

Blue Raiders suffer narrow setback to rival WKU

Hilltoppers win highly-competitive game, 71-66, at Murphy Center

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. -

Two of the Sun Belt's oldest rivals and hottest-playing teams provided fans with hotly-contested game before a regional television audience and in the end it was visiting Western Kentucky that held off Middle Tennessee for a 71-66 win in front of 5,307 at Murphy Center.

The Hilltoppers (21-5, 13-1) won their 11th straight and maintained their first-place hold in the Sun Belt's East Division, while Middle Tennessee (12-13, 9-6) remained in third place in the league standings after splitting the rugged two-game homestand with a win vs. South Alabama Thursday before falling to the Hilltoppers Saturday afternoon on CSS.

Middle Tennessee guard Demetrius Green, a native of Lexington, Ky., scored a game-high 22 points - his second-highest scoring output

of the season - and Desmond Yates added 17 points and five rebounds. Nigel Johnson was also in double figures with 10 points and Kevin Kanaskie added eight for the Blue Raiders.

WKU was led by Tyrone Brazelton's 20 points, four assists and three steals and Courtney Lee finished with 18 points and six rebounds for the Hilltoppers.



The Blue Raiders lost despite outshooting and outrebounding WKU. The Blue Raiders shot 47 percent (17-of-36) from the field while the Hilltoppers managed just 40.7 percent. Middle Tennessee won the battle of the boards by a slim 29-28 advantage but the Blue Raiders surrendered 11 offensive rebounds to Western Kentucky.

"If someone had told me we would hold Western to 40 percent (shooting), we would shoot 47 percent and rebound them by one, I would have (thought) that we'd win the game," Middle Tennessee coach Kermit Davis said. "We felt like we had to outshoot them and limit them from the field. We did. We felt like we had to rebound them. We did. We felt like we had to keep the turnovers to 15 or less. We did not. That was the difference in the game."

Middle Tennessee was guilty of 22 turnovers, including a season-high eight by Johnson. More importantly, WKU turned those miscues into 26 points and they also managed 13 second-chance points off their offensive rebounds.

"Turnovers [were the difference], some caused by their press and others by our inability to handle the ball," Davis said. "That was the key to the game. I don't want to take anything away from Western, but we did some things that were uncharacteristic. [We were] throwing balls in the backcourt. They forced some turnovers, but we had seven or eight that were just unbelievable."

The highly-competitive game was nip-and-tuck throughout with neither team leading by more than eight. There were 10 lead changes and 11 ties.

"We knew this was going to be a tough game; it always is when we come down here. Kermit (Davis) does a great job of getting his team ready to play and taking away things that we like to do," WKU coach Darrin Horn said. "Coming into this game, nobody was playing better in the league than Middle Tennessee was. We knew exactly how the game was going to be, and we knew we were going to have to find a way to fight and get through it. You have to credit Middle; they did a great job tonight."

Middle Tennessee built a 38-34 halftime lead and had opportunities to build on the advantage at the start of the second half but could not capitalize.

Yates' layup pushed the lead to 40-34 with 18:08 remaining but the Hilltoppers went on a 6-0 run that culminated with Brazelton's long 3-pointer to tie the game, 42-42, with 16:17 remaining.

After a series of exchanging baskets, Middle Tennessee again tied the game, 48-48, on Yates jumper with 12:26 remaining; however, WKU went on a 5-0 run and Orlando Mendez-Valdez provided the Hilltoppers a 53-48 lead with 10:28 remaining with his runner in the lane.

From there, the deficit was within one possession nine different times for the Blue Raiders but they were unable to hit the big shot to get over the hump.

Middle Tennessee will embark on its final regular-season road trip this season when it travels to Denver Thursday and Florida Atlantic Saturday.

Middle Tennessee Postgame Quotes

Head Coach Kermit Davis

On turning the ball over 22 times:

"If someone had told me we'd hold Western to 40 percent [shooting], we'd shoot 47 percent and rebound them by one, I would have (thought) that we'd win the game. Turnovers [were the difference], some caused by their press and others by our inability to handle the ball. That was the key to the game. I don't want to take anything away from Western, but we did some things that were uncharacteristic. [We were] throwing balls in the backcourt. They forced some turnovers, but we had seven or eight that were just unbelievable."

On failing to capitalize on opportunities: "

The most critical part of the game was the start of the second half. Western's energy level wasn't as high as it became [later]. Against a pressing team, we really had a chance with four-on-threes and three-on-twos, and just couldn't convert."

On Nigel Johnson:

"He's been so good for us, and he was just so bad today. He tried his tail off. It wasn't lack of effort."

On the critical play of the game:

"A huge play in the game was the three-point goal they counted [after] Theryn Hudson's fifth foul. That was a big turning point to get them to [an] eight [point lead]. The game was at a workable number, and then we had to fight too hard to get back."

On facing Western Kentucky and South Alabama within a 48-hour span:

"Every coach in our league is flabbergasted by our schedule. We've got to do something with it. The scheduling is a little quirky, but it's happened to everybody, not just us. It was definitely not an energy level thing today. We played two really good teams, and we know we can beat both of those teams. There's no question that both can go into the NCAA Tournament and win first-round games. We are a factor in this [Sun Belt] race, to keep getting better and make a run in the tournament."

On the crowd:

"It was an emotional, electric crowd. Western Kentucky's people were very good, and our people supported the team in a great way. It was a good college atmosphere."

On guarding Courtney Lee:

"Against a good player, you can't give them any room. I thought Demetrius Green did a great job on Courtney Lee. We contested shots and he made tough shots. I'm his [Lee's] biggest fan. [For him] To have six turnovers and only get 16 points on 16 shots, I thought he [Green] did well."

On Western Kentucky's best performer:

"The player of the game was Brazelton. He's developing into the best point guard in our league. He shoots for a great percentage and runs the team. He's been that way all season. We guarded the heck out of him, and he got a tough 20 points."

Junior guard Nigel Johnson

On Tyrone Brazelton:

"He's really fast. What we talked about in our scouting report was not letting him get going in transition because he can go all the way to the basket."

Junior guard Demetrius Green

On turning the ball over:

"It wasn't really hard pressure, it was just mistakes that we made, like not driving it and not making

good passes and good decisions. It was basically our fault."

WKU Head Coach Darrin Horn

On Middle Tennessee's performance:

"We knew this was going to be a tough game; it always is when we come down here. Kermit (Davis) does a great job of getting his team ready to play and taking away things that we like to do. Coming into this game, nobody was playing better in the league than Middle Tennessee was. We knew exactly how the game was going to be, and we knew we were going to have to find a way to fight and get through it. You have to credit Middle; they did a great job tonight."

On getting defensive stops:

"The press the second half helped to get us going. It threw them [Middle] off their rhythm and forced some turnovers. They are an overall tough team and they are well coached, and we didn't think they would go away by any means."

Senior Guard Courtney Lee

On being in first place in the league:

"Anywhere we go we get people who are going to give us their best shot. It's going to be like this all the time. This was like preparation for March. The atmosphere is going to be like this."

On Middle Tennessee's performance:

"It is a learning experience. They had their runs and we had ours. Its like a March game, they gave us their best punch. They pushed the ball faster today and we just learn from it. We knew we had to come in and focus, coming in here is tough."

Senior Guard Tyrone Brazelton

On tonight's performance:

"I am very pleased with the win. They played tough but we came ready to play, and we stayed together. We knew they were going to be on an emotional high coming off of the South Alabama win. We knew they were giving to give us their best shot, we were just ready."

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