

Blue Raiders Open SBC Play With 85-50 Win Against UALR

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee opened the Sun Belt portion of its schedule in resounding fashion as it thumped Arkansas-Little Rock, 85-50, for its fourth straight win in front of 3,910 at Murphy Center Monday night. The Blue Raiders (11-4, 1-0) dominated the game from the opening tip and led 45-14 at the half on the strength of 68 percent (19-of-28) shooting from the field, including a sizzling 60 percent (6-of-10) from 3-point range. "This was a game where I don't think I've had a team play a better 20 minutes of basketball," Middle Tennessee coach Kermit Davis said. "This was just one of those games where everything went right. All the things we did in the first 20 minutes were just sensational. It's a good way to start league play. We have so much respect for Arkansas-Little Rock and we know how tough



it is to beat that team." Middle Tennessee had lost its previous five games to Arkansas-Little Rock, the defending Sun Belt East champs, and was 0-4 against the Trojans under Davis, but that trend changed in Monday night's opener as the Blue Raiders improved to 3-0 in conference openers under Davis. The 35-point margin of victory was Middle Tennessee's largest as a member of the Sun Belt. "We faced a better-prepared team and a hungrier team," Arkansas-Little Rock coach Steve Shields said. "You have to give credit to Kermit and Middle Tennessee. They took us out of everything we wanted to do. You have to give them credit for making the extra passes to get open shots, for being very intense and being a very disciplined basketball team." Middle Tennessee, which increased its home winning streak to 10 games, had four players in double figures, led by Mike Dean's 19-point

performance. Marcus Morrison continued his stellar play off the bench with 17 points, Michael Cuffee finished with 16 points, four assists and four rebounds, Steve Thomas finished with 10 points and seven rebounds, while Fats Cuyler tallied eight points and three steals. Bryan Smithson also continued his solid play with six assists. "I thought all five starters played very well and we continued to get solid bench play," Davis said. "Marcus Morrison was solid off the bench, Kyle Young only had two points but I really thought he defended well and (Smithson) was strong. You forget he didn't start because he just goes in and runs the team very well." Arkansas-Little Rock (9-5, 1-1) was within 9-7 with 13:45 remaining in the first half when Middle Tennessee went on a 20-2 run to take a 29-9 lead with 7:38 remaining. The run continued into the half as Middle Tennessee rang up 45 points and limited the Trojans to just 14, the fewest points allowed in one half under Davis. Dean, who had 15 first-half points, single-handedly outscored the Trojans in the first 20 minutes. The Blue Raiders didn't let up in the second half as they opened the period with an 8-2 run and eventually build a 60-20 lead with 14:36 remaining. "We didn't want to let up," Dean said. "We wanted to come out and play with the same intensity in the second half because Arkansas-Little Rock is a very good basketball team and you knew they weren't going to quit. It was a well-played game and one we really needed to start conference play." Middle Tennessee finished the game shooting 56.9 percent (29-of-51) from the field, a season-high, and also connected on season-high 85 percent from the free-throw line (17-of-20). The 43.5 percent (10-of-23) from 3-point range was the second-highest for the team this season. The Blue Raiders also won the rebounding battle, 33-22. The Blue Raiders return to action when they travel to Jonesboro, Ark., to play Arkansas State Thursday at 7 p.m.

NOTES: DEAN FASTEST TO 90: Senior Mike Dean became the fastest player in Middle Tennessee history to hit 90 three-pointers when he connected on his first of three Monday night against UALR. Dean, who has hit at least one three-pointer in all 37 career games he has played at MT, now has 92 three-pointers in his two years with the Blue Raiders. The Rome, Ga., native now needs 10 more treys to take over seventh place on the all-time list from Tim Gaither (101).

CONFERENCE OPENERS: For the third year in a row, Middle Tennessee opened Sun Belt Conference play with a victory. Under Kermit Davis, the Blue Raiders are a perfect 3-0 in SBC openers and 3-2 all-time. **BIG VICTORY:** Middle Tennessee's win over Arkansas-Little Rock marked the largest margin of victory for the Blue Raiders in Sun Belt Conference play. MT defeated the Trojans by 35 total points to best the previous mark of 34 points established against North Texas on Jan. 6, 2001 in the Murphy Center. It also ranks as the largest margin of victory in conference play since the Blue Raiders downed Morehead State in OVC action by 40 points on Jan. 23, 1989 at the Murphy Center. **PERFECT IN '05:** With tonight's conference opening victory, Middle Tennessee remained perfect in 2005. Since the New Year turned, the Blue Raiders are 3-0 with close wins over VCU and IP-Fort Wayne to go along with tonight's victory. The Blue Raiders have not started a new year 3-0 since the 1995-96 team went 3-0 and a team has not gone 4-0 since the 1986-87 squad went 7-0. **MORRISON SHINING OFF THE BENCH:** Junior Marcus Morrison continued his stellar play off the bench on Monday night to key the Blue Raiders' Sun Belt Conference victory over UALR. Morrison added 17 points, three boards, and two steals in 20 minutes to move the Blue Raiders' mark to 6-0 this season when he comes off the bench. In the six games, Morrison is averaging 11.7 points, 6.7 rebounds, and is shooting a sizzling 60.0 percent from the field (24-40) and 82.6 percent from the charity stripe (19-23). **TOUGH AT HOME:** Middle Tennessee ran its streak of consecutive victories at the Murphy Center to 10 games with the win over UALR. The Blue Raiders are a perfect 7-0 this season and 26-8 overall under Kermit Davis at the "Glass House". It's the longest streak since the 1988-89 team won 14 in a row at home. **BENCH PLAYS WELL ... AGAIN:** Middle Tennessee outscored the opponent's bench tonight for the 10th time this season and is now 9-1 in those games. The Blue Raiders had 30 points from their reserves tonight, while UALR totaled 24

points. MT is now 8-0 when its bench tallies 20 or more points. Marcus Morrison and Alex Weekes combined for 25 of the 30 points in the win over UALR. **PLAYER OF THE GAME:** Members of the working media voted Mike Dean the Alexander Automotive Family Player of the Game. Dean finished with a game-high 19 points on 6-for-10 shooting. **THOMAS LIKES THE 'MURPH':** Transfer Steve Thomas is playing his only season for the Blue Raiders, but already he has found the home court at the Murphy Center to his liking. In two games at the "Glass House", Thomas is averaging 12.5 points and 8.5 rebounds compared to 9.2 points and 4.8 boards away from home. The senior is also shooting 64.3 percent at home (9-14) from the field, while connecting on a 44.2 percent clip on the road (19-43). **INSIDE THE PAINT:** The 14 first half points Middle Tennessee held UALR to went down as the fewest points allowed in a half in the Kermit Davis era (the previous low was 16 points against Alabama State last season) ... The Blue Raiders shot a sizzling 67.9 percent from the field in the first half which went down as the best shooting effort in a half in the Kermit Davis era (school record for a half is 83.3 percent set against Akron on Feb. 4, 1982) ... In the first half of tonight's game, MT made 19 field goals while UALR attempted only 19 field goals ... Tonight's win was the 11th of the season for the 2004-05 squad making them the quickest to 11 victories in the program's 91-year history ... The victory over UALR marked the first for the Blue Raiders in five tries under Kermit Davis ... The Blue Raiders are now allowing just 57.1 points per game at home in seven contests and only one team has topped the 55-point mark (Tennessee State with 94) ... MT is now a perfect 8-0 under Davis when scoring 80 or more points ... Fats Cuyler matched his career-high with three steals ... The Blue Raiders shot 56.9 percent from the field against UALR, which was their best mark of the season and the top effort since hitting on 58.5 percent of their shots against Louisiana-Lafayette in the final game of the 2003-04 season.

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