

November 21, 2008

Blue Raiders upset bid falls short against No. 13 Tennessee

Middle Tennessee comes up short, 76-66, in front of packed house

Athletic Communications



Senior guard Nigel Johnson (11) drives past Bobby Maze during Middle Tennessee's game vs. No. 13 Tennessee Friday. (MT)

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee pushed No. 13 Tennessee to the finish in a highly-anticipated game of in-state teams but the Vols pulled away in the end and escaped their first road test with a hard-earned 76-66 win in front of 11,802 at Murphy Center Friday night.

Demetrius Green led three Blue Raiders (2-1) in double figures with 17 on 7-of-12 shooting in his first game of the season. **Nigel Johnson** added 13 points and six assists, and **Kevin Kanaskie** contributed 11 points and six assists. Preseason Sun Belt Player of the Year Desmond "Boogie" Yates picked up two fouls in the first 1:20 and finished with eight points in just 19 minutes of work.

Tennessee's Tyler Smith led all scorers with 18 points, Bobby Maze totaled 12, and J.P. Prince and Scotty Hopson netted 10 each for the Vols (3-0).

Middle Tennessee had a great opportunity to pull off the upset, trailing 36-32 at the half and staying within two possessions early in the second half. Tennessee's patented pressure was a non-factor as Middle Tennessee committed just nine turnovers, seven fewer than Tennessee. In fact, guards Johnson and Kanaskie combined for 12 assists and two turnovers in a combined 76 minutes of action.

"I still think that Tennessee is a great team," Middle Tennessee Head Coach Kermit Davis said. "We had a great opportunity, but we shot poorly from the free-throw line. Our best player (Yates) played 1:20 in the first half and we were able to keep it close, so I was proud of our team. In the second half we had our chances but they made their free throws on the road and we couldn't get stops when we needed to. I was proud of our effort but it was disappointing to miss an opportunity like that."

Despite being out-rebounded 38-23 and allowing Tennessee to shoot 55 percent (26-of-47) the Blue Raiders still had their opportunities late; however, the difference was at the free-throw line where Middle Tennessee was an uncharacteristic 12-of-25 for 48 percent, including missing the front end of four one-and-ones. The Volunteers, on the other hand, were 77 percent (20-of-26) at the charity stripe including a strong 17-of-21 (81 percent) in the second half.

"It was a pretty good day for college basketball this early in the season," Tennessee coach Bruce Pearl said. "It was great environment. Middle (Tennessee) did a great job hosting this event. Their fans were great, our fans were great. Middle Tennessee is a good team. This was anybody's game."

The game featured four ties and 13 lead changes. It was a one-possession contest the

majority of the first half until Tennessee used a 10-0 run to turn a 26-25 deficit into a 35-26 lead with 2:43 remaining before intermission. Middle Tennessee answered with a 6-0 run on consecutive 3-pointers from Kanaskie to trim the lead to 35-32 with 1:41 remaining and the Vols carried a 36-32 lead into the break.

Middle Tennessee tied the game, 38-38, on Yates' first basket - a short jumper in the lane - with 17:30 remaining but that's when Tennessee went on its biggest run of the game. The 13-2 run was capped by Josh Tabb's 3-pointer and gave Tennessee a 51-40 lead with 13:31 remaining.

The Blue Raiders wouldn't wilt. In fact, they had a chance to cut the lead to five when Kanaskie missed a layup with 6:21 remaining. From there, Middle Tennessee closed to within six twice down the stretch but couldn't get critical stops to afford it a chance at the comeback.

Middle Tennessee will face its second straight SEC foe when it travels to Vanderbilt Monday. Tipoff at Memorial Gym is 7 p.m.

Middle Tennessee Postgame Quotes

Middle Tennessee Head Coach Kermit Davis

On tonight's game:

"I still think that Tennessee is a great team. We had a great opportunity, but we shot poorly from the free-throw line. Our best player (Yates) played 1:20 in the first half and we were able to keep it close, so I was proud of our team. In the second half we had our chances but they made their free throws on the road and we couldn't get stops when we needed to. I was proud of our effort but it was disappointing to miss an opportunity like that."

On Tennessee's size:

"They wore us out on the boards. We couldn't get any second-chance opportunities. That was the third straight game **Desmond Yates** didn't have an offensive rebound. He has to do better than that if we're going to beat quality teams. They're very athletic. We tried to front their post and we did for a long time. I was proud of our effort."

On foul shooting:

"Kevin (Kanaskie) is one of the best free-throw shooters to play (at Middle Tennessee) and he missed two big ones. It just got contagious. That was the difference, they went 20-of-26 and we were 12-of-25 and that's the ball game. If they make 12 and we make 20 then we win the game. Basketball gets pretty simple and we couldn't get it to a one or two possession game because of that."

On Nigel Johnson's effort:

"I think Nigel is as athletic as any point guard in the country. (Bobby) Maze doesn't shoot well, but he's good and I thought he held his composure. He doesn't take bad shots and he understands where he's at which is hard to do for a junior college transfer at this stage of the season, but I thought Nigel played very well tonight."

Senior guard Nigel Johnson

On the lack of turnovers:

"Tennessee is a team that presses a lot and makes you want to speed up. We just wanted to keep control and make plays. We just have to work on rebounding and getting back on defense."

On tonight's performance:

"We all know what we can do. We should've won but Tennessee is a good team and we'll just have to get better at practice."

Junior forward Desmond Yates**On early foul trouble:**

"You don't know how bad I wanted to be out there with my teammates tonight. It's one of the most frustrating things I've ever been through in a game. We played hard, but we have to get better tomorrow (at practice)."

On poor free throw shooting:

"We really don't know what happened. We missed 13 and four of those were front ends of the one-and-one, so really we missed about 16 free throws. We were just missing them tonight but we know we can make them and we'll be alright in the future."

Senior guard Demetrius Green**On tonight's performance:**

"I just knew I had to step up because this was my first game. I wanted to be big for our team and make plays."

On getting Tennessee in early foul trouble:

"They are big guys and get a lot of offensive rebounds. We were focused on getting them in foul trouble so we could take control of the game."

Tennessee Head Coach Bruce Pearl**Opening Comments:**

"It was a pretty good day for college basketball this early in the season. It was great environment. Middle (Tennessee) did a great job hosting this event. Their fans were great, our fans were great."

"We've played three games so far and each game was completely different. We played a tougher opponent in a different environment tonight. We took 47 shots, only eight of those were threes and we just grinded it out. This was anybody's ball game. We got the ball into Bobby's (Maze) hands; they couldn't press it out of his hands. He didn't turn it over and then went to the foul line and made 6-of-8 free throws."

"Middle Tennessee is a good team. They turned in over nine times. They turned it over nine times in the first five minutes last year in Knoxville. Coach (Kermit) Davis did a great job of getting them ready. They did a great job of handling pressure and a great job staying in this basketball game. They will be good this year."

How this Middle Tennessee team compares to last season:

"They are a much better ball-handling team and a much better driving team. They took the ball to the basket. I think Kermit likes what they are doing offensively. He tried to do the Memphis thing a year ago and it just wasn't quite right. Now, they are doing a lot of ball screens and mismatches which are difficult offense to cover. It is really effective for the offensive he has."

On Tennessee playing in-state non-power conference schools on the road:

"These games will help us play on the road. You don't go on the road at a Top 20 right off the bat. Teams like this help us down later on during the season. It's good for my basketball team and it's great for basketball in the state of Tennessee. I'm a mid-major guy. I know how much it meant for these fans. There were people here tonight that have probably never seen Middle Tennessee play and they were wearing orange. Those same people wearing orange will come back to Middle Tennessee games wearing blue. They should. That's a good team we played tonight."

On Tennessee's 10 early first half turnovers:

"Middle Tennessee came out with good ball pressure. We didn't handle it well. I changed the starting lineup to settle us down on the road. Bobby (Wade) was not very settled early."

(Nigel) Johnson could really get to the basket and so could (Demetrius) Green. You've got to guard them off the bounce because they can get to the rim. I think them scoring easily on us bothered our guys."

On Middle Tennessee's chances of making the NCAA tournament:

"The Sun Belt does not have a dominant team yet. I don't see the Western Kentucky from last year. Western had a pro. They had the quickest kid out there in Tyrone Brazelton. I think this Middle Tennessee team is going to have a good year. I really like what Kermit is doing. They are going to contend for it for sure."

Tennessee Junior Guard Bobby Maze

On Tennessee's start vs. settling down for the rest of the second half :

"It was a tough environment to play in. They had a nice crowd and were loud. The game is a game of runs. They are going to make runs and we are going to make runs. Coach (Pearl) did a nice job of calling time outs when we needed it. It helped settle us down."

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