Yates pours in 27 as Blue Raiders earn exhibition win

Preseason game serves as eye opener for players

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee Head Men's Basketball coach Kermit Davis has tried to tell his players the team is not where it needs to be at this point of the preseason. Now Davis believes the players also see it. Desmond "Boogie" Yates led three Blue Raiders in double figures with a game-high 27 points as Middle Tennessee disposed of Cumberland 81-70 in exhibition action at Murphy Center Saturday afternoon. Five Middle Tennessee players scored eight or more in a balanced attack that also featured 13 points from Nigel Johnson, 10 from Kevin Kanaskie, and newcomers Eric Allen and Montarrio Haddock netted nine and eight, respectively. Despite the successful start in the first of two exhibition games Davis said the overall performance both individually at spots and collectively as a team is not what it needs to be. "Everyone had their good moments but I was really disappointed in how we defended," Davis said. "The coaches know where we are but now I think the team does too. We need to get a lot better." Yates was the offensive difference as he hit 11 of 16 shots, including both 3-point attempts, on the way to his 27-point outburst in 23 minutes of play. Despite the strong offensive effort the Sun Belt's Preseason Player of the Year said it was clear the team has great strides to make in future practices. "I think we played hard and we gave effort but we made some mistakes and we have a long way to go," Yates said. "We will take this and built on it through next week's practices and see what

improvements we can make before we play our next exhibition game (Thursday)." Johnson and Kanaskie, the squad's top playmakers, combined to dish out 14 assists but they were also guilty of six turnovers. Johnson had a stellar line with 13 points, a team-high seven rebounds, seven assists, three steals and two turnovers. Kanaskie also was strong across the board, supporting his 10-point effort with four caroms, seven assists, three steals, and a blocked shot. The lowlight was four turnovers. Darren Avery also displayed energy and finished with six points on 3-of-5 shooting and Davis saw positive moments from each of the newcomers but his disdain was primarily on the defensive end and decision-making at times. His concern was justified. Middle Tennessee shot 50 percent in the first half as it opened a 45-36 halftime advantage but Cumberland, which started the season with consecutive regular season wins before stepping into an exhibition game, kept pace with a sizzling 59 percent shooting percentage in the first half. The shooting display included an uncanny 60 percent (6-of-10) from 3-point range. The difference for Middle Tennessee's defense in the second half was its ability to better defend the 3-point line. Cumberland failed to connect on six 3-point attempts in the second half, when they were just 8-of-21 for 38 percent. "I thought we contested more shots and defended the 3-point shots better (in the second half)," Davis said. "Maybe they got tired but we did defend better. We just have to do that with consistency from start to finish and we will. We will continue to work on the areas that need improvement and we will keep showing progress because we have a group of good guys with great character." Cumberland hit its first 3-pointer to take its only lead, 3-0, just nine seconds into the game but Middle Tennessee capped a 21-6 run with Yates' 3-pointer to build a 21-9 lead with 13:26 remaining in the first half. The Bulldogs, who were led by Kenneth Simms' 19 points, closed to within 29-25 late in the first half but Middle Tennessee used another late run to seize momentum and take a 45-36 advantage into the half. The Blue Raiders maintained their double-digit lead most of the second half and stretched the lead to as many as 19. Middle Tennessee will have its final tune-up of the preseason in an exhibition game against North Alabama at Murphy Center Thursday at 7 p.m. **Middle Tennessee Postgame Quotes**

Head Coach Kermit Davis

Opening Comment

"I was really disappointed in how we defended. They made some tough 3-pointers but we didn't contest. They shot well over 50 percent in the first half. I just hope that's a valuable lesson to our team. The coaches know where we are but now I think the team does too. We need to get a lot better." **How much to read into first exhibition game:**

"I read a lot into this one. We know we're not going to be picked to win the Sun Belt without Demetrius (Green) and Theryn (Hudson) so I realize that. I'm not disappointed in the new guys, it's just nervousness for them, but for the returning guys we didn't really have a tough base. I thought Desmond was really soft. He gave up a lot on defense. I didn't think Calvin O'Neil defended like he can. I thought Kevin and Nigel's decision making was really poor at times in critical points. So it's pretty much our returning guys I'm disappointed in. They should've been better in an exhibition game." **Difference in second half defense**

"I thought we contested more shots and defended the 3-point shots better. Maybe they got tired. I was really disappointed at the end when Cumberland outscored us 7-0 to end the game because those two minutes were critical for all those guys." **Junior forward Desmond Yates**

On today's game

"I think we played hard. We've got a long way to go, we made some mistakes. We take this and build on it through next week's practices and before we play our next exhibition game (Thursday)." **On the new guys**

"The new guys are coming on good. The returning guys have to build on what we know but the new

guys are coming on good and they're learning a lot." **Senior guard Nigel Johnson**

On the flow of the game

"We have to learn how to play without our hands and stop fouling so much. That's why I thought all those fouls were being called. We have to play (defense) without our hands and without fouling." **On the assists during the game**

"That'd be a good asset to our game if Kanaskie and I could get seven assists per game each. We'll win a lot of games that way." **Eric Allen**

Thoughts on first game action

"I have to get better defensively and knock down open shots. Nigel's going to drive the lane and kick it out to me and I have to be able to knock it down. It was my first Division 1 game so I had a couple jitters but I'll be alright." **Thoughts on all young guys**

"We all came out there and played hard. We tried to follow the older guys' lead. We've just got to keep our hands off and play hard."

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