Blue Raiders open with SBC Tourney win over NMSU

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DENTON, Texas - Middle Tennessee remained perfect in Sun Belt Conference Tournament openers under third-year Head Coach Kermit Davis by securing a 77-63 win against upset-minded New Mexico State in front of 1,188 at the Super Pit Friday night.

The Blue Raiders (19-11) will now face Louisiana-Lafayette Sunday at 9 p.m., looking to reach the tournament semifinals for a third straight year under Davis, but there was no looking ahead to the anticipated match-up as Middle Tennessee began postseason play Friday.

"We are taking this one game at a time and tonight's game was the one that mattered most," said Blue Raider senior Steve Thomas. "We are looking forward to playing Louisiana-Lafayette and it is a team we have a great deal of respect for. I didn't want the (New Mexico State game) to be my last college game."

Thomas' play against the Aggies (6-24) helped assure it would not be his last college game as he collected his sixth career double-double with 17 points and a career-high 17 rebounds - the 12th most boards in a single game in Middle Tennessee history. Thomas was one of four Blue Raiders in double figures. He was joined in double figures by Marcus Morrison (17 points, nine rebounds), Michael Cuffee (16 points) and Mike Dean (11 points), while Fats Cuyler added eight.

The story of the game was Middle Tennessee's dominance of the boards as they out-rebounded the Aggies 43-23, including a whopping 16-1 advantage on the offensive glass.

"That was the difference in the game," Davis said of the offensive boards. "We have been one of the better rebounding teams in the league this season and it showed up in the game tonight. Not only did we have 16 offensive rebounds, but also gave up just one and that was big. I thought Steve Thomas just took the game over in the second half. It seemed like he got every rebound and he took charge inside."

Middle Tennessee trailed 25-18 with 9:08 remaining in the first half before the Blue Raiders put together a 9-2 run that saw them tie the game, 27-27, with 6:32 remaining before the half. Dean's 3-pointer tied the game with 7:00 remaining in the first half and after New Mexico State went back on top 27-25 Cuffee evened the score with a 12-foot jumper.

From there, Middle Tennessee used a 13-7 run to close out the half and carry a 40-34 lead into the locker room. The Blue Raiders controlled the game in the second half, maintaining a lead of 8-to-12 points the majority of the second frame to advance into the quarterfinals.

Morrison was huge for Middle Tennessee in the first half, scoring 12 of his 17 in the first half. He was 5-of-8 from the field, including 2-of-3 from 3-point range, to help the Blue Raiders build a lead that wouldn't relinquish.

MIDDLE TENNESSEE VS NEW MEXICO STATE FIRST ROUND, SUN BELT CONFERENCE TOURNAMENT DENTON, TX; MARCH 4, 2005

THOMAS STEPS UP BIG: Senior Steve Thomas turned in his best performance as a Blue Raider when he poured in 17 points and ripped down a career-high 17 rebounds. It marked Thomas' sixth double-double of the season and his second in the last three games. The Carrollton, Ga., natives 17 caroms rank as the 14th most ever recorded in a single game at Middle Tennessee.

WALKING WOUNDED: The victory tonight over NMSU came at a costly price as a number of Blue Raiders spent more time with athletic trainer Joe-Joe Petrone than on the court. Junior Fats Cuyler went down early in the second half when he suffered a blow to the head that required five stitches above his left eye. Cuyler, who finished with eight points, did come back in the game later in the half. Also, forward Kyle Young suffered a mild MCL ligament of the left knee and will be listed as day-to-day according to Petrone. Point guard Bryan Smithson also battled an upper respiratory ailment that slowed him tonight.

NICE DEBUT: Junior Marcus Morrison, playing in his first Sun Belt Conference Tournament, turned in one of his top efforts off the bench this season to key the Blue Raider victory. Morrison, who has hit double figures in scoring 19 times this season, tallied 17 points, nine rebounds and two assists in 28 minutes. In two games against North Texas this season, Morrison has averaged 19 points and eight rebounds.

TOUGH ON THE GLASS: The key to tonight's win over NMSU was Middle Tennessee's work on the glass, especially on the offensive end. The Blue Raiders won the battle of the boards, 43-23, and owned a 16-1 advantage on the offensive end. It went down as the largest rebound margin since the Blue Raiders collected 23 more boards than VCU back on Jan. 2. MT has now won the board battle in four of the last five games.

MT IN THE TOURNEY: The Blue Raiders are now 5-4 all-time in the SBC Tournament and a perfect 3-0 in first games under Kermit Davis.

IN THE PAINT: Former Blue Raider point guard Keith Conner was in the stands supporting his alma mater. Conner now lives in Dallas ... MT is now 15-0 this season when leading at the half ... Tonight's win ran the Blue Raiders' record to 19-11 and the 19 wins are the most by a Blue Raider team since collecting 19 wins in 1997-98 ... In today's opening round of the SBC, the East Division

won all three games.

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