Showdown of SBC leaders decided at free-throw line

Blue Raiders outscored by 17 at charity stripe in 70-65 setback at UALR

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LITTLE ROCK, Ark. - UALR took advantage of charity to secure a 70-65 win against Middle Tennessee in a showdown of Sun Belt Conference leaders in front of 4,814 at Jack Stephens Center here Saturday night. The Trojans (13-5, 6-1) scored 41 percent of their 70 points at the free-throw line, where they were 29-of-34 for the game and 25-of-28 in the second half alone, to curtail the Blue Raiders in a game that was nip-and-tuck throughout. Middle Tennessee dropped its second consecutive league game on the tough two-game swing through WKU and UALR, dropping the two games by a combined five points. The Blue Raiders never shot a one-and-one in Bowling Green, Ky., and did not reach the bonus until late in the second half at UALR. They were outscored 34-14 at the free-throw line at UALR and had three players (Desmond Yates, Nigel Johnson and Montarrio Haddock) foul out. "That's the glaring stat in this game," said Middle Tennessee Head Coach Kermit Davis, referring to the discrepancy at the free-throw line. "I thought we played pretty good defense in the second half and held them to just six field goals, which is a good number, but they were able to get to the line and, to their credit, did a good job knocking them down." Yates led Middle Tennessee

(11-7, 5-2) with 17 points on 7-of-12 shooting and Kevin Kanaskie contributed 14 points in the setback. Haddock contributed nine points and collected a game-high seven rebounds, while Nigel Johnson added eight points and Calvin O'Neil seven. It wasn't enough to overcome the decisive edge UALR enjoyed at the free-throw line. Officials Andrew Walton, Gary Vaughn and Johnny Pearson called Middle Tennessee for 22 personal fouls. UALR was whistled for just 14 infractions but the glaring stat was the 34 free throws the Trojans attempted to the 14 the Blue Raiders were able to get. Of those 14, six were on two plays when Kanaskie was able to draw fouls on 3-point field goal attempts and a seventh was courtesy of UALR putting the Blue Raiders on the line intentionally with two seconds remaining.. With less than eight minutes remaining in the game UALR had attempted 16 second-half free-throw attempts to Middle Tennessee's two. Despite it all, Middle Tennessee found a way to stay in the game and still had an opportunity to escape with what would have been a crucial road win. The Blue Raiders held UALR to six second-half field goals and just two in the final 10 minutes; however, the Trojans scored 20 points at the free-throw line in the game's final 10 minutes. It was a difficult loss for the Blue Raiders to absorb after hitting more field goals (23 to 19), more 3-pointers (7 to 3), and winning the rebound battle (34 to 27), but UALR's extremely disciplined defense was able to seemingly play without fouling considering they were called for just one foul in the first 16 minutes of the second half. When Middle Tennessee was able to get to the line it had great results. The Blue Raiders were 12-of-14 at the line for 86 percent but UALR shot 85 percent and had 20 more attempts. They were 4-of-6 in the first half and 25 of 28 in the second half. Middle Tennessee trailed 33-28 at the half but they battled back and took a 48-46 lead on Haddock's three-point play with 9:22 remaining but UALR answered with a 7-0 run despite just one field goal over the next four minutes. Kanaskie's 3-pointer cut the lead to 53-51 with 6:01 remaining. The Blue Raiders had another charge in them and Yates' three-point play cut the lead to 55-54 with 3:50 remaining. Four free throws later UALR had jumped back in front 59-54 but O'Neil's clutch 3-pointer narrowed the gap to 62-61 with 1:29 remaining. The Blue Raiders were called for another foul and John Fowler scored both free throws to extend the lead to 64-61 with 1:19 remaining. O'Neil came up big once again with a driving layup to cut the lead to 64-63 with 50 seconds remaining. Middle Tennessee put together another strong defensive sequence with the game on the line but it was called for another foul with three seconds on the shot clock and Lionel Foster hit both free throws with 18 seconds remaining to extend the lead back to three, 66-63. Nigel Johnson scored on a short jumper with nine seconds remaining to narrow the gap to 66-65 but Shane Edwards followed with two free throws and UALR fouled O'Neil after he reached midcourt with two seconds remaining to put him at the line for a one-and-one, down three. O'Neil missed the first and UALR grabbed the rebound and hit two insurance freebies with four-tenths of a second remaining to seal the win. Middle Tennessee will return home to play host to Arkansas State Thursday at 7 p.m. **NOTES:** Kevin Kanaskie moved past Chris Harris (1,070) into 23rd on the all-time scoring list at Middle Tennessee with 14 points vs. UALR. Kanaskie now has 1,078 points and is 12 shy of 22nd ... Kanaskie dished out four assists vs. UALR to move into second on the all-time assists list at Middle Tennessee with 454, passing Duane Washington (452). He is nine shy of Gerald Harris' all-time mark of 463 ... Kanaskie also moved into third on the career 3-point field goals list. His three treys vs. UALR gives him 182 and moved him into third all-time. He passed Chris Rainey (180). Kanaskie is three away from Tommy Gunn, who had 185 during his Blue Raider career.

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