Middle Tennessee Suffers 83-71 Setback At Denver

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DENVER - Middle Tennessee's defense suffered a Mile High headache against Denver in a match-up against the Sun Belt Conference leader here Saturday afternoon.

Middle Tennessee entered the Denver contest as the Sun Belt's top team in scoring defense and field goal percentage defense, but Denver had its way offensively in an 83-71 win in front of 1,580 at Hamilton Gymnasium.

"I just thought we never got in any defensive rhythm and we were playing on our heels," Middle Tennessee coach Kermit Davis said. "They were better offensively than we were. We just didn't guard very well but give Denver a lot of credit. Terry Carroll has done a good job with his team and they were prepared today."

The 83 points allowed by Middle Tennessee were the second most surrendered in a Sun Belt game under Davis and the most allowed in a regulation game against a SBC foe. Arkansas State scored 86 in an overtime loss to the Blue Raiders last season. The Blue Raiders (15-10, 5-6) entered the game allowing just 63 points per game and were holding conference foes to 61, but Denver (15-8, 9-2) not only put up 83 points, but also shot 53 percent (31-of-59). The Pioneers also won the rebounding battle, 38-33.

"It's very disappointing because we take a great deal of pride in our defense and our rebounding," Middle Tennessee senior Michael Cuffee said. "We weren't able to get enough consecutive stops and then when we did get stops we didn't do a very good job of rebounding. We hurt ourselves."

Cuffee led the Blue Raiders with 20 points and nine rebounds, and Steve Thomas finished with 14 points and seven boards. Marcus Morrison (12 points) and Mike Dean (10 points) also tallied double figures but the Blue Raider quartet of double-figure scorers were not enough to offset the onslaught provided by a talented trio of Denver contributors.

Antonio Porch scored 27 points, pulled seven rebounds and dished out five assists, while SBC Player of the Year candidate Yemi Nicholson added 23 points, 11 rebounds and three blocks. The game's biggest difference maker, however; was Pioneer point guard Rodney Billups, who finished with 18 points, had five rebounds, dished out nine assists and had just three turnovers.

"(Billups) dominated the game, no question, " Davis said. "He was solid at the point, (Nicholson) is really good and Porch had a fine game. Denver is a quality basketball team and we know that but the defensive effort is disappointing. We shoot 60 percent in the first half and we are down one so I didn't feel real good about that."

The Blue Raiders trailed 42-41 in the first half of a wild shootout, and they took a 61-60 lead on Morrison's 3-pointer with 11:30 remaining. In fact, Morrison erased a 58-51 Middle Tennessee deficit when he scored 10 consecutive points, but Denver answered the Blue Raider run with a 15-2 spurt of its own and never looked back. Interestingly, Middle Tennessee, which had 30 field goals, finished with just one less than Denver (31) and made one more 3-pointer, but the Pioneers were 16-of-23 from the free-throw line while the Blue Raiders were 5-of-5. The 11-point margin at the stripe weighed heavily in the game's outcome. Middle Tennessee never reached the bonus in either half.

"We are outscored 16-5 at the free-throw line and it's amazing to me that we never get into the one-in-one and (Denver) is picking us up man-to-man," Davis said. "I don't think I've ever been involved in a college basketball game where a team goes the entire game without getting into the one-and-one - until this one."

Middle Tennessee returns home to play Arkansas State Thursday night.

NOTES: Mike Dean connected on two 3-pointers against Denver to pass Richard Duncan and move into sixth place on the career 3-point goals made list with 104. He needs three more to move into fifth place over Nod Carter ... The loss ended Middle Tennessee's four-game winning streak against the Pioneers and it also marked the first time the Blue Raiders have tasted defeat in Denver ... The game marked just the third time Middle Tennessee has allowed more than 80 points in a contest this season. Tennessee State (94) and Villanova (81) also topped the 80-point mark against the Blue Raiders.

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