

# Middle Tennessee Gets Defensive In 66-47 Win Against Belmont

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**MURFREESBORO, Tenn. -** Middle Tennessee got defensive as it renewed an old rivalry with local foe Belmont at Murphy Center Monday night. Playing its fourth game in 11 days, and second in three days, the Blue Raiders buckled down and put forth one of the best team defensive efforts under Head Coach Kermit Davis to claim a 66-47 win in front of 3,023. Middle Tennessee improved to 16-6 all-time against Belmont and 6-1 against in-state foes under Davis at home. Middle Tennessee (2-2) limited Belmont to just 26.9 percent (14-of-52) from the field, including 2-of-17 from 3-point range, to record the lowest field goal percentage for an opponent during the Davis era. "Belmont runs a well-designed rhythm offense and the whole thing is trying to get teams like Belmont out of a rhythm," Davis said. "We thought some switching would disrupt some rhythm. They are going to try to slip to the goal and get some baskets and sometimes that happens. We were going to let the big guys inside play them by themselves and I think (Andrew) Preston is a really good young player for Belmont



who is going to be very good.

We took them out of a rhythm and then we pressed them some just to try to get the game going. We thought we needed to be in some transition and take advantage of some dribble penetration. It was good to see, and I was proud of our team." Michael Cuffee's 15 points and eight rebounds led the Blue Raiders, while Mike Dean contributed 12 points, pulled down five rebounds and dished out three assists. Marcus Morrison tallied nine points and seven boards, and Bryan Smithson finished with eight points and five rebounds. Junior guard Fats Cuyler also had his best game as a Blue Raider with five points, three assists and three rebounds. Defense dominated the first half as Middle Tennessee took a 22-16 lead into the break but the second half was a totally different story as the Blue Raiders dominated the Bruins (0-3) during the 20-minute stretch and seized control of the game during the first seven minutes of the second frame. Leading 24-20 with 19:00 remaining, Middle Tennessee used a 12-0 run during the next 4:44 to stretch the advantage to 36-20 and never looked back. Steady offensive play from Cuffee, Morrison and Cuyler sparked the Blue Raider run, while total team defense was prevalent throughout. The Blue Raiders continue their four-game homestand against Tennessee Wesleyan Thursday at 7 p.m. **Head Coach Kermit Davis**

**Opening statement:**

"I was very proud of our players. We had a tough trip to Mississippi and I thought we responded very well. We convinced our guys that fatigue wouldn't be a factor. We told them they are young guys and they are in shape. I did think the long layoff did hurt Belmont, not playing in 16 days. I'm sure (Belmont) coach (Rick) Byrd, being the type of guy he is, would not reflect that at all. He has a good young team and I think it's one of the better-designed offenses you can run and for the team to put the switching into the game that we did in one-day preparation, I thought that was very good. I was proud of them." **On the defensive effort:**

"Belmont runs a well-designed rhythm offense and the whole thing is trying to get teams like Belmont out of a rhythm. We thought some switching would disrupt some rhythm. They are going to try to slip to the goal and get some baskets and sometimes that happens. We were going to let the big guys inside play them by themselves and I think (Andrew) Preston is a really good young player for Belmont who is going to be very good. We took them out of a rhythm and then we pressed them some just to try to get the game going. We thought we needed to be in some transition and take advantage of some dribble penetration. It was good to see. I thought our bench played better tonight." **On baskets off offensive rebounds:**

"That's exactly the thing. We were trying to have dribble penetration and we had to go back and offensive rebound the ball. I think that's the advantage we do have is that one through 12 we are probably more athletic so we were trying to go back and rebound it. I thought it was critical tonight. We got (15) offensive rebounds." **Were you disappointed at halftime?**

"I really wasn't. Our effort was so good and I think Belmont had a lot to do with our offensive inefficiencies. I think in the first half we were trying to maybe recognize if they were in zone or man and I just said, 'We are going to run our man offense against whatever defense they play and try to get the ball reversed and drive it to the goal and offensive rebound the ball. I thought Belmont had a lot to do with us only having 22 points at the half.'" **On the play of Fats Cuyler:**

"It was great to see him. He's a very good shooter and he's had open looks but he finally got some balls to go down. I thought Jonathan Loe played well off the bench. He got himself into a little rhythm, guarded better tonight. I was good to see Fats play because we need his offensive productivity shooting the ball." **Senior guard/forward Michael Cuffee**

**On the difference in the second half:**

"We just had to come out with more intensity. We took a real, real bad defeat at Mississippi Valley (Saturday night) so we had to come out today and play even harder." **Did the outcome have**

**anything to do with being more athletic than Belmont?**

"I wouldn't say that because they were pretty athletic. They came out and ran their sets and I think our coaching staff and everybody did a good job of preparing us to defend whatever they had to bring at us." **Did the team talk much about the Mississippi Valley State loss because you only had one day to prepare for Belmont?**

"We talked about it after the game but we had a long ride home and on the bus everybody had time to do a lot of thinking. We knew we had to come out and play tonight." **How long was that bus ride? Was it a quite bus ride?**

"It was about 8 hours, 8 long hours. Anytime you lose it's going to be a quite ride back." **What happened tonight against Belmont that didn't happen in that Mississippi Valley loss?**

"I don't think we came out with great intensity at Mississippi Valley. We didn't play good help defense but tonight we came out and played more team defense and everybody played their role. We knew what we had to do coming back home." **Junior guard Fats Cuyler**

**On getting in transition more in the second half:**

"We were rebounding the ball better and at halftime we were talking about pushing it more on them because we saw they were not getting back as well in the first half. Bryan (Smithson) and I started pushing it more in transition and we were able to get easier baskets." **On appearing to be more comfortable in his fourth game as a Blue Raider:**

"I was. It's our fourth game and I'm starting to feel more comfortable with my teammates and my role." **On whether or not he felt he needed to be a spark:**

"That's how I want to come play every night. Come out play hard and try to get everybody involved."

**Postgame notes**

**DEFENSE TIGHTENS UP:** The key to Middle Tennessee's win over Belmont on Monday night centered around its defense. The Blue Raiders held the Bruins to 26.9 percent shooting from the field, which went down as their best effort of the year and the best under Kermit Davis, and also limited Belmont to 2 of 17 shooting from behind the arc. The Blue Raiders were also effective on the glass by out rebounding the Bruins, 47-27. **"CUFF" NAMED PLAYER OF GAME:** Following the win over Belmont, members of the working media named Senior Michael Cuffee the Alexander Automotive Family Player of the Game. Cuffee poured in a team-high 15 points on 6-for-9 shooting to go along with eight boards. **SECOND HALF SURGE:** After one of the lowest scoring halves in the Kermit Davis era, Middle Tennessee came to life in the second stanza to breeze past Belmont. The Blue Raiders doubled their point total by registering 44 in the final 20 minutes, while also shooting a sizzling 51.5 percent from the field (17-33). Michael Cuffee and Marcus Morrison led the second half charge with nine points each during that span. **STATE FOES:** With tonight's win over Belmont, the Blue Raiders improved their record to 6-4 under Kermit Davis against in-state competition and are now 6-1 at home. Middle Tennessee is a perfect 2-0 on the season against state schools in 2004 with victories over Lambuth and Belmont. **INSIDE THE PAINT:** The 22 first half points were the fewest by a Blue Raider team since the 2002-03 team netted 22 in the first half against Arkansas State - a span of 50 games ... Middle Tennessee has now hit at least one three-pointer in 250 straight games ... Tonight's victory marked the 35th win for Head Coach Kermit Davis at Middle Tennessee ... The Blue Raiders are now 30-4 when leading at the half under Davis ... Kyle Young equaled his personal-best with three blocks against the Bruins ... Marcus Morrison ripped down a career-best seven boards ... Mike Dean made his 74th career three-pointer against Belmont and now needs just six more to break into the Top Ten all-time ... The Blue Raider bench netted a season-high 27 points, which also went down as the most by the reserves since they had 28 points against South Carolina State in 2003-04 ... Mike Dean has now hit at least one three-pointer in all 27 career games he has played for the Blue Raiders ... Bryan Smithson did not register an assist for just

the second time in his career (vs New Mexico State on (1-29-04).

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