

Blue Raiders Suffer Tough-Luck Loss To Auburn In San Juan

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SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico -

Missed opportunities cost Middle Tennessee a chance to upset SEC-foe Auburn in the San Juan Shootout as the Blue Raiders suffered a tough 79-74 setback at Angulo Coliseum Tuesday. The Blue Raiders (6-3) trailed 75-72 in the final minute but Darrio Scott scored a layup out of a timeout and was fouled with 34 seconds remaining but his free-throw attempt was off the mark. Middle Tennessee still had a chance to force overtime after Auburn's Toney Douglas canned a pair of charity tosses to put the Tigers on top 77-74 with 26 seconds remaining, but the Blue

Raiders turned the ball over with 16 seconds remaining to account for the final margin. Free throws ultimately were the difference in the game as Auburn (7-3) knocked down 19 of their 24 attempts (79 percent), while Middle Tennessee misfired on 17 of its 27 tries from the charity stripe. All five Middle Tennessee starters were in double figures, including a team-high 17 points from senior center Steve Thomas in his second game since becoming eligible after transferring from Georgia. Mike Dean finished with 14 points and Michael Cuffee continued his strong season with his second double double of the season - 12 points and a game-high 13 rebounds. Marcus Morrison and Bryan Smithson each tallied 10 points for the Blue Raiders. "This loss is disappointing and frustrating because we know we had every chance to win the game," Cuffee said. "We just didn't execute and we made too many mistakes to beat a good team." The game featured seven lead changes and was tied five times. Middle Tennessee jumped out to a 21-10 lead on Thomas' second of two successful free throws with 9:58 remaining in the first half but Auburn battled back and carried a 37-35 lead into the half. The second half was back-and-forth with Auburn maintaining a slight advantage until Middle Tennessee seized a 61-60 edge on Morrison's dunk with 8:35 remaining and then stretched the advantage to 63-60 when Cuffee knocked down a jumper at the 7:47 mark. Middle Tennessee maintained the lead until Auburn went ahead 67-66 with 4:43 to play and eventually stretched the advantage to six, 73-67, with 2:59 remaining; however, the Blue Raiders wouldn't wilt and battled back to make it a one possession game inside the final two minutes. Auburn made just one field goal

in the final 4:43, but the Tigers converted on 10-of-11 free throws down the stretch to maintain their slight advantage. Douglas' 18 points led Auburn, while Ian Young and Daniel Hayles each tallied 17.

NOTES: The loss ended Middle Tennessee's five-game winning streak ... The Blue Raider bench has been a strong suit in the early season but the reserves combined for just 11 points against Auburn, which is a season low ... Thomas was a big presence inside for Middle Tennessee with 17 points and five rebounds, both career highs, in 26 minutes of play before fouling out ...Dean moved into a tie for 10th on the career 3-pointer list at Middle Tennessee with 80, joining Ali McGhee (1998-99). He is four shy of the No. 9 spot and seven away from No. 8 on the career lists ... Cuffee finished with a double double, his second of the season, with 12 points and 13 rebounds. The 13 rebounds tied him for No. 15 on the single-season list. He had 14 rebounds against Tennessee Wesleyan earlier this season, which is 14th on the single-game list.

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