Johnson pulled a career-high 10 rebounds against North Texas to lead all players from either team in that category. It's Johnson's first double-figure rebounding game but he has had five or more rebounds in a game six times this season. Playing like a big man inside, Johnson also had a career-high two blocked shots in the Middle Tennessee win. Johnson also had five assists in the win, prompting teammate Kevin Kanaskie to call him "the player of the game."

GREEN WITH ENVY: Demetrius Green easily had his best game as a Blue Raider in the 69-60 win against North Texas. The junior guard had a game-high 21 points on 10-of-16 shooting and he also had five assists and five steals, establishing personal best in each category. Green scored 13 consecutive points for the Blue Raiders during an eight-minute stretch from the end of the first half into the start of the second.

A GOOD 'HAIR' DAY: Sophomore forward Dino Hair collected his second start of the season and responded with 10 points to tie his career high. Hair also tied his career high with four field goals made. He played 26 minutes against North Texas, his second-highest total of the season.

PERFECT AT THE LINE: Middle Tennessee only made it to the line 11 times against North Texas but the Blue Raiders knocked down all 11 charity tosses, including 8-of-8 in the final 2:51.

CLAMPING DOWN ON 'D': Middle Tennessee's team defense was a key in the win vs. North Texas as it held the visitors to 20 points below their season average. The Mean Green came into the contest averaging 80 points per contest but they were limited to just 60 against the Blue Raiders, who tied their season high with 13 steals in the win. Demetrius Green led the way with five steals, followed by two each from Kevin Kanaskie and Desmond Yates. Nigel Johnson, Broderick Gilchrest, Josh Sain and Uriah Hethington had one steal each.

WORKING OVERTIME: Kevin Kanaskie is known as a workhorse and he continued to exhibit that

quality Sunday. Kanaskie logged 40 minutes for the third time in four games vs. North Texas. He also played 40 minutes at Louisiana-Monroe and 40 minutes at Troy. Kanaskie entered the North Texas game third in the Sun Belt for minutes played at 34.7 per contest. He has logged 35 minutes or more 11 times this season. He has played 2,466 minutes in his Blue Raider career, which are 11th most all-time.

SPREADING THE WEALTH: Middle Tennessee players demonstrated outstanding ball movement and collected assists on 13 of the 26 field goals converted in the win vs. North Texas. Demetrius Green and Nigel Johnson led the way with five helpers each, while Kevin Kanaskie, Dino Hair, and Uriah Hethington each had one.

KEEP SHOOTING: Middle Tennessee players were 0-of-5 from 3-point range in the first half against North Texas and the Blue Raiders didn't connect from beyond the arc until Josh Sain hit a trey to pull them to within 41-40 with 13:14 remaining. Middle Tennessee started the game 0-of-6 from beyond 3-point range but it finished 6-of-11 from downtown.

REMEMBERING LEGENDS: It was Legends Weekend at Middle Tennessee as numerous former Blue Raiders were back on campus. The 1987-88 men's basketball team that won 23 games and beat Tennessee and Georgia in the NIT was honored at the half. Returning for the celebration were: athletic trainer George Camp, manager Carlos Cooper, radio play-by-play man Dick Palmer, SID Ed Given, graduate assistant Kyle Turnham, and assistant coach Tommy Smith, along with players Randy Henry, Ty Baynham, Dwayne "Bam Bam" Rainey, Gerald Harris, Phil Snell, and Chris Ingram.

BLUE BITS: Middle Tennessee improved to 4-0 against North Texas at Murphy Center, including 3-0 under Head Coach Kermit Davis ... The Blue Raiders improved to 57-41 all-time under Davis after Jan. 1 ... Middle Tennessee's 52 Sun Belt wins since 2002-03 are fourth-most among Sun Belt teams ... Junior center Theryn Hudson missed his third straight game with a foot injury.

Middle Tennessee Postgame Quotes
Head Coach Kermit Davis
On a hard-fought win
"I thought it was one of the toughest wins we've had the last two or three years. We got down 11 in the first half, and Desmond Yates gets his third foul. I thought that was the critical point in the game. We played Uriah [Hethington] and Dino [Hair] and got it [the deficit] back to two. That lead could have swung to 14 or 15 but those guys stepped up and did a good job. I thought Demetrius Green put us on his back late. Nigel Johnson was just terrific defensively and rebounding. It was good to see Kevin [Kanaskie] just break out and want the ball, and make huge shots at the end."

On the talent of North Texas
"It just shows our league [is very competitive]. North Texas beat Oklahoma State and New Mexico State and has a good record and a really good team, and they're three and five in our league. It was a good win for us."

On being able to hold a late lead
"To finish it off [was encouraging]. We've come back in some games and not hung on to win at the very end. We kept getting defensive stops. They went to the zone and that's when Kevin hit three of his 3s. I thought we were really good against the zone. We won without Theryn and without Boogie

[Desmond Yates] playing his best. That's what was really encouraging for me."

On the defensive effort

"We wanted to be so much more aggressive defending the 3-pointer. We weren't very good against Monroe. Nigel [Johnson was really embarrassed that they kept scoring on him in that game]. Today he was terrific defensively. We went to our three-quarter court seventy-five defense. We looked at tape last year and thought that it would slow them up. That was a big key in the game. Demetrius Green had five steals, which is hard to do in a game.

On a breakout game by Demetrius Green

"He walked around a couple of days before Monroe coming off a not-so-great game against New Orleans [like something was wrong]. I told him, come into the gym every day smiling and playing. I can live with 3-for-10 and 5-for-20 games from the field, it's just the other part of it [that concerned me]. We looked at other stuff. Demetrius Green and I have a good relationship. He had his best two practices of the year [the last two days]. I'm not saying it's always going to be that stat line, but he sure [looked better]. He needs to keep doing what he's doing for us to have a chance to win."

On Green having more responsibility

"With sit-out guys, it takes a little while [to get going]. Sometimes players will get in their own way of how they approach different things. He's a good kid; he's doing fantastic in school. Sometimes he'll get in a mood where he's kind of up-and-down, and it hinders his play. We knew he was going to be a good player, but we thought we would have a few other guys around him [that have been missing]. A lot more has been put on Demetrius with Calvin [O' Neil] and Antwaun [Boyd] not making it. I think he's going to end the year really well, and I really think he'll have a terrific senior year."

On making defensive adjustments

"Against New Orleans [we had] the same exact score, 63-58, and we were on the line. Normally at that point we go from our three-quarter court defense back to a zone. I didn't do it that time (against New Orleans), I just felt more comfortable that man-to-man would get stops, and they [New Orleans] penetrated. Tonight we talked about it as a staff, and Artie [Pepelea, assistant coach] was a great reminder on the bench. Nigel was about to go [shoot], and make or miss we were going to the three-quarter. It made them [North Texas] take some time off the clock."

On Kevin Kanaskie's clutch shooting

"When we made our run was when they went to the zone. Kevin started getting some looks against the zone, and it got him going. We don't do a great job screening for Kevin. When he gets his feet set he's good, and we need to do a better job of getting him good looks."

On giving Dino Hair significant minutes

"That's what we've been talking about. I told Dino [Hair], 'We don't 20 points from you and Uriah, we just need you to rebound and defend and carry out the game plan. You'll get some baskets along the way.' We chose to go with Dino over Josh [Sain] because we thought he was a little more active, and it paid off." **On Uriah Hethington**

"I thought Uriah's energy level was good, I just wish he could get more athleticism into the game. He jumps great, but when people are around him he can't lift. You've got to be able to jump in traffic. He's going to be big. We've got to bring him along."

On getting good play from all three guards

"We haven't really had it the whole year. We've talked about how with Theryn out, that's going to have to happen. Tonight they did [all play well]. I thought Nigel had one of his best all-around games. He got some key rebounds, and I love having him at the line late in the game. For us to be able to play in these games, our guards are going to have to get rebounds. We couldn't have won the game without Nigel doing what he did and Demetrius [as well]."

Junior guard Demetrius Green
On his performance
"I had a meeting with Coach, and he told me to bring my old self back and continue to play hard throughout the season, and not have any more lapses like I've had the last two games. I thought our whole team stepped up and played well."

On playing aggressive
"I thought I had to attack the rim. Boogie got in foul trouble early, so I knew I had to pick myself up and put our team on my back."

Junior guard Kevin Kanaskie
On finding a rhythm late
"I thought all my shots were good shots. They all felt good, so I needed to keep shooting."

On Nigel Johnson
"Nigel was the player of the game, no question. He really stepped up and got the big stops and rebounds when we needed them."

Sophomore forward Desmond Yates
On foul trouble
"You can't shoot while you're on the bench. When I got in foul trouble I couldn't get into my groove. Luckily Demetrius and Kevin and Nigel stepped up tonight. I'm happy that my teammates supported me and picked up the slack. I was the biggest cheerleader on the bench. When I got back in I wanted to just step up and do what I could."

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