Middle Tennessee Sits Atop SBC East Following 70-68 Win At Arkansas State

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JONESBORO, Ark. - Michael Cuffee and Fats Cuyler turned in career nights as Middle Tennessee turned back Arkansas State, 70-68, in front of 4,248 fans at the Convocation Center Thursday night.

Cuffee recorded his third double double of the season with a career-high 24 points and 10 rebounds, and Cuyler established career highs in points (17) and 3-point field goals made (five) to lead the Blue Raiders (12-4, 2-0) to their fifth straight win and their third straight road win.

While Cuffee and Cuyler were putting together one of the best nights of their collegiate careers, Marcus Morrison continued to do what he has done so well in the past five games - provide a tremendous spark off the bench. Morrison delivered his third double double as a Blue Raider with 10 points and 11 rebounds and two of the feats have come as a reserve.

Middle Tennessee matched its season long winning streak at five and beat the Indians (9-6, 2-1) for the fifth straight time under third-year Head Coach Kermit Davis. The three-game road winning streak is the longest for the Blue Raiders since the 1997-98 season and enabled them to move into sole possession of first place in the SBC East for the first time as a league member.

The Blue Raiders ended Arkansas State's nine-game home winning streak by becoming the first team to win in Jonesboro since Middle Tennessee won, 70-69, here last season. In fact, Arkansas State has won 13 of its last 15 at home with both losses to Middle Tennessee.

"This is the best Arkansas State team we have played since I've been at Middle Tennessee," Davis said. "They were very good defensively and we felt like we would get their best shot, and I believe we did. We played very hard, too. It was a great game and it's a big win for our basketball team."

In addition to the three double-figure scoring games produced by Cuffee, Cuyler and Morrison,

Middle Tennessee received nine points from Mike Dean, who failed to hit a 3-pointer for the first time in his Blue Raider career. Dean also failed to score double figures for the first time this season, but Cuyler picked up the slack in the first half and Cuffee dominated in the second half.

Cuyler scored all 17 of his points in the first half to carry the Blue Raiders offensively and Cuffee picked up where Cuyler left off in the second half. Cuyler was 5-of-7 from 3-point range in the first half.

Cuffee took over in the second half when he scored 18 of his 24 points and was 7-of-10 from the field. The senior swingman scored 13 straight points during a 5:16 span in the second half as Middle Tennessee turned a 37-36 deficit into a 47-41 advantage.

"Fats kept us in the game in the first half when no one else was getting much done and then my teammates started getting me involved in the second half," Cuffee said. "It was really just a matter of being in the right place at the right time. This was a big win for us because Arkansas State is a very good team and they have been playing well at home. It took a great game for us to win here tonight and we knew it would."

Arkansas State (9-6, 2-1) led 33-32 at the half and maintained the advantage early in the second half before Middle Tennessee used a 15-5 run to go on top 53-43 with 9:32 remaining. The Indians, the Sun Belt's highest-scoring team, scored just 10 points in the first 11:18 of the second half as Middle Tennessee built a double-digit lead.

Sophomore guard Bryan Smithson continued his strong play of late with four assists and was near flawless running the team as it built its lead, while fellow teammate Alex Weekes was strong inside and collected clutch rebounds as senior Steve Thomas, who finished with seven boards, was in foul trouble.

Middle Tennessee led by a dozen, 61-49, with 5:40 remaining and maintained control until Arkansas State's Dewarick Spencer scored 13 of his 21 minutes in the final four minutes to rally the Indians. Arkansas State narrowed the deficit to 69-68 with eight seconds remaining, but Cuffee made the first of two free throws with 2.8 seconds remaining and missed the second before time ran out on the Arkansas State comeback bid.

NOTES: Middle Tennessee improved to 5-0 against Arkansas State under third-year Head Coach Kermit Davis ... Michael Cuffee (24 points and 10 rebounds) and Marcus Morrison (10 points and 11 rebounds) each had double doubles in the same game for the second time this season ... Middle Tennessee has won three straight road games for the first time since the 1997-98 season ... The Blue Raiders are 2-0 to start SBC play for the second time in three seasons under Davis and are in sole possession of the East Division lead for the first time since becoming a Sun Belt member in 2000-01 ... The win was Middle Tennessee's 12th SBC road win under Davis in two-plus seasons, which is tied with Louisiana-Lafayette for the most conference road wins since the start of the 2002-03 season ... With its win at Arkansas State, Middle Tennessee now has 22 league wins under Davis, which is second most in the SBC since the start of the 2002-03 season ... The Blue Raiders improved to 39-6 under Davis when leading with five minutes remaining, including an 11-1 mark this season ... Middle Tennessee is now 4-0 in 2005, marking the first time the Blue Raiders have started 4-0 at the start of a new year since the 1986-87 squad went 7-0.

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