Middle Tennessee Impressive In 86-62 Exhibition Win

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Five Middle Tennessee players, led by Michael Cuffee's game-high 18 points, scored in double figures and the Blue Raiders erupted for 52 second-half points en route to an 86-62 win against North Alabama in the team's only exhibition game of the preseason at Murphy Center Thursday night. Cuffee led Middle Tennessee with a double-double, scoring 18 points on 9-of-15 shooting from the field and yanking 13 rebounds. Freshman Brian Lake (14 points), sophomore Kyle Young (13 points), senior Mike Dean (10 points) and newcomer Marcus Morrison (10 points) all reached double figures for the Blue Raiders in front of a boisterous crowd of 1,811. "First, I would like to commend North Alabama," Middle Tennessee coach Kermit Davis said. "They are a well-coached team and they play hard, which is what we wanted to face. We got a good test tonight. I liked the way we guarded the dribble and we were able to sustain it for longer periods of time. I'm proud of our defense and the defensive field goal percentage." Middle Tennessee trailed 20-13 almost midway through the first half, but Cuffee scored eight of Middle Tennessee's next 10 points and after taking a 27-26 lead with 5:57 remaining before intermission, the Blue Raiders held North Alabama scoreless the remainder of the half to carry a 34-26 advantage into the locker room. The defensive intensity only heightened in the second half as Middle Tennessee limited the Lions to just one field goal in the first 5:17 to start the period and widen the lead. "We started kind of sluggish but we came out in the second half and played much better," Cuffee said. "We played strong team defense and it showed. As for me, my teammates put me in the right place to score and they got me the ball so all the thanks goes to my teammates." Middle Tennessee shot 55 percent for the game and limited North Alabama to just 35 percent. At the same time, the Blue Raiders had 22 assists and 15 turnovers, while forcing 10 Lions turnovers. "It's a very good line," Davis said. "I'll have to watch the tape, but when you shoot (55) percent, limit the opposition to (35 percent) and have a positive assist-to-turnover ratio, that's what we try to do, so you have to be pleased with that." Dean led the Blue Raiders with eight assists and had just one turnover, while steady point guard Bryan Smithson

dished out five assists and had two turnovers. Morrison also was solid with four assists and one turnover and all three players logged 24 minutes or more. Lake also was a pleasant surprise. The freshman from Bolivar, Tenn., earned his first start as a Blue Raider and responded by going 6-of-9 from the field and pulling down eight rebounds. "The nerves were a little tough at the beginning. It feels like it was just months ago when I was in this same room doing the same thing," said Lake, referring to spending time in the media room answering questions as he helped lead Bolivar to the Class AA Tennessee state championship and was named tournament Most Valuable Player in March. "This is a different time and a different team, though, and it felt good to contribute." The Blue Raiders will open the regular season against Lambuth University at Murphy Center, Nov. 19, at 7:30 p.m. **3-POINT THREAT?:** If Middle Tennessee's game against North Alabama had counted in the standings then a long streak of sorts would have ended. The Blue Raiders have hit at least one 3-pointer in 246 consecutive games, but they were 0-of-8 from beyond the arc in the exhibition win against the Lions. **SHARING THE BALL:** Davis has stressed and emphasized the importance of making the extra pass and looking for the open man during preseason practices, and the veteran coach is getting his point across. Five different Blue Raiders scored in double figures against North Alabama and 11 of the 13 players who competed scored. **SPREADING THE WEALTH:** Middle Tennessee starting guards Bryan Smithson and Mike Dean combined for 13 assists and were guilty of just three turnovers in a combined 51 minutes of playing time. Dean, whose individual game high for assists last season was six, dished out eight against the Lions and had just one turnover, while Smithson added five assists. **LAKE RISING:** Lake, Middle Tennessee's talented freshman forward, earned his first Blue Raider start in the exhibition game against the Lions. The rookie from Bolivar had 14 points and eight assists in 15 minutes of playing time. Lake was 6-of-9 from the field and hit both of his free-throw attempts.

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