

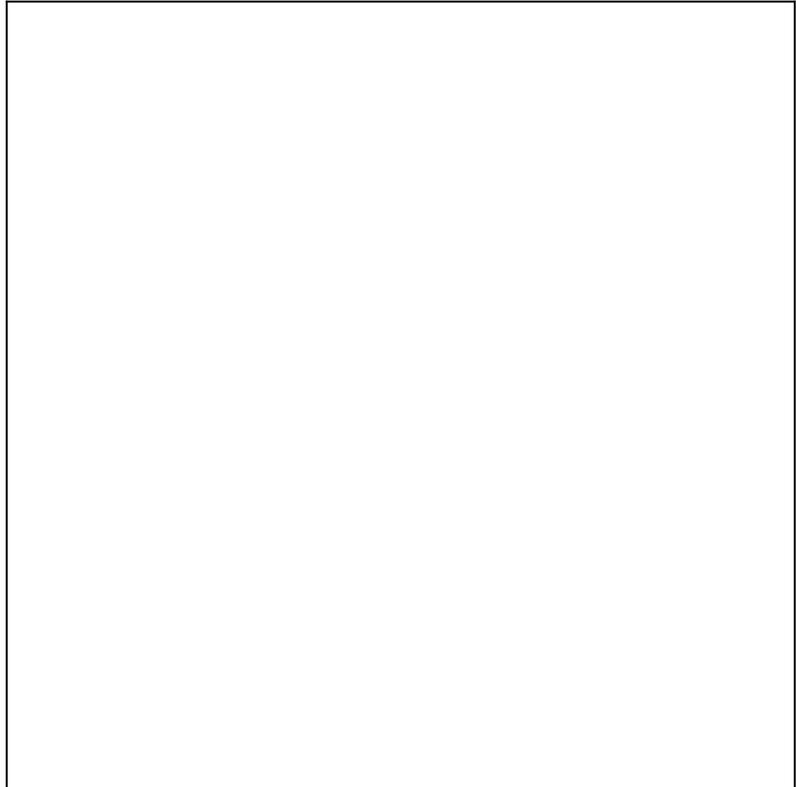
# Seniors Go Out In Style As Middle Tennessee Rolls Past Portland State

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## **MURFREESBORO, Tenn. -**

Middle Tennessee's trio of seniors went out in style on "Senior Night" as the Blue Raiders bolted to an early lead and coasted to an impressive 83-62 win against Portland State in front of 4,023 at Murphy Center.

The non-conference game materialized when the teams were paired as part of the ESPN Bracket Buster series pool. The Blue Raiders (17-10) won for the fourth time in five games while ending a six-game winning streak for Portland State (18-7), leaders of the Big Sky Conference.



"We were really motivated, as we are every game, but coach (Kermit Davis) told us this was a NCAA Tournament team and we feel like we can be that, as well," said senior Michael Cuffee, who finished with 18 points and six rebounds. I believe we are starting to hit our stride and play our best at the right time."

Seniors came up big in their final regular season appearance at Murphy Center as Cuffee, Mike Dean and Steve Thomas combined for 34 points and 18 rebounds; however, it was a pair of juniors who stole the show as Fats Cuyler and Marcus Morrison continued their recent superlative play.

Morrison had his best all-around game as a Blue Raider with a game-high 19 points, eight rebounds, four assists and four steals, while Cuyler tied his career high for the second straight game with 17 points on the strength of 4-of-6 shooting from 3-point range. In addition to Cuffee's 18 points, Dean finished with 12 as Middle Tennessee placed four players in double figures. Thomas tied his career high with 10 rebounds.

"We wanted to win this game for our seniors," Morrison said. "They have been great leaders, on and off the court, and we wanted to make sure they went out with a win. This was a big game for all of us, but this was a special night for the three seniors and we wanted to make sure it was a night they would remember."

Morrison, rated No. 2 in the Sun Belt in 3-point field goal percentage, knocked down three treys, while Cuyler finished with four. The tandem combined to go 7-of-12 from beyond the arc. The Blue Raiders also were dominant on the boards with a 45-32 edge and they were particularly strong on the offensive glass with a 17-6 advantage.

Cuyler and sophomore point guard Bryan Smithson also keyed Middle Tennessee's defense against Portland State standout Will Funn, who entered the game second in the nation in assists per game at 7.86. He was held to two assists and committed four turnovers against pressure applied by Smithson and Cuyler.

"I thought Bryan had a solid all-around game and played solid defense, as did Fats," Middle Tennessee Head Coach Kermit Davis said. "I thought they really pressured (Funn) and took him out of an offensive rhythm."

Middle Tennessee, which shot 39.4 percent from the field and 39 percent from 3-point range, was never threatened after falling behind 5-2 early in the game. The Blue Raiders took their first lead when Cuyler collected a steal and converted the layup on the other end to go on top 6-5 and they never trailed thereafter. A 14-3 run midway through the first quarter put the Blue Raiders on top 18-8 with 10:30 remaining before halftime and Middle Tennessee carried a 38-26 edge into the intermission.

The Blue Raiders never let up in the second half as they stretched the lead to as many as 32 points, 79-47, and cruised to the triumph.

Middle Tennessee will travel to Bowling Green, Ky., to face Western Kentucky Thursday at 8 p.m.

## **POSTGAME NOTES**

**CUYLER ON A ROLL:** Junior Fats Cuyler is glad to be back home. During Middle Tennessee's current two-game home stand, Cuyler has been deadly from three-point range. In the two games, both victories, Cuyler connected on 9 of 14 treys (.643) while averaging 17.0 points, 3.0 rebounds, 2.5 assists, and shot a combined 61.1 percent from the field (11-18). Cuyler's 17 points against PSU on Saturday night equaled his career-high and marked the sixth time this season he has scored in double figures. It is also the first time this year Cuyler has scored in double figures in back-to-back games.

**MORRISON REMAINS HOT FROM ARC:** Junior Marcus Morrison, who ranks third in the Sun Belt Conference in three-point field goal percentage, continued his hot streak from long distance by hitting three of six in the win over PSU. Over the past 13 games, Morrison has hit 24 of 52 attempts (.462) from behind the arc to raise his season average to 44.0 percent (36-81). That percentage would rank fourth all-time on the single-season list at Middle Tennessee if the season ended today.

**CUFFEE'S BEEN CONSISTENT:** Senior Michael Cuffee, the Blue Raiders' leading scorer, has been one of the team's most consistent performers the past two weeks. In the last four games, Cuffee is averaging 16.8 points, 6.3 rebounds, and is shooting a combined 54.2 percent from the field (26-48).

**MORRISON A STAT SHEET STUFFER:** Junior Marcus Morrison had arguably his best all-around game of the season when he poured in 19 points, grabbed eight rebounds, handed out four assists (equals personal-best), and collected a career-high four steals in the win over Portland State.

Morrison, who is averaging nearly three made three-pointers a game the past five outings, has hit for double figures in scoring six straight games.

**17 AND COUNTING:** Tonight's win over PSU was the 17th victory of the season for Middle Tennessee, which equals the most in the Kermit Davis era. The Blue Raiders won 17 games a year ago after collecting 16 wins in Davis' first year. One more victory this season would assure Middle Tennessee of increasing its win total in each year of Davis' tenure.

**MILESTONE VICTORY:** Tonight's win over Portland State was victory number 950 in the program's history. It was also the 50th win for Kermit Davis as head coach of the Blue Raiders.

**SLIGHT DELAY:** Tonight's game against Portland State was delayed by six minutes due to a technical problem with the arena public address system. Just prior to the Senior Night introductions, the system went down so announcer Larry Tolbert had to move to the southeast corner of the arena to handle the introductions. Tolbert remained in that location for the entire first half before moving back to midcourt and his normal position. The actual time of tip-off was 7:06 PM CST.

**PLAYER OF THE GAME:** Members of the working media voted Marcus Morrison the Alexander Automotive Family Player of the Game. Morrison finished with 19 points, eight rebounds, and four assists to earn the honor.

**INSIDE THE PAINT:** Middle Tennessee recorded a season-low nine turnovers in the win over PSU, which is their best effort since giving it away just nine times against NMSU in 2003-04 - a span of 38 games ... Middle Tennessee is now 6-1 this season against teams with the word 'State' in their name ... The Blue Raiders are now 19-4 over the past two years when four or more players score in double figures ... The Blue Raiders have now hit at least one three-pointer in 273 consecutive games ... MT is now 41-4 under Kermit Davis when leading at the half, including a 13-0 mark this year ... Forward Alex Weekes attempted and made his first collegiate three-pointer late in the second half as the shot clock was running down ... Steve Thomas equaled his personal-best with 10 rebounds against PSU ... Middle Tennessee's starters outscored Portland State's starting five, 70-39 ... Steve Thomas recorded a personal-best three blocked shots ... The Blue Raiders owned a 17-6 advantage on the offensive glass ... There was a total of 48 fouls called in tonight's game and four players fouled out.

## **POSTGAME QUOTES**

### **MT Head Coach Kermit Davis**

"I think our team is continuing its improvement. We are playing with a lot of energy. We are defending well, and we are playing with a sense of urgency. I was very impressed with Portland State's team on tape. It was a long trip for them after playing on Thursday night. But, they have a good team. You will see that team in the NCAA Tournament here in about three weeks. Their point guard dominates all of these games. He had 14 assists his last game. He is second in assists in the country. We just really tried to get into him. I thought Fats and Bryan did a good job. I thought we got them out of rhythm because of the pressure we put on their point guard. We just had good balance all of the way through the game."

"Playing a quality team was our motivation tonight. They are a well coached team. They are leading their league. Portland State is a team that our guys think will make the NCAA Tournament. They are an impressive team on tape. At this point, if you play an out of conference team that is losing and isn't very good you could really have a let down. But, this was an ESPN Bracket Buster series game.

It is publicized. Not only do you represent Middle Tennessee, but you also represent the Sun Belt Conference. It is good for our league when you go out of conference. Our guys were really excited about playing this game."

**MT Forward Michael Cuffee**

"Tonight was fun. I enjoyed it. The team played well. We just all came out and played tonight. Everybody showed up and we did what we had to do."

"Coach Davis talked to us about Portland State being a NCAA Tournament team. We just came out and played tonight. We came out and competed and everyone played hard and contributed. If they are an NCAA team, hopefully we can make it there. We plan on it."

**MT Forward Marcus Morrison**

"Being the type of player that I am, I try to just let the game come to me. I try to get my points through the offense. Coach Davis has stressed that a lot. He has told me to not force shots and just let it come to me. My teammates put me in a position to finish baskets and that is what I am trying to do."

"The seniors are great leaders. We were looking for leadership, and those three stepped up from day one. They led us through the ups and downs."

**MT Guard Fats Cuyler**

"I just wanted to win tonight because it was the seniors' last game in the Murphy Center. I was going to do whatever it took for us to win this game."

"The seniors just bring it every day. In practice and in the games, they just play hard everyday."

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