Blue Raider Comeback Bid Falls Short At Rice

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HOUSTON - Middle Tennessee spent all of the game against Rice playing catch-up and put together a strong comeback down the stretch but the home-standing Owls hit seven-of-eight free throws in the final minute to secure a 67-62 win in front of 1,023 at Autry Gym Tuesday. The Blue Raiders (1-1) never led and trailed by 10, 60-50, with 1:17 remaining, but Middle Tennessee hit four straight 3-pointers in a 56-second span and trimmed the Rice lead to 62-59 with 21 seconds remaining, but the Owls (2-0) knocked down clutch free throws in the end and claimed the victory. "I thought their guards were better than our perimeter guys down the stretch," Middle Tennessee coach Kermit Davis said. "They were harder and tougher than we were. We have to get better, and we have a lot of work head of us." Middle Tennessee was led by Mike Dean, who finished with 20 points, seven assists, three steals and four rebounds, while Michael Cuffee (12 points, seven rebounds) and Marcus Morrison (11 points) also tallied double figures for the Blue Raiders. Rice took advantage of its opportunities at the free-throw line and although it didn't shoot for a high percentage at the charity stripe (61 percent), the Owls did get Middle Tennessee in foul trouble and more than doubled the Blue Raiders in free-throw opportunities. Middle Tennessee was 7-of-15 from the line, while Rice connected on 19-of-31 free throws. "I thought we did what we were supposed to do but we couldn't hit some shots we usually make," Davis said. "The bottom line is they shoot 31 free throws and we shoot 15, and they outscore us 12 at the line." The difference was clearly at the free-throw line because Middle Tennessee made two more field goals than Rice, three more 3-pointers and was virtually even on the boards with the Owls owning a slight 36-35 edge. The Blue Raiders hauled in 18 offensive rebounds, led by Cuffee's seven. Middle Tennessee, which shot 38 percent (23-of-60) from the field, trailed 35-27 at the half but the Blue Raiders came out of the locker room strong for the final 20 minutes and cut the deficit to 40-38 with 14:53 remaining on a 3-pointer by Jonathan Loe. It was as close as Middle Tennessee would get the rest of the way, although the Blue Raiders had numerous opportunities to cut into the lead. Rice was led by Jason McKrieth's 21-point performance. Middle Tennessee will return to action when it plays Mississippi Valley State in Greeneville, Miss., Saturday at 7 p.m.

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