

Blue Raiders Start Fast In 79-64 Win Against North Texas

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee put together one of its best starts of the season at the outset and maintained control throughout as it turned back North Texas, 79-64, in front of 4,088 at Murphy Center Thursday night.

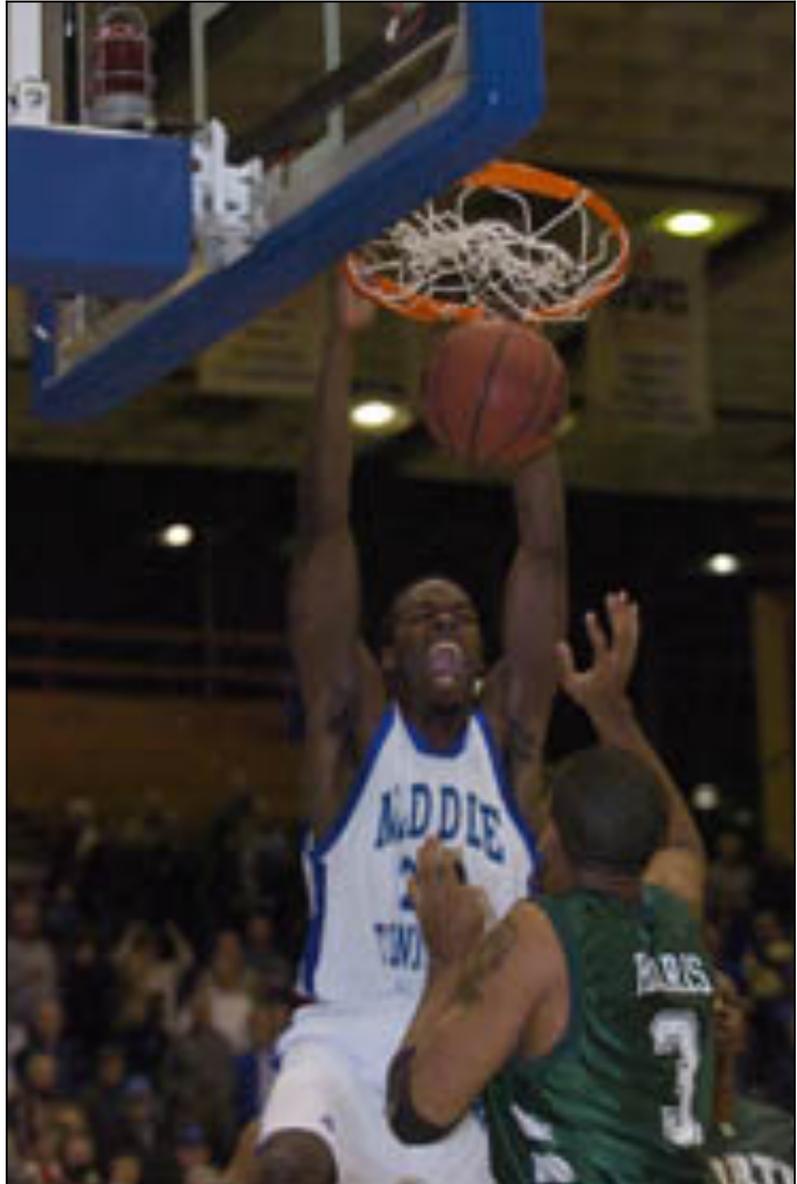
The Blue Raiders (15-9, 5-5) jumped out to a 19-1 lead and didn't allow the Mean Green (11-10, 4-6) to score their first point until the 14:35 mark and didn't give up a field goal until Leonard Hopkins connected at the 11:22 mark.

While the Middle Tennessee defense, which leads the Sun Belt in scoring defense and field goal percentage defense, continued to be stifling, the offense was clicking on all cylinders at the outset. Marcus Morrison continued his outstanding play of late with a game-high 21 points, seven rebounds, four assists and three steals, while Michael

Cuffee added 16 points and Mike Dean finished with 12. The tone of the game was set; however, by the steady play of point guard Bryan Smithson and center Steve Thomas.

Smithson finished with six assists and eight points, while Thomas added nine points and eight rebounds, but Head Coach Kermit Davis credited the duo with setting the tone for the Blue Raiders Thursday night.

"I just felt like Bryan at the point and Steve inside dictated the tone of the game from the outset," Davis said. "They were very good and got us off to a good start. Bryan has been playing very well



and leading our team the last five or six games, and he was good again tonight, plus I thought Steve was very physical and came out strong for us."

The Blue Raiders shot a blistering 60 percent (6-of-10) from 3-point range in the first half and 50 percent (15-of-30) from the field overall in the first 20 minutes on their way to a 40-21 halftime advantage. Morrison, who has been on fire during his last two games, was 6-of-8 from the field and 3-of-4 from beyond the arc in the first half to set the standard.

Middle Tennessee impressed the crowd with six awe-inspiring dunks, including four of the high-flying variety from Morrison, another acrobatic catch and dunk by Cuffee and another when Kyle Young grabbed an offensive rebound and jammed it home.

Middle Tennessee cooled off in the second half, shooting just 41.4 percent, but the Blue Raiders were never seriously threatened in the second half as they maintained a double-figure lead throughout.

Winners of back-to-back games, Middle Tennessee moved into a tie for third in the Sun Belt's East Division and will travel to Denver for a Saturday afternoon game against the West Division leaders. Tipoff is set for 5 p.m.

POSTGAME NOTES

MORRISON ON FIRE: Over the past two games, junior Marcus Morrison has been the hottest Blue Raider. During that span, Morrison has averaged 23.5 points, 6.0 rebounds, 3.0 assists, and has shot a combined 62.9 percent from the field. The St. Petersburg, Fla., native is the second player this season to record back-to-back 20-point games for the Blue Raiders and the first since Mike Dean accomplished the feat in game two and three earlier this year.

CRUISING AT THE MURPH: In three meetings against North Texas at home in the Murphy Center, the Blue Raiders have simply dominated the Mean Green. In the three games, Middle Tennessee has won by a combined margin of 260 to 190 for an average of 23.3 points per contest. Needless to say, the Blue Raiders are a perfect 3-0 in those games.

AUTOMATIC: Sophomore Bryan Smithson has been Mr. Automatic at the charity stripe since conference action started in early January. With four makes tonight, Smithson has now connected on 14 consecutive free throws and has hit 16 of 17 in SBC play this year (.941). For the year, Smithson is shooting a career-best 81.8 percent (45-for-55).

SOLID OFF THE BENCH: A starter during most of the season, sophomore Kyle Young came off the bench for the second straight game and turned in another solid effort. In just 16 minutes of action, Young added eight points on 3-for-5 shooting to go along with six rebounds and two assists to equal his career-best. More importantly, Young did not commit a turnover. The Blue Raiders are 5-1 this season when Young scores eight or more points with the lone loss coming at the hands of South Alabama.

DEAN PASSES GAITHER: With three 3-pointers in the win over North Texas, senior Mike Dean surpassed Tim Gaither for seventh place on the all-time list. Dean now has 102 career trifecta's and needs two more to take over sixth place from Richard Duncan and five more to move into fifth place over Nod Carter.

PLAYER OF THE GAME: Members of the working media voted Marcus Morrison the Alexander Automotive Family Player of the Game. Morrison finished with 21 points, seven rebounds, four assists and three steals to earn the honor for the second straight game.

INSIDE THE PAINT: Middle Tennessee was outscored in the second half tonight (43-39) for just the fourth time this season and the first time since Austin Peay took a 36-35 second half edge back on Dec. 30 ... Steve Thomas collected a career-high three steals in the win over North Texas ... Marcus Morrison equaled his personal-best with four made three-pointers in the win over UNT ... Over the past four games, Smithson's assist-to-turnover ratio is 2:1 (14 assists and 7 turnovers) ... Steve Thomas has recorded at least seven rebounds in five of the seven home games he has played ... Mike Dean recorded his first blocked shot of the season tonight ... MT improved to 11-0 this season when leading at the half and 39-4 overall under Kermit Davis ... Tonight's victory was the 48th for Kermit Davis at the helm of the Blue Raiders ... Walk-on Chandler Knox played in his first game tonight as a Blue Raider ... The Blue Raiders have now hit at least one three-pointer in 270 straight games ... Kyle Young, a career 38 percent shooter at the line, has hit eight straight free throws after connecting on both his tries against UNT.

POSTGAME QUOTES

MT Head Coach Kermit Davis

"I was really pleased obviously. I thought we really got our practice into the game. I'm feeling better about our team because I think we are practicing better. I see [Mike] Dean getting healthier. I just feel better about where we are. I have seen Bryan Smithson really improve over the last couple of weeks. Marcus Morrison is playing well. I like the way our team started. I liked the way we finished the half. Give North Texas credit. I thought they competed a lot harder in the second half. We didn't do a very good job of guarding. We just kind of held on. But, it was a good win for us."

"I thought we did some switching that maybe caused them some problems. As Coach Jones probably realized, I don't think Watson was at his best. It didn't seem like he was tough and hard tonight. I have seen him on tape, and he has been very good. But, I was pleased with our defensive effort."

MT Forward Marcus Morrison

"I just approached it like any other game. I just tried to come out, be focused, play defense, and have fun."

"If you can go out there and get some dunks it will get the crowd into it. Then, you can just feed off of them. It is fun."

"We like to play in transition. We have a lot of athletes that can run and jump. We work on our half court game, but we really thrive in transition. We like to play in transition."

MT Guard Bryan Smithson

"We are not really talking about offense right now. We know our talent. Everybody is at this school for offense. Our main concern is defense. The shots are going to come. We are not worried about that."

"We started out the first five or ten minutes aggressive defensively and offensively. That was our main goal coming into the game. It was a good goal, and we accomplished that tonight."

MT Forward Michael Cuffee

"We came out with a lot of energy tonight. The crowd was right behind us. We give the crowd a lot of support for being right there with us."

UNT Head Coach Johnny Jones

"I thought Middle Tennessee did an excellent job of starting the game and building a huge lead. I thought they did an excellent job of maintaining that lead pretty much throughout the game. They really kept us at bay. I thought we needed to come out and at least match their intensity level. We weren't able to do that early on. They established themselves. They threw the first punch and did what was necessary in the first six minutes of the game to win this one. I thought that was when the game was lost."

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