Middle Tennessee wins 60-59 thriller against Utah State in season opener

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee opened the 2005-06 season in dramatic fashion with a nail-biting 60-59 win against tradition-rich Utah State in front of 4,223 at Murphy Center Monday night.

The fourth largest home opening crowd in 25 years watched the Blue Raiders (1-0) take a 60-59 lead with 1:27 remaining on Bud Howard's free throw and then use their tenacious trademark defense to hold off the Aggies (1-1) on a potential buzzer-beater by standout Nate Harris with no time on the clock.

"I thought it was a great student body crowd," Middle Tennessee coach Kermit Davis said. "They cheered at the right time and they really picked our team up when we didn't start as good as we needed too in the second half."

"I knew the quality of the opponent was going to be good. I didn't know if we would be good enough to win the game, but I knew going into it we would be competitive. I knew people would see a real good college basketball game. You are talking about a team that since year 2000 is the fourth-winningest program in the country. They are favored to win the WAC and they will be right in the NCAA Tournament again this year."

On Monday night; however, Middle Tennessee continued its home wizardry against non-conference foes. The Blue Raiders won their 17th consecutive non-conference home game and improved to 31-11 all-time at home under Davis as four players reached double figures.

Newcomers Adam Vogelsberg and Bud Howard led the offensive charge, with 16 and 14 points, respectively, while Fats Cuyler and Kyle Young added 11 points in one of the biggest home non-conference wins Middle Tennessee has enjoyed in many years.

The big crowd certainly got its money's worth as the two teams battled from start to finish in a tightly-contested game, which featured 13 lead changes and 12 ties. Utah State's last lead of the game, a 59-58 advantage, was erased when Vogelsberg connected on the second of two free throws to tie the game, 59-59, with 2:05 remaining.

It was two crucial defensive plays down the stretch that made the biggest difference in the outcome. After Middle Tennessee tied the game for the seventh time in the second half, Utah State called a timeout on its baseline to set up a play. The athletic Howard; however, curtailed the offensive possession when he dove out of bounds to steal a ball and saved it to a teammate.

Howard then converted the first of two charity tosses with 1:27 remaining to give the Blue Raiders a 60-59 lead and set up the frantic final minute. Utah State had the ball out of bounds under its goal with three seconds remaining, but Young provided solid post defense, as he had all game, and he was able to deny Harris the game-winner as time expired.

"It was a great game and it was a good win for our basketball team," Young said. "The best thing is that we played hard, played good enough defense and found a way to win a close game against a quality opponent with a lot of new players in their first Division I game."

Vogelsberg and Howard started in their Blue Raider debuts and each had a significant impact in the triumph. Vogelsberg's 16 - on the strength of 3-of-5 shooting from behind the 3-point arc - led the offensive charge in regard to points; however Howard had a big part in just about everything the Blue Raiders did.

The Baton Rouge, La., native not only had 14 points in his debut, but he pulled a game-high seven rebounds, dished out two assists and collected two steals - the biggest coming with the game on the line in the final minutes.

After allowing Utah State to shoot a blistering 56 percent in the first half, Middle Tennessee stiffened its defense in the second half and held the Aggies to 27 percent (7-of-26) from the field.

The Blue Raiders return to action when they play at Indiana State Saturday at 4 p.m.

POSTGAME NOTES

NICE CROWD: Tonight's season-opening crowd was announced at 4,223 which went down as the fourth largest in the past 25 years on opening night. It was also the second largest over the past 10 years. Since Kermit Davis took over the Blue Raider program, Middle Tennessee has seen a 68 percent increase in its attendance.

FIRST WIN OVER UTAH STATE: Tonight marked the third time Kermit Davis has faced the Aggies from Utah State. In two previous meetings, Davis was on the losing side of the scoreboard but all changed with the win tonight. Middle Tennessee hung on for a nail-biting, 60-59, decision to give Davis his first-ever win over the Aggies.

VOGELSBERG LEADS MT: In his first game as a Blue Raider, Adam Vogelsberg quickly became a crowd favorite. The Marysville, Kan., native led Middle Tennessee with 16 points in 32 minutes. The transfer also hit a game-high three three-pointers

THIS BUDS FOR YOU: Junior College transfer Bud Howard made a nice debut as a Blue Raider

against Utah State. Howard, out of Baton Rouge, La., scored 14 points, grabbed a team-high seven rebounds, and picked up two steals and two assists to help pace the Blue Raiders. For his efforts, Howard was named the Alexander Automotive Family Player of the Game.

YOUNG HAS SOLID GAME: Junior Kyle Young played a huge role in Middle Tennessee's win over Utah State with some timely baskets and excellent post defense. The Lewisburg, Tenn., native had his seventh double figure scoring game of his career with 11 points to go with five rebounds. Young, who went 4-for-5 from the field, matched his personal-best with three blocked shots to give him 29 for his career. Young needs four more rejections to move into the top 15 all-time at Middle Tennessee.

TIDBITS: Kermit Davis is now a perfect 3-0 at Middle Tennessee in one-point games ... MT has never been 2-0 under Davis and they will try for that on Saturday at Indiana State ... The Blue Raiders have now hit at least one three-pointer in 278 straight games ... Tonight's win was the third in a row for the Blue Raiders on opening night ... The win over Utah State was the Blue Raiders' 17th consecutive non-conference home win (last home loss against a non-conference foe was on 12/16/02 versus Murray State) ... Six of Middle Tennessee's eight newcomers saw action tonight against Utah State. They were Bud Howard, Adam Vogelsberg, Tim Blue, Calvin O'Neil, Kevin Kanaskie, and Theryn Hudson. Blue, Howard and Vogelsberg earned starts in their Blue Raider debuts ... The Blue Raiders had 19 total baskets in the win over the Aggies and only nine assists on those field goals ... MT is now 31-11 all-time at home under Davis.

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