Blue Raiders Top Tennessee State, 96-94, For Third Straight Win

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. Middle Tennessee State and Tennessee State renewed their longstanding rivalry for the first time in three years at Murphy Center Sunday and when all was said and done fans are likely hoping the series continues with regularity.

The game wasn't decided until Marcus Morrison hit two clutch free throws with five seconds remaining to give Middle Tennessee a 96-91 lead, and Bruce Price drained a harmless 3-pointer at the buzzer as the Blue Raiders improved to 4-2 with an exciting 96-94 triumph in front of 4,105 at Murphy Center.

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"It was a great college basketball game," Middle Tennessee coach Kermit Davis said. "My hat is off to (Tennessee State coach) Cy Alexander. I've known Cy for a long time and I've always respected what he's done. I knew the moment they hired him where that basketball program would be. They are a good team and we had to play well. We had to make a lot of free throws and I know I wasn't comfortable up 10 or 11 just based on their talent level and their team never quits. It's good to have the game back and I hope we will continue it the rest of the time that we are both at these schools because it's good for the Midstate."

The Blue Raiders won their third straight game while ending Tennessee State's four-game winning streak.

Mike Dean led four Blue Raiders in double figures with a season-high 25 points to go along eight rebounds, which tied his career high, but the storyline belonged to junior post Darrio Scott, who earned his first career start and responded with a 18 points and eight rebounds, both career highs. Michael Cuffee (17 points, five rebounds, three assists, two steals) and Marcus Morrison (16 points, 11 rebounds) also had double-figure scoring games for Middle Tennessee. In fact, Morrison secured his second double double in as many games with a yeoman-like effort off the bench.

Tennessee State carried a 39-36 lead into the half but the Blue Raiders had to feel good about the play they were getting from the bench as Cuffee and point guard Bryan Smithson were whistled for two quick fouls and watched most of the first 20 minutes.

Nonetheless, the Blue Raiders came out strong in the second half and erased the deficit for good when on the second of two successful Dean free throws gave them a 54-53 edge with 13:01 remaining. The Blue Raiders stretched the lead to 11, 81-70, with 3:54 remaining on Smithson's free throws, but the Tigers (4-4) wouldn't wilt and came back behind a barrage of 3-pointers.

Middle Tennessee shot 49 percent from the field, including a sizzling 62 percent (13-of-21) in the second half. The Blue Raiders were also successful at the free-throw line, where they canned 79 percent (35-of-44) charity tosses for the game, including 28-of-32 (88 percent) in the second half.

POSTGAME NOTES

SCOTT ENJOYS CAREER DAY: Middle Tennessee junior forward Darrio Scott earned his first career start against Tennessee State and came up huge for the Blue Raiders in the 96-94 win. Scott poured in a career-high 18 points and also recorded a career high in rebounds with eight. Scott was 7-of-12 from the field, including 2-of-3 from 3-point range. For his efforts, Scott was named the Alexander Automotive Family Player of the Game, as voted on by the working media.

SEASON HIGHS ABOUND: While Darrio Scott produced career highs in points and rebounds against Tennessee State, it was also a game in which several Blue Raiders enjoyed season-best performances. Mike Dean poured in 25 points and eight rebounds, which established a new season high for points and tied his career high for rebounds. Marcus Morrison established a new career high with 11 rebounds. The 96 points by Middle Tennessee team is a season high and the most points scored by the Blue Raiders under Head Coach Kermit Davis.

ANOTHER DOUBLE: After going almost a full calendar year without a double double, Middle Tennessee had a player produce a double double for the second time in as many games against Tennessee State. Junior guard Marcus Morrison came off the bench for the first time this season and provided a big lift with 16 points and 11 rebounds. Morrison also had a double double against Tennessee Wesleyan Thursday night. The St. Petersburg, Fla., native was 4-of-6 from the field against the Tigers, including 8-of-9 from the free-throw line. Middle Tennessee narrowly missed having three players with a double double, as Darrio Scott and Mike Dean were two rebounds shy of accomplishing the feat.

STRONG AT THE LINE: Middle Tennessee entered Sunday's game shooting just 62 percent from the free-throw line but the Blue Raiders were a solid 79.5 percent (34-of-44) from the charity line against Tennessee State, including a sizzling 87.5 percent (28-of-32) in the second half. In fact, Middle Tennessee was 7-of-9 from the line in the final 1:11 to curtail a Tiger comeback. Mike Dean (10-of-12) led the Blue Raiders at the free-throw line, while Marcus Morrison was 8-of-9 and Bryan Smithson was 6-of-8.

DEFENDING THE HOME COURT: Although Tennessee State shot 43.7 percent from the field against Middle Tennessee - the highest percentage an opponent has shot at Murphy Center this season - the Blue Raiders remain strong defensively inside the friendly confines. Through four home games, Middle Tennessee is holding opponents to 34 percent (81-of-236) from the field and has

outrebounded the opposition 190-122, including a sizeable 47-30 edge against Tennessee State Sunday.

BENCH COMES THROUGH AGAIN: Middle Tennessee's play off the bench has been key in the team's four wins this season and it was a strong suit against Tennessee State once again Sunday. The Blue Raiders received 21 points off the bench, marking the fourth time in four games the Middle Tennessee bench has scored 20 or more points.

STATE FOES: With the win over Tennessee state the Blue Raiders improved their record to 8-4 under Kermit Davis against in-state competition, and are now 8-1 at home, including seven straight wins against Tennessee foes at Murphy Center. Middle Tennessee is 4-0 against state schools this season with wins against Lambuth, Belmont, Tennessee Wesleyan and Tennessee State.

INSIDE THE PAINT: Middle Tennessee improved to 4-0 at Murphy Center this season with the win ... The Blue Raiders have now won three straight ... Middle Tennessee improved to 11-0 under Kermit Davis when scoring over 80 points ... Sunday's announced attendance was a season-high 4,105 ... Middle Tennessee improved to 31-16 all-time against Tennessee State.

POSTGAME QUOTES

HEAD COACH KERMIT DAVIS

OPENING REMARKS: "I would first like to say it was a great college basketball game. My hat is off to (Tennessee State coach) Cy Alexander. I've known Cy for a long time and I've always respected what he's done. I knew the moment they hired him where that basketball program would be. They are a good team and we had to play well. We had to make a lot of free throws and I know I wasn't comfortable up 10 or 11 just based on their talent level and their team never quits. It's good to have the game back and I hope we will continue it the rest of the time that we are both at these schools because it's good for the Midstate."

Did it seem like they would never go away? "They just play too hard. (Alexander's) teams never quit. They play extremely hard and they have great inside-outside. They score on the post, they make tough 3-pointers, and they press. They just keep coming at you. I'm really impressed with their balance. I told our guys that one through nine they may be the most talented team we have played, including Rice and a very good Mississippi Valley State team. My hat is off to our guys because I like the way we held our composure and got good play off the bench."

On the play of Darrio Scott. "It was great for Darrio. He has fought so many injuries and about this time last year he was getting himself into great shape and was getting ready to start the Virginia Commonwealth game before he broke his foot. He's been our most active guy in practice. After the Tennessee Wesleyan game, which we didn't play very well, we had a hard, competitive practice and he was by far the toughest guy on our team so we inserted him into the lineup. He was very athletic and physical."

JR DARRIO SCOTT

When did you find out you were going to make the start? "Coach (Davis) says whoever brings it in practice is who he's going to start and I've been trying to bring it in practice the past couple of weeks. How I practice is how I play."

Talk about your shooting performance and the career high 18 points. "I'm not shy when it comes to shooting but that's how I've been practicing and it showed up in the game."

SR MIKE DEAN

What did coach Davis say at halftime (when you were trailing 39-36) because it seemed like you came out with more energy in the second half? "He said what he says every game, that the first five minutes is important, and we were down three so we needed to come out hard and make a jump on them."

Did it seem like they would ever cool off from the 3-point line? "It happens. The 3-point line is such that the game is never over and when a team or guys get hot out there anything can happen."

You got to the free-throw line a lot. Was that a focus for you? "It has been a focus coming into this year because coach Davis wants me to be more aggressive in the paint this year and that's what I'm trying to do."

SR MICHAEL CUFFEE

Is this a confidence builder considering Tennessee State had won four straight? "I would say it is because it was a big game. They have a lot of good athletes and they weren't going to back down. This was a rivalry game and they gave us their best shot."

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