Men's basketball starts fast, rolls to 80-63 triumph

Yates, Johnson lead way as Blue Raiders start season 2-0

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee bolted out of the gate and cruised to a 2-0 start with an 80-63 win against Houston Baptist at Murphy Center Sunday afternoon.

Desmond "Boogie" Yates led the Blue Raiders in double figures with a game-high 19 points. Nigel Johnson contributed another outstanding performance with 17 points on 6-of-8 shooting, and Calvin O'Neil posted his second straight double-figure performance with 10 points and he tied for game-high rebounding honors with seven.

Senior guard Kevin Kanaskie had another rock-solid performance. He narrowly missed a second straight double double and was within an eyelash of a triple double. Kanaskie finished with nine points, seven rebounds and dished out nine assists against just two turnovers. He went over the 900-point mark with 904 for his career. Eric Allen added eight points and freshman Demario Williams contributed six.

The Blue Raiders never trailed and essentially put the game away with outstanding toughness exhibited in board work that produced numerous successful second-shot opportunities. Middle

Tennessee won the rebounding battle 48-30 and collected 14 offensive rebounds, led by O'Neil's five.

Middle Tennessee led 19-11 after Gordon Watt's jumper pulled the Huskies (0-2) within eight with 10:57 remaining in the first half. That's when the Blue Raiders flexed their muscles and turned up the defensive intensity. It triggered a 13-2 run over a span of 3:28 that stretched the lead to 32-13 with 7:29 remaining. The Blue Raiders stretched the lead to as much as 23 before halftime.

Yates provided six points during the key run, including two monster dunks, and Johnson added five points during the stretch.

Head Coach Kermit Davis called the first half one of the best the Blue Raiders have played during his tenure.

"The first half was fun," Davis said. "We played with great energy, shared the ball, really hit the boards, but we didn't have that in the second half. It just kind of left us but we will take the win and continue to work on improving some areas. There were a lot of positives to come out of the game."

Middle Tennessee stretched its lead to as much as 27 in the second half and never allowed Houston Baptist to climb closer than 18 until the final shot closed the final margin to 17.

The Blue Raiders return to action when they play host to No. 13 Tennessee Friday at 7:30 p.m.

Middle Tennessee Postgame Quotes
MT Head Coach Kermit Davis
On today's game
"I thought our energy level in the first half was great. Houston Baptist can win some games in our league, but we had a great first half. We rebounded better and their shooting percentage was down. We got up 27 and I thought it would get to 35 or 40 but it got into a grind and we stopped sharing the ball and our energy level went. So we'll take the win and move on."

On the rebounding performance
"I think it's a better commitment by our players. We had 14 offensive rebounds but the negative is that Desmond Yates still doesn't have one in two games. That's impossible for a guy whose 6-7, 220 and who runs and jumps like he does. I thought Calvin O'Neil played like he did before he got hurt last year. He played really well."

On Calvin O'Neil's play
"I think he has a lot more confidence. We saw it in practice the last few days. He has just kept getting better. He gives us good minutes. We will get Demetrius Green back this week, he has a chance to be really good in this league and hopefully Theryn Hudson makes some progress this week."

On getting new guys minutes
"It's been great for us to get some of them minutes and it is going to pay off for us down the road. It has been great to see Demario Williams really come on the last few games. The progress of the new guys is a real positive."

Senior guard Kevin Kanaskie
On tonight's play

"I didn't shoot well tonight. I got good looks but sometimes they don't fall. The reason we kept scoring was Calvin and Nigel Johnson and everybody was getting offensive rebounds and second chances."

On being prepared for Tennessee and Vanderbilt
"I think we need to work on some things, the second half hurt us, but I think we're getting better. I think this game was better than the last one and hopefully Friday will be better than tonight."

Senior guard Nigel Johnson
On playing differently in different games
"We have a little more to offer, but we have to learn how to do it more often together so we can win the conference."

On long run in first half
"We talked in locker room about sending a message and coming out with a strong mindset and set the tone. We did that in this game"

Junior forward Calvin O'Neil
On tonight's rebounding
"The last couple of days the rebounding has been a big emphases. We've worked on it a lot in practice. Our level was really high in the first half."

HBU Head Coach Ron Cottrell
Game Comments
"Offensive rebounds were the key to the game. They were not getting terrific first shots, but the second and third shots were killing us. Anytime you give a team that many shots at the basket, they are going to start making some. We didn't do a good job controlling the glass which is what give them the opportunity to run a little."

On Middle Tennessee's players (Kanaskie, Yates, O'Neil)
"They have good players. We were able to hold Kanaskie to just nine points. Yates is a very solid player. I think our zone looked good at times. The zone was causing them problems, but the fact was we couldn't rebound out of the zone. They are going to have a good ball club and make a good run. I look forward to when they have to come down and play in Houston in front of our crowd."

Middle Tennessee Postgame Notes
SURPASSING 900: Senior guard Kevin Kanaskie surpassed the 900-point mark for his career with nine against Houston Baptist Sunday. Kanaskie scored nine points to reach 904 in the 80-63 win. Kanaskie barely missed a triple double for the second straight game. He finished with nine points, nine assists and seven rebounds. Kanaskie now has 385 career assists and needs 15 to pass Richard Duncan (399) for third on the all-time list. The savvy playmaker has 20 assists and just three turnovers in two games.

YATES ENJOYS FAST START: Desmond "Boogie" Yates led Middle Tennessee with 19 points on 8-of-11 shooting against Houston Baptist and is off to the best start of his stellar career. The junior forward is averaging 19.5 points and is shooting 76 percent (16-of-21) from the field, including 75 percent (3-of-4) from 3-point range, in the team's first two games. He needs one point to reach 900.

BACK TO FORM: Junior forward Calvin O'Neil put together two strong games in his return. O'Neil

suffered a season-ending injury in last season's opener but he appears to be making up for lost time in his first two outings of 2008-09. O'Neil had 10 points on 4-of-6 shooting and tied for game-high rebound honors with seven, five of which were offensive caroms. The Newark, N.J., native is averaging 10 points, 5.5 rebounds and shooting 62 percent from the field in the first two games. The Blue Raiders improved to 10-2 when O'Neil scores double figures.

JOHNSON DYNAMIC IN WIN: Senior guard Nigel Johnson's quickness created havoc against Houston Baptist. The electrifying Johnson was able to get inside the paint and convert layups or dish to open players for easy baskets during an impressive first half. Johnson finished with 17 points on 6-of-8 shooting and added four rebounds.

FAST BREAKS: Middle Tennessee started the season 2-0 for the first time since 2001-02 with the win ... The Blue Raiders improved to 31-1 under Kermit Davis when scoring 80 points or more, including 16 straight wins. They also improved to 77-15 when leading at the half under Davis ... The Blue Raiders have hit at least one 3-pointer in 371 consecutive games.

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