

Middle Tennessee Suffers Rare Home Setback To South Alabama

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. -

Middle Tennessee's strong second-half rally came up short against visiting South Alabama as the Blue Raiders suffered a 59-56 setback in front of 4,220 at Murphy Center Thursday night.

The Blue Raiders, who trailed 46-30 with 16:24 remaining, had a chance to force overtime in the final 26 seconds but they couldn't get a good look and Mike Dean's 3-pointer with time running out was off the mark. Middle Tennessee suffered its first home loss in 11 games and dropped to 12-6 overall and 2-2 in Sun Belt Conference play, while South Alabama improved to 5-11, 2-3 in league action.

Dean led Middle Tennessee with a game-high 19 points, while Kyle Young and Steve Thomas each had eight points. Senior guard Michael Cuffee was held to a season-low six points.

Stephen Cowherd, Daniel Northern and Mario Jointer each tallied 13 to lead a balanced South Alabama attack.

The Blue Raiders' furious rally saw them tie the game, 56-56, on Thomas' jumper with 2:57 remaining, but Northern came right back with a driving layup to give his team the lead for good, 58-56, with 2:22 remaining. Middle Tennessee's defense didn't allow another field goal but it couldn't muster a score on the offensive end, missing three straight shots before Cowherd made one-of-two free throws with 1:38 remaining to put the Jaguars on top 59-56.

Dean missed two treys in the next Blue Raider sequence but the defense held and gave Middle Tennessee one final chance to send the game into overtime. The Blue Raiders took possession with 26 seconds remaining after Cowherd's jumper at the end of the shot clock was errant but South Alabama's defense was up to the challenge and denied the Blue Raiders a good look within their offense.

Middle Tennessee got off to a woeful start and never totally recovered after falling behind 14-2 five minutes into the game. Bryan Smithson keyed a five-point play when he scored a pair of technical free throws and then buried a 3-pointer on the ensuing possession to cut the deficit to 24-20 with 5:17 remaining, but South Alabama answered with a 11-4 run to regain momentum.

Young was Middle Tennessee's only bright spot in the first half, connecting on 4-of-5 field goals for eight points. Young's four first-half field goals were as many as the team's five starters had combined in the first 20 minutes as the Blue Raiders shot just 37.5 percent (9-of-24) in the opening half.

South Alabama stretched its lead to 16 early in the second half before Middle Tennessee put together a strong run in the final 15 minutes; however, they were never able to sustain runs or get over the hump because of the early deficit.

The Blue Raiders return to action when they play host to New Orleans Saturday at 7 p.m.

POSTGAME NOTES:

INAUGURATION DAY: Tonight's game marked just the fourth time Middle Tennessee has played basketball on the day of the Presidential Inauguration. With tonight's loss, the Blue Raiders are now 1-3 on Inauguration day and all three losses have come when a Republican was being sworn in to office.

YOUNG PLAYS BIG OFF BENCH: Sophomore Kyle Young came off the bench tonight for just the fourth time this season and gave the Blue Raiders a huge spark. In 22 minutes of action, Young made 5 of 7 shots from the field for 10 points to go along with a season-high eight rebounds. The Lewisburg, Tenn., native also equaled his personal-best with two steals. In his previous six games combined, Young had just 10 points and nine rebounds.

SHOOTING WOES HURTING MT: The Blue Raiders have lost two games in a row for just the second time this season and a common denominator has been poor shooting. In the losses to UALR and tonight against South Alabama, Middle Tennessee is shooting a combined 34.7 percent from the field (41-118).

STREAK SNAPPED: Middle Tennessee saw its home winning streak snapped at 10 games with the loss to South Alabama. MT was a perfect 7-0 this season at the Murphy Center before the setback to the Jaguars, and is now 26-9 all-time in the Glass House under Kermit Davis.

DEAN STRUGGLING: Leading scorer Mike Dean, who has suffered with nagging injuries this season, continues to struggle with his shot. Over his last three games, Dean has made just 11 of 43 shots from the field (25.5 %) and is only 3-for-16 from behind the arc. In the loss to USA, Dean led the Blue Raiders with 19 points, but connected on only 6 of 15 shots from the field.

PLAYER OF THE GAME: Members of the working media voted Kyle Young the Alexander Automotive Family Player of the Game. Young finished with 10 points, eight boards, and two steals off the bench in 22 minutes.

INSIDE THE PAINT: Middle Tennessee's starting five totaled just 35 points with Marcus Morrison and Fats Cuyler both going scoreless ... Michael Cuffee was held to just six points in the loss to USA, which was his fewest in a game since tallying only two points against Wyoming on Jan. 8,

2004 - a span of 34 games ... Tonight's loss was just the second of the season for the Blue Raiders when the MT bench outscores the opponents bench ... The 56 points scored tonight against USA was the lowest this season for MT.

POSTGAME QUOTES

MIDDLE TENNESSEE HEAD COACH KERMIT DAVIS:

Opening comment:

"I thought South Alabama really had a nice plan. They were trying to take time off the clock. I thought they played with a lot of discipline tonight and some toughness. I think that's as poorly as I've had a team compete here in 2-1/2 years in the first 25 minutes. Take nothing away from South Alabama. I thought they were more physical and played with some toughness but that was embarrassing, the way we started the game with no emotion and no energy. I thought the last 15 minutes of the game we competed hard. I would have loved to win the game but the team that was best prepared and most physical won the game."

On not being able to get over the hump and sustain runs:

"When you are not emotionally ready and prepared to play with a high-energy level you can't sustain it for long periods of time. We couldn't do it. We got it to 24-20 and they took it right back to 12. We started the first half poorly. We started the second half poorly and then about the last 15 minutes we played with a high intensity level but it was too late. We have to be better than that. We had our worst practice of the year on Monday and it showed up today."

Seemed like you couldn't find that one guy to make any combination work because of foul trouble:

"Marcus Morrison, it was embarrassing to watch him play tonight. He didn't compete, couldn't guard anyone, wouldn't rebound the ball and that's why we had to play (Michael) Cuffee mainly at the '3,' because when Fats (Cuyler) fouled out we weren't going to put him back in the game. We just have to get better and more consistent point guard play. Some of the turnovers we had in the open floor are just mind-boggling. We have to be better at that spot, playmaking, and we have a lot of work to do before we play New Orleans."

Did the team overlook South Alabama?:

"I know one thing, I won't sleep tonight but I know I can lay my head on the pillow knowing I did everything in my power, as a staff, to prepare our team because I knew what kind of shot we would get from South Alabama. I know that our staff did that. It's just typified in Daniel Northern, he's a good player but he's a freshman and we have a fifth-year senior in Steve Thomas and a third-year guy in Kyle Young double teaming him and he splits our double team and dunks in the goal. We tie it up and we have (Thomas) on Northern and he drives it right by him, lays it up and South Alabama goes back up two. Steve Thomas has to be better. His fatigue is not very good, he's not finishing balls. He has to be more productive."

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