Blue Raiders Suffer Second-Half Letdown In 81-62 Loss At Villanova

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PHILADELPHIA, Pa. - Middle Tennessee put forth a valiant first-half effort against Big East foe Villanova here Monday night but the second half belonged to the Wildcats, who broke open a close game and dealt the Blue Raiders an 81-62 setback in front of 6,500 at The Pavilion. The Blue Raiders (7-4) trailed 39-37 at intermission but they managed just one field goal in the first 8:05 of the second half as Villanova (6-1) opened a 53-39 advantage to take full control of the game. Michael Cuffee, a Philadelphia, Pa., native, led Middle Tennessee with 17 points and pulled down six rebounds, while Mike Dean finished with 15 players and Steve Thomas netted 10 points. "We gave ourselves a chance in the first half but we couldn't sustain it in the second half," Cuffee said. "We went through a long scoring drought and we didn't defend very well during that stretch and that's not a good combination against any team, especially one as good as Villanova. It's disappointing." Villanova was led by Curtis Sumpter, who led all scorers with 26 points on 10-of-13 shooting in 31 minutes of action. He dominated the game in the second half and was the biggest difference maker on the court. The Blue Raiders jumped out to a 13-4 lead less than seven minutes into the game but Villanova stormed back and erased the Middle Tennessee advantage on Randy Foye's 3-pointer that gave his its first lead, 14-13, with 11:14 remaining in the half. The Wildcats stretched the advantage to 32-22 with 6:06 remaining before Middle Tennessee regained its composure and pulled to within 39-37 on Cuffee's buzzer-beater at the intermission. That was as close as Middle Tennessee would get; however, as Villanova opened the second half on a 14-2 run to take the wind out of the upset-minded Blue Raiders' sails. Villanova shot a blistering 53.4 percent (31-of-58) from the field for the game, including a 50 percent-clip (8-of-16) from 3-point range. It marked the first time in 11 games an opponent has shot better than 50 percent against Middle Tennessee's defense, which entered the game ranked No. 15 nationally in field goal percentage defense. While the Wildcats couldn't seem to miss, Middle Tennessee couldn't find the mark in the second half. The Blue Raiders managed just seven field goals in the final 20 minutes and shot 35 percent (7-of-20) in the half and

42.6 percent (20-of-47) for the game. **NOTES:** Michael Cuffee tied his season high with 17 points against Villanova. He also tallied 17 points against Tennessee State. The senior guard/forward has scored in double figures in 16 straight games dating to last season ... Junior point guard Fats Cuyler played a career-high 38 minutes and dished out a career-high eight assists against just two turnovers ... The 19-point setback marked the largest margin of defeat for Middle Tennessee since suffering an 89-54 loss at Cincinnati (12/20/03).

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