Blue Raiders turn back ULM, 74-69, to reach SBC quarters

Confidence high as team has won eight of last 11

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee picked the best time to gain its first win against Louisiana-Monroe as Sun Belt Conference members.

The No. 4-seeded Blue Raiders (15-14) turned back No. 13 seed Louisiana-Monroe, 74-69, in the first round of the Sun Belt Conference Men's Basketball Championships at Murphy Center Wednesday and will face No. 12 seed Troy in quarterfinal action Sunday at 3 p.m. at the Mitchell Center in Mobile, Ala. Troy upset No. 5 seed Louisiana-Lafayette, 70-60, Wednesday.

Middle Tennessee had lost its first three games to the Warhawks since they joined the Sun Belt in 2006-07 but something had to give Wednesday as the Blue Raiders entered the game unbeaten in first-round Sun Belt Conference games under sixth-year Head Coach Kermit Davis. They are now 5-0 in such games.

"I knew we would get (ULM's) best shot," Davis said. "They are talented and they played like a team that was picked to win their side in the preseason tonight. Our team is in a great frame of mind. It's a fun group to be around. Everyone in our locker room expected to go to Mobile for the quarterfinals and we are excited to still be playing."

Middle Tennessee was led by first-team All-Sun Belt selection Desmond "Boogie" Yates, who poured in a game-high 22 points and pulled five rebounds. Center Theryn Hudson was a beast inside, connecting on 7-of-8 field goal attempts for a career-high 19 points and eight rebounds. Guards Kevin Kanaskie added 11 points, six assists and three steals while Demetrius Green finished with 11 points and six rebounds.

Yates and Hudson combined to shoot 80 percent (16-of-20) from the field, score 41 points, grab 13 rebounds and connect on nine-of-10 free throws. The Blue Raiders improved to 8-1 when Yates and Hudson are in double figures.

One of the unsung key players was freshman Broderick Gilchrest, who started for Nigel Johnson and played most of the second half. Johnson suffered an ankle injury on the final play of the first half and did not see action in the second half. He returned from the locker room several minutes into the second half on crutches and wearing a protective boot.

"It's just a sprained ankle," Davis said. "He couldn't go in the second half tonight. He'll just go day-to-day at this point. He's a tough guy and he's under great care. If anyone can come back from it, he can."

ULM was led by Jordan Payne's 20 points and 12 from Raphelle Turner. Senior Lance Brasher has been a force against Middle Tennessee in the three previous games between the teams, averaging 15 points and 11 rebounds, including two double doubles, but he was limited to 1-of-5 shooting from the field for two points and he had just two rebounds against the Blue Raiders Wednesday.

"Hats off to Middle Tennessee," ULM coach Orlando Early said. "I thought they did a great job executing offensively and defensively. I thought their size was effective for getting offensive rebounds. (Middle Tennessee) is a confident team right now. I think they can make some noise down in Mobile."

The Blue Raiders have won eight of their last 11 and advance into the quarterfinals riding high. Middle Tennessee has not trailed in its last two games - vs. ULM and Troy - and the Blue Raiders have done a good job answering opposing team's run with big runs of their own in these recent games.

Wednesday was another example.

Middle Tennessee vaulted to a 25-12 lead on the second of two Yates made free throws to take its biggest lead with 7:27 remaining in the first half. ULM followed with an 8-0 run to cut the deficit to 25-20 before Hudson nailed a 5-footer to stop the bleeding.

ULM pulled to within three, 27-24, with under three minutes remaining before halftime only to see the Blue Raiders stretch the lead back to nine, 35-26, on Yates 15-footer just before halftime. Johnson suffered his ankle injury after he blocked Tony Hooper's 3-point attempt with two seconds remaining before intermission.

When the team returned to the court without the junior point guard it seemed a bit out of sorts to begin the second half but Kanaskie and Yates led a strong charge as Middle Tennessee ran out to a 44-32 advantage with 15:27 remaining.

Like it had done all night, ULM made a run and cut the deficit to as few as five with less than five minutes remaining but that's when Gilchrest stepped up and showed his grit. He knocked down a clutch 3-pointer with 7:29 remaining to extend the lead to 60-51 and minutes later he forced a jump ball and then he made a driving layup with 1:37 remaining to put the Blue Raiders on top, 64-57.

The Blue Raiders shot 55 percent (27-of-49) and won the battle of the boards, 30-20, including 12 offensive caroms.

POSTGAME QUOTES
Middle Tennessee Head Coach Kermit Davis
On tonight's win
"I knew we would get Monroe's best shot. They're talented. They played like a team that was picked to win their side. We couldn't stop their guards at all around the goal or on the perimeter in the second half."

On players stepping up
"I thought T [Theryn Hudson] and Boogie [Desmond Yates] had outstanding games. Theryn played well even with four fouls, and we had a limited bench. Broderick [Gilchrest] came in and played really well. He made a couple of really big plays for a freshman put in that situation. I told him, 'Just do what you do. You don't have to make any special plays.' He won the game at Denver. Nigel [Johnson] got three or foul fouls, and he [Gilchrest] played 27 minutes and made all the big plays. This was his first time [in that situation] at home, and I thought he showed a lot of poise."

On the injury to Johnson
"It's just a sprained ankle. He couldn't go tonight, but he'll just go day-to-day. He's a tough guy and he's under great care. There's no break or stress fracture or anything like that. Nigel's role is predicated a lot on his athleticism. I know he'll live in the training room, and if anyone can come back from it he can."

On the team's mentality going into the quarterfinals
"We belong based on what we've done the last five weeks. Our team is in a great frame of mind. It's a fun group to be around. Everyone in our locker room expected to go to Mobile."

On ULM's comeback
"That's what the 3-point line can do. You think the game is just in hand, up 70-59 and then Theryn has to make a free throw just to get it over a one-possession game."

Freshman guard Broderick Gilchrest
On taking over at point guard
"I knew I had to step up. My team was counting on me. I had to take over Nigel [Johnson]'s role and do some positive things, and I think I did that."
On making a critical drive late
"I just heard Coach yelling at me to drive, and I knew I had to make that basket no matter what."

Junior center Theryn Hudson
On not playing in the last matchup with ULM due to injury
"In the last game [Lance] Brasher had 17 rebounds against us. I knew if I was playing in that game I

would have taken some rebounds away from him."

On matching up with Raphelle Turner
"I like playing against a bigger person, because I can bang with them and not really get fouls called on me. Tonight I think I did a good job on him [Turner]."

Sophomore forward Desmond Yates
On playing injured
"My mentality was just to win. I'm a little banged up. Everybody's banged up. I just knew I had to come out with heart and passion."

On shutting down Lance Brasher
"It was a personal challenge for me, and some of my teammates were saying the same thing. In the past Brasher has averaged about 16 and 12 against us. It was our goal to stop him because we wanted to win this game."

Louisiana Monroe Coach Orlando Early
Opening Statement
"Hats off to Middle Tennessee, I thought they did a great job executing offensively and defensively. I thought their size was effective for getting offensive rebounds. They are a confident and hot team right now. I think they can make some noise down in Mobile."

On Middle Tennessee jumping out to an early lead
"I thought they did a good job pressuring us early defensively. They did jump out to a lead and that gave them some confidence. Our guys battled back and helped get us back into the game. Middle Tennessee's game plan was to get the lead early and they did well with their execution of the game plan."

On the play of Jordan Payne
"Jordan [Payne] has had a tough year. I feel for him. He has been a great player for us. We believe in him. Our players and coaching staff believe in him. He had the confidence to step up to make shots and put us in the position to help us at least get a chance to win."

On the physical post play
"That's one of the reasons we started Rudy [Turner]. We knew [Theryn] Hudson and [Desmond] Yates would be in there. We needed size and strength around the basketball. I think our two young kids are going to be good young players down the road because they were able to play against the likes of Hudson and Yates."

Senior Guard Jordan Payne
On making crucial shots down the stretch of the game
"I know I could make that shot because my teammates had faith in me."