

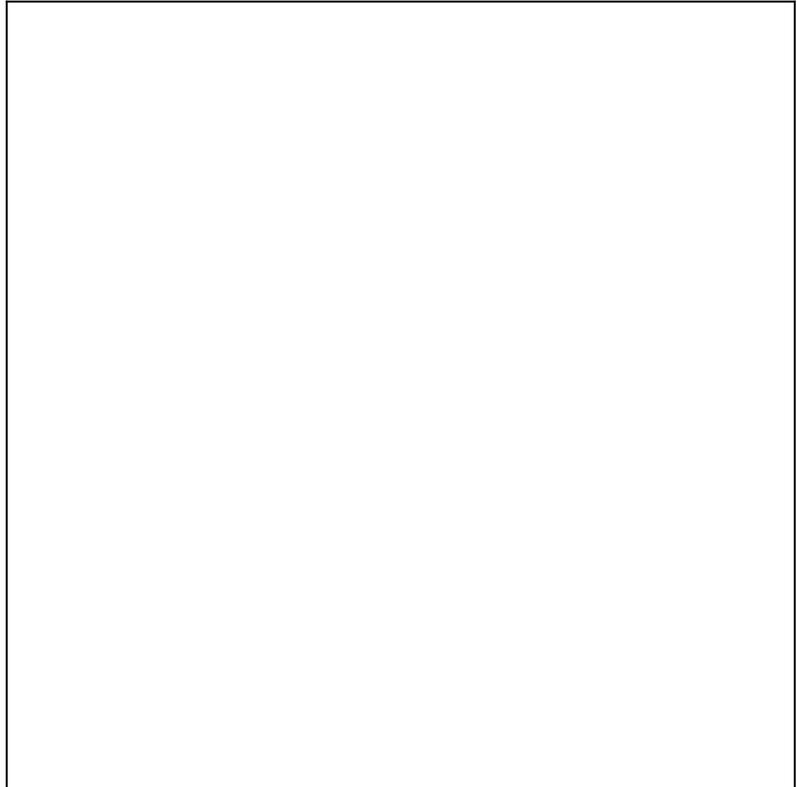
Blue Raiders Increase Home Win Streak To Nine With 59-55 Triumph Against VCU

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. -

Middle Tennessee showed tremendous poise down the stretch and, as a result, was able to ring in the New Year in style as the Blue Raiders turned back Virginia Commonwealth, 59-55, in front of 2,702 at Murphy Center Sunday afternoon.

The Blue Raiders (9-4) entered the game winless in their last five games played after the start of a new calendar year but clutch performances from a host of players enabled Middle Tennessee to end the skid and improve their home winning streak to nine.



Steve Thomas was huge in his Murphy Center debut as he collected his first career double double at Middle Tennessee with 15 points and 10 rebounds, both team highs, while teammate Mike Dean finished with 11 points and five assists. Michael Cuffee and Alex Weekes each contributed seven points.

Virginia Commonwealth (4-6) had battled back from a nine-point first-half deficit to take a 51-47 lead with 7:26 remaining, but Thomas nailed a jumper in the paint to get Middle Tennessee back to within two, 51-49. Then, out of a timeout, point guard Fats Cuyler connected with Weekes on a perfectly-designed back-door lob that Weekes went high above the rim and jammed to tie the game, 51-51, and bring the crowd to its feet with 6:08 remaining.

Dean came back with a long-range jumper to give Middle Tennessee a 53-51 advantage but VCU tied the game for the sixth time on Derrick Reid's jumper; however, the Blue Raider defense buckled down and allowed just one field goal the remainder of the way, while Middle Tennessee converted four free throws down the stretch to seal the win.

Middle Tennessee allowed just two field goals in the final seven minutes to earn its ninth win. The play of Middle Tennessee's post was crucial in the victory. The Blue Raiders won the rebounding

battle 44-21, including 19 offensive boards. Three different Blue Raiders had as many as seven rebounds, led by Thomas' 10. Marcus Morrison finished with eight boards and Weekes tallied a season-high seven.

"It is obvious to everybody how good Virginia Commonwealth is," Middle Tennessee coach Kermit Davis said. "I don't know if there is any other 4-6 team in the country that has done what they have done. They have had some quality losses on the road. They had Ole Miss beat the other night. I thought the biggest statistic was 44-21 on the boards. We didn't take advantage of our offensive rebounding opportunities in the first half. I thought we exemplified a lot of toughness. To do that to that team is outstanding."

The Blue Raiders jumped out to a fast start and grabbed early leads of 11-2 and 15-5 before a scoreless drought allowed VCU to claw its way back into the game. Middle Tennessee led 17-8 with 8:14 remaining in the first half but it managed just two field goals during a four-minute span as Virginia Commonwealth pulled to within 21-20. Middle Tennessee carried a 30-29 lead into the intermission - a good sign considering the Blue Raiders entered the game 34-4 all-time under Davis when owning the halftime lead.

Middle Tennessee returns to action Wednesday when it hits the road to play IP-Fort Wayne. Tipoff is 7 p.m.

NOTES: HOME SWEET HOME: Middle Tennessee increased its home win streak to nine against Virginia Commonwealth, dating to last season. It is the longest home winning streak since the 1997-98 season when the Blue Raiders also strung together nine straight wins.

RINGING IN THE NEW YEAR: The Blue Raiders snapped a five-game losing streak in the first game played in a new calendar year with the triumph against the Rams.

NO DOUBTING THOMAS: Senior forward Steve Thomas was named the Alexander Automotive Family Player of the Game for his efforts against Virginia Commonwealth. Thomas, playing in his sixth game as a Blue Raider, collected his first double double at Middle Tennessee with 15 points and 10 rebounds, both team highs.

GETTING THERE FAST: Middle Tennessee's nine wins on Jan. 2, 2005, represent the fastest the team has reached as many victories this early in a season since the 1990-91 season when the Blue Raiders won their ninth game on Dec. 29, 1990.

DEAN PLAYING UNSELFISHLY: Senior guard Mike Dean is known for his scoring prowess but the Rome, Ga., native has been making a habit of getting his teammates more involved in recent games. Dean dished out a team-high five assists in the win against VCU and has now led the squad in that category in four of the previous five games.

DEAN MAKES MOVE: Mike Dean moved into a tie for No. 8 on the all-time 3-point goals made list with two treys against VCU. Dean now has 87 career 3-pointers and is tied with Torrey Moore (1995-97) Tim Gaither is No. 7 on the career list with 101 (1993-96).

"KERMIT DAVIS LIVE": "Kermit Davis Live," the weekly radio call-in show with Blue Raider Head Coach Kermit Davis, begins Monday night. The show takes place at Corky's Barbecue in Murfreesboro from 7-8 p.m., and can be heard on WBOZ 104.9 FM and WMOT 89.5 FM. The first of

nine Kermit Davis Television Shows begins Monday and will air three times weekly. The show will air on Monday at 7 p.m., on CSN, Channel 49, Wednesday at 6:30 p.m., on CSS and Saturday at 10:30 a.m., on ESPN2.

FAST BREAKS: Michael Cuffee's consecutive streak of games scoring in double figures ended at 17 when he finished with seven against VCU ... Middle Tennessee improved to 3-1 all-time against VCU and is 2-0 against teams from the Colonial Athletic Association, including a 73-69 overtime win against Delaware in the San Juan Shootout ... Middle Tennessee improved to 35-4 under Kermit Davis when leading at the half ... The Blue Raiders are a sparkling 25-8 (76 percent) under Davis at Murphy Center.

QUOTES:

MT Center Steve Thomas

"It feels good to play at home. It was great seeing all of the blue and white shirts in the stands. It was a great crowd, and we have great fans."

MT Head Coach Kermit Davis

"It is obvious to everybody how good Virginia Commonwealth is. I don't know if there is any other 4-6 team in the country that has done what they have done. They have had some quality losses on the road. They had Ole Miss beat the other night. I thought the biggest statistic was 44-21 on the boards. We didn't take advantage of our offensive rebounding opportunities in the first half. I thought we exemplified a lot of toughness. To do that to that team is outstanding."

"We had some silly turnovers, just some missed passes and catches. I thought down the stretch we did execute and defend better. I thought we had some experience on the floor tonight that helped us."

VCU Head Coach Jeff Capel

"[MT] has more depth than they did last year. When we played them last year I thought they were a very good basketball team. They had a lot of guys returning from last year. With Steve Thomas being eligible, they have more bodies. They are a good team. They play hard. They defend and play with a lot of energy. They really, really execute their stuff. They are a good team."

We try to pride ourselves on being a good defensive team. I'm not going to say it was because of our defense tonight. We try to make things happen when we play. We try to make things difficult for our opponent. But, [MT] does a really good job of executing their offense. Those guys cut. They understand how to move without the basketball. They do a really good job of screening, and they have a purpose of what they are doing."

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