Five Players Score Double Figures As Middle Tennessee Completes Sweep Of Arkansas State

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Five players scored in double figures as Middle Tennessee completed the season sweep of Arkansas State and moved into sole possession of third place in the Sun Belt's East Division with an 80-60 win in front of 3,747 at Murphy Center Thursday night.

Mike Dean, who canned 16-of-18 free throws, led Middle Tennessee with 18 points, while Fats Cuyler tied his career high with 17 points on the strength of 5-of-8 shooting from 3-point range. Michael Cuffee (13 points), Steve Thomas (11) and Marcus Morrison (10) also tallied double figures.

"This was a game we really needed to win because we are nearing the end of the season and they are all so important," Dean said. "This game was big in the standings but the biggest thing is we are trying to finish strong, gain momentum and be playing our best entering the (SBC) tournament."

The Blue Raiders (16-10, 6-6) assured themselves of a third straight winning season under third-year Head Coach Kermit Davis and improved to 6-0 against the Indians (13-12, 5-7) since he became Middle Tennessee's head coach. It marks the first time Middle Tennessee has had three consecutive winning seasons since the 1995-98 seasons.

Middle Tennessee, which shot 48 percent in the second half and 42 percent for the game, seized control early and finished strong, never allowing the Indians to get back into the game after jumping out to a 39-26 halftime lead. Arkansas State trailed 20-16 with 7:39 remaining in the first half but the

Blue Raiders went on a 15-4 run to go on top 35-20 with 2:24 remaining.

Arkansas State never got closer than 11 in the second half as the Blue Raiders finished strong and never let their defense suffer with the big lead. The potent Indians' offense was limited to 39 percent shooting and just 23 field goals. Middle Tennessee also out-rebounded Arkansas State 42-33, led by a season-high nine boards from sophomore forward Kyle Young.

Middle Tennessee will play host to Portland State Saturday at 7 p.m., in the final regular-season home game of the 2004-05 season. Cuffee, Dean and Thomas will be honored on "Senior Night" prior to tipoff and fans are encouraged to arrive early for the presentation.

POSTGAME NOTES

CUYLER HAS CAREER NIGHT: Junior Fats Cuyler was inserted into the starting lineup for the first time in five games and the Leesburg, Fla., native responded with his best game as a Blue Raider. Cuyler equaled his career-high in points with 17, hauled in a personal-best six rebounds, and had three assists. Cuyler, who scored in double figures for the fifth time this season and the first since Jan. 22, also equaled his career-best with five made 3-pointers.

SPREADING THE WEALTH: The key to Middle Tennessee's victory over Arkansas State on Thursday was its ability to involve everybody on the offensive end of the floor. A total of five players scored in double figures, led by Mike Dean's 18 points. It marked the third time this season the Blue Raiders have put at least five players in double digits and the first since Dec. 21 against Auburn. The Blue Raiders had six players in double figures against Lambuth in the season opener. Over the last two seasons, Middle Tennessee is 18-4 when four or more players score in double figures, including a 9-3 mark this season.

DEAN GETS IN RECORD BOOK: Senior Mike Dean struggled with his shooting from the field tonight, but he made up for it at the line. The senior connected on 16 of 18 attempts at the line to tie Chris Rainey, Mike Milholland and Nod Carter for the fifth most ever made in a single game at Middle Tennessee. The 16 makes are the most by a Blue Raider since Aylton Tesch hit a school record 18 against Eastern Illinois in 1998. Dean has now hit 45 of his last 52 free throws (.865).

MORRISON REMAINS HOT FROM ARC: Junior Marcus Morrison, who ranks third in the Sun Belt Conference in 3-point field goal percentage, continued his hot streak from long distance by hitting three of six in the win over ASU. Over the past 12 games, Morrison has hit 21 of 46 attempts (.457) from behind the arc to raise his season average to 44.0 percent (33-75).

PLAYER OF THE GAME: Members of the working media voted Fats Guyler the Alexander Automotive Family Player of the Game. Guyler finished with 17 points, six rebounds, and three assists to earn the honor.

INSIDE THE PAINT: Senior Steve Thomas came off the bench tonight for the first time as a Blue Raider and responded with his fourth double-double of the season (11 points, 10 boards) ... Kyle Young recorded a season-high nine rebounds against ASU ... Middle Tennessee's 20-point margin of victory against ASU is its largest since downing UALR on Jan. 10, 85-50 ... Mike Dean failed to hit a three-pointer for just the fifth time in his Blue Raider career ... Middle Tennessee improved to 12-0 when leading at the half this season and 15-1 when leading with five minutes remaining ... Middle Tennessee improved to 6-0 against Arkansas State under Kermit Davis.

POSTGAME QUOTES
MIDDLE TENNESSEE HEAD COACH KERMIT DAVIS
Opening comments:
"I thought our team came out with a lot of energy. I thought we played very consistent. We did a really good job on the offensive boards and we had balanced scoring. We had five guys in double figures and held that team to under 40 percent so it was good for us, and to out-rebound a team by nine or 10 was good because I thought Arkansas State tried to play physical and I thought we matched that."

On finishing strong:
"We've been in those games with Arkansas State when they just keep coming back. In four of the games we have had them 12 to 15 points and it gets to be a one possession game. It scares you to death with (Dewarick) Spencer, (J.J.) Montgomery and (Jerry) Nichols out there but I thought we really did a good job of getting out to shooters. We went to our zone defense with nine or 10 minutes to go and that really limited their possessions by taking time off the clock and we contested shots and made free throws."

On Mike Dean's ability to take the ball to the goal and draw fouls and convert free throws:
"It's something Mike could not have done 2-1/2 to three weeks ago. He's still not full speed but there was a time when he couldn't get past anybody so it's good to see he could at least get a piece of the paint. I thought he missed some really good shots. I thought he had some really open 3-pointers but to go 16-of-18 from the free-throw line is really good. The best thing is he's getting better when he can get himself to the line and that's a good thing for us."

Talk about the two lineup changes with Kyle Young and Fats Cuyler getting starts?
"Based on practice Monday Kyle Young was more active than Steve Thomas was. Steve was a lot better Tuesday and Wednesday but based on the three days combined we started Kyle and I thought he rebounded real well. Bryan Smithson has not been bad at all but Fats had a good week so we started him. I did think Steve and Bryan came off the bench and played well. We will start Steve "Senior Night" no question. We will start all three seniors and we will see what happens with Bryan and Fats."

JR Guard Fats Cuyler:
What about Arkansas State seems to bring out the best in you?
"I was talking to coach earlier today and I was telling him I was going to try and have a good game, pressure the point guard and everything else just worked for me."

Do you think they were overlooking you this time after scoring 17 on them in the earlier meeting?
"I think so. I don't know if they were playing defense hard enough or what it was, but I got some good looks against a good team. The big men screened for me well and I just got open looks."

SR Guard Mike Dean:
On five players in double figures.
"We just shared the ball, made the extra pass and we have several guys on this team who can score."

Talk about getting to the free-throw line 18 times.

"I saw my shot was not going down early so I tried to adjust my game before it got too late. I was able to get to the line and hit the free throws."

How big is this win in regard to the conference standings?

"It's the end of the season so every game is big. We are in third place now and we have a chance to be in second and get a bye in the tournament. We knew it was big but we try to play every game like it's the biggest."

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