Guard Play Ignites Middle Tennessee To 82-69 Win Against FIU

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee found its scoring punch and its guards put forth a combined strong effort to turn back visiting Florida International, 82-69, to end a three-game home losing streak in front of 3,955 at Murphy Center.

Starting guards Mike Dean, Marcus Morrison and Bryan Smithson combined for 57 of the team's 82 points and shot a blistering 65 percent (20-of-31) from the field and 58 percent (10-of-12) from 3-point range to key the most points since the Blue Raiders (14-9, 4-5) scored 85 in a win against Arkansas-Little Rock to open league play.

"I thought our guard play was very good and a big key to the win," Middle Tennessee coach Kermit Davis said. "Bryan Smithson was very good with four assists, no turnovers, he shot the ball well and with confidence and he just ran our team. Marcus Morrison brought a lot of energy and did a very good job and it looked like Mike Dean had more bounce than he has in recent games. He got us those 18 points we have been missing in recent games."

Morrison led Middle Tennessee with a career-high 26 points on 9-of-12 shooting from the field and 3-of-4 from 3-point range, while Dean finished with 18 points. Smithson continued his strong play of late with 13 points on 4-of-7 shooting. He canned a pair of 3-pointers and dished out four assists to no turnovers. Smithson is shooting 55 percent (17-of-31) in his last five games, averaging 3.1 assists, 3.0 rebounds and nine points. Michael Cuffee rounded out four starters in double figures

with 10 points and a team-high eight rebounds, marking the 13th time he has led the squad in boards in 23 games played.

Unlike the previous six games where Middle Tennessee has started slowly and had to play catch-up, Saturday was a different story as the Blue Raiders got out of the gates fast and maintained a slim lead throughout the first 20 minutes. The Blue Raiders led 30-27 at the half and then saw Morrison take the game over in the second half. Morrison scored 24 of his 26 in the second half, including 20 of the team's first 29 points in the second half. Middle Tennessee erupted for 52 points in the second half and never lost the lead it had worked so hard to build.

While Morrison was strong throughout, it was also key plays by Smithson and Dean that slowed Florida International (8-13, 1-7) each time it tried to make a run to get back into the contest. The Blue Raiders shot 48 percent for the game, including a strong 53 percent (16-of-30) in the second half and they were 78 percent from the free-throw line (18-of-23).

Middle Tennessee will conclude its current three-game homestand against North Texas on Thursday.

POSTGAME QUOTES

MORRISON HAS CAREER NIGHT: Junior Marcus Morrison put together his best game as a Blue Raider on Saturday night and it could not have come at a better time. The St. Petersburg, Fla., native turned in a career-best 26 points on 9-for-12 shooting, while connecting on all five of his free throw attempts to help the Blue Raiders break a three-game home winning streak. The 26 points are the most by a Blue Raider this season in a game and the most since Mike Dean had 26 in a loss to North Texas on Feb. 12, 2004.

STREAK ENDS: With the win tonight, Middle Tennessee broke its three-game home losing streak to improve to 8-3 on the season at the Murphy Center. The Blue Raiders' last win at the 'Glass House' prior to tonight's victory was back on Jan. 10 when MT routed UALR, 85-50.

DEAN BREAKS OUT: Senior Mike Dean came into tonight's game shooting just 23.3 percent from the field over his past five outings, but the Rome, Ga., native broke out in big way against FIU. Dean connected on 7 of 12 field goals for a total of 18 points. It marked the first time Dean has hit more than 50 percent of his field goal attempts since making 6 of 10 shots against Arkansas-Little Rock on Jan. 10, which ironically was the Blue Raiders' last home win.

THOMAS CORRALLED: Senior Steve Thomas was held to just three points in the win over FIU, which is his lowest scoring output as a Blue Raider. Thomas, who entered the contest with six straight double figure scoring games, had hit double digits in all five of his home outings before tonight. Thomas played just 18 minutes, but did manage to haul in six rebounds.

GUARDS STEP UP: The Blue Raiders have had their struggles from the perimeter this season, but against FIU the guard trio of Bryan Smithson, Marcus Morrison and Mike Dean turned it up a notch. The group combined for 57 points, made 20 of 31 field goals, and hit 7 of 12 shots from behind the arc.

MUST BE THE SHOES: The Middle Tennessee men's basketball coaching staff donned sneakers with their suits during the win over FIU at the Murphy Center on Saturday. The gesture was part of a nationwide tribute on behalf of Coaches vs. Cancer. The Blue Raiders are now 2-0 when the

coaching staff puts on their sneakers with both wins coming at the expense of the Golden Panthers.

PLAYER OF THE GAME: Members of the working media voted Marcus Morrison the Alexander Automotive Family Player of the Game. Morrison finished with a career-best 26 points and five rebounds.

INSIDE THE PAINT: The Blue Raiders are 11-7 on Feb. 5 all-time during their history ... Marcus Morrison made his 11th start of the season tonight and his first since getting the nod against South Alabama on Jan. 20 ... Both team's were a combined 10-for-10 from the free throw line in the first half ... MT's starting lineup accounted for 70 of the team's 82 points against FIU ... The Blue Raiders are now 10-0 this season when leading at the half and 13-1 when leading with five minutes to play ... The 30 points scored by FIU's Junior Matias marked the most by an individual against MT since NMSU's Brandon Mason netted 30 points in a triple overtime win against the Blue Raiders in the Murphy Center on Jan. 10, 2002 - a span of 97 games. Ironically, Matias entered tonight's contest shooting just 28 percent from behind the arc ... Head Coach Kermit Davis is now 5-0 all-time against FIU.

POSTGAME QUOTES

MT Head Coach Kermit Davis

"Our team desperately needed to win, which is an understatement. Were we at our best? No, but I thought offensively we played with a lot more confidence tonight. I thought Bryan Smithson was really solid and ran our team. Marcus Morrison was very good offensively. He didn't force anything and shot good shots. Mike Dean looked like he as a little better. I have known Sergio Rouco for a long time. He is going to get that team going. He is an outstanding recruiter. His team plays really hard. Anytime you get a win in our league it is good."

"I thought offensively we had a better rhythm. I wasn't real pleased with giving them a couple of baskets in transition. I thought we moved the ball around better. Steve [Thomas] got two quick fouls again. It happens a lot. I thought without him we shared the ball. I thought the second half was the best we have been offensively since UALR."

MT Forward Marcus Morrison

"I got the opportunities and made them fall. My teammates set me up with some great passes and I just finished them."

On the first 10 minutes of the game

"One of our goals was to focus primarily on the first half. For the first 20 minutes, we wanted to come out and play strong because we knew we would progress as the game went on."

MT Guard Bryan Smithson

"In practice, we have been working on offense more. People are starting to be more aggressive towards the goal. Even though we have been shooting low percentages, [Coach Davis] hasn't put any restrictions on anyone. We are just taking it to the goal, and people are building their confidence back up."

MT Guard Mike Dean

On his injury

"It is still the same. I'm just trying to fight through it and play."

FIU Head Coach Sergio Rouco

"This was not the best effort we have had, not even close. It was probably one of our worst efforts all year. We fought when the ball was on the floor, but I thought we could have contested shots better. With a team that doesn't have a lot of confidence shooting the ball, we let them make shots. You have to crowd them and contest shots. They are not going to miss at this level. Guys are not going to miss if you don't contest shots. So, they read all of the crap that you guys write and everything that people tell them about how that team is struggling offensively. Then, they think they don't have to put in the same effort as they would guarding [Brandon] Freeman or Eric [Benzel]. They think 'well, this guy can't shoot. I don't have to give the same effort and same close out.' I thought that my best player didn't come out with the same fire that has done. That is why I put him on the bench. I need him to be great. I can't let him think that he is doing us a favor or 15-10 is good enough. That is not good enough for us. [Almonte] needs to carry us. He needs to be better. We are going to challenge him. My job as a coach is to challenge him and my guys. If I don't do that, then I am doing them a disservice."

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