

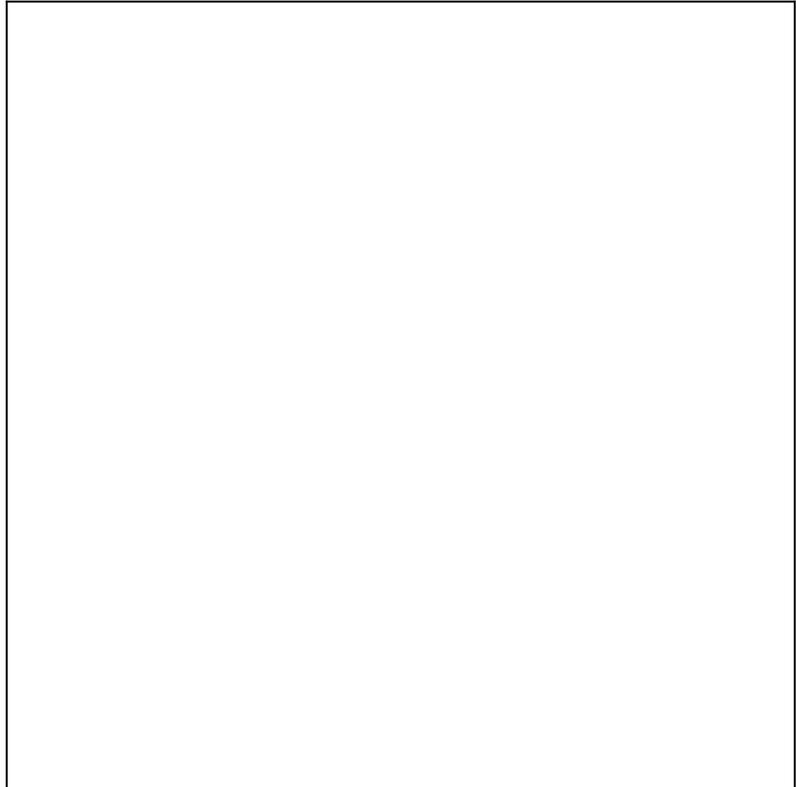
Blue Raiders squander 19-point lead in 68-66 setback to UALR

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. -

Depending on your perspective, Middle Tennessee either gave away a home Sun Belt Conference game or Arkansas-Little Rock simply came back and took a 68-66 triumph from the Blue Raiders in front of 4,077 at Murphy Center Saturday night.

Either way, it was a tough way for Middle Tennessee (8-7, 1-2) to lose a game on a night when it had a golden opportunity to register a weekend sweep in league play and put itself one-half game behind Western Kentucky early in the East Division race.



The Blue Raiders led by as many as 19, 40-21 with 2:58 remaining in the first half, but the lead dwindled to 41-28 by the half and then Arkansas-Little Rock (9-7, 2-2) methodically chipped away in the second half before finally taking its first lead of the game with 1:25 remaining and holding on for the big road win.

"You talk about winning plays," Middle Tennessee coach Kermit Davis said. "Arkansas-Little Rock made all the winning plays tonight from a toughness standpoint, and they deserved to win the game. They made all of the plays when they needed to. You have to give them the credit because they came back and made all the big plays. They outrebounded us 43-26 and that was very disappointing."

Middle Tennessee was led by Marcus Morrison's 19 points and eight rebounds as the senior swingman averaged a double-double in the weekend series against Arkansas State and Arkansas-Little Rock, while junior forward Tim Blue scored a career-high 16 points on 7-of-10 shooting.

While the offense was clicking in the first half, when Middle Tennessee shot 59 percent and established itself on the scoreboard, the second half was a different story as the Blue Raiders shot 26 percent (7-of-27) from the field and were just 1-of-10 from 3-point range. The lone trey came when Fats Cuyler connected for a meaningless 3-pointer with 1 second remaining.

The Blue Raiders led 54-46 following Blue's layup with 8:59 remaining, but Middle Tennessee was 0-for-7 from the field during the next 6:28 and scored just two points off free throws during that span as the Trojans closed to within 56-54 and made it a fight to the finish.

"The second-half letdown is a concern because you can't have letdowns in the second half," Morrison said. "You can't let your guard down and put it in cruise control. This was a critical game and their big bodies had a toll on us at the end of the game."

Middle Tennessee led 59-57 with 2:07 remaining, but Elijah Muldrow tied the game 59-59 with a layup at the 1:52 mark. Following a Blue Raider turnover, Malone Lekheythan converted to give the Trojans their first lead, 61-59 with 1:25 remaining. Morrison missed a 3-pointer and Malone answered with a 3-pointer on the other end to stake Arkansas-Little Rock to its biggest lead, 64-59 with 1:25 remaining.

The Blue Raiders were able to get to within three on two occasions in the final minute but they were never able to tie or regain the lead.

Middle Tennessee returns to action when it travels to South Alabama Thursday night.

POSTGAME NOTES:

BLUE HAS BIG NIGHT: Junior Tim Blue turned in his best game as a Blue Raider in the setback to Arkansas-Little Rock. The first year player scored a career-best 16 points on 7 of 10 shooting in just 24 minutes of action as he hit in double figures for just the second time this year at home. Blue's previous scoring high was 13 points at Louisville.

MORRISON ON FIRE: Senior Marcus Morrison continued his hot streak against UALR Saturday by turning in a team-high 19 points, eight rebounds, and three assists. Over the past five games, Morrison is averaging 15.2 points, 9.0 rebounds, and is shooting 40.3 percent (23-for-57) from the field.

KEEPING MISTAKES DOWN: Middle Tennessee had a disappointing split in its Sun Belt Conference season-opening series, but one positive came in the turnover department. The Blue Raiders had a season-low 10 turnovers against Arkansas State, then had only 11 in the loss to UALR. The 21 miscues in back-to-back games are the fewest in consecutive contests since having only 21 in games against South Alabama and New Orleans during the 2003-04 campaign.

SLUMPING FATS: Middle Tennessee senior Fats Cuyler could not find a way out of his shooting slump on Saturday night. The Leesburg, Fla., native made just 3 of 13 shots from the field against UALR, including 1 of 7 in the second half. Over the past four games, Cuyler is shooting only 22.7 percent from the field (10-of-44).

HOME SWEET HOME???: Middle Tennessee's game against Arkansas-Little Rock marked the first time this season the Blue Raiders have played back-to-back home games. The only other time a Blue Raider team has not played consecutive home games deeper into a season was 1983-84 when Stan Simpson's squad had to wait until Jan. 17-19.

PLAYER OF THE GAME: Marcus Morrison was voted the Alexander Automotive Family Player of the Game against Arkansas-Little Rock by members of the working media.

TIDBITS: Middle Tennessee's bench outscored UALR's bench, 20-2 ... The Blue Raiders shot a sizzling 59.3 percent from the field in the first half which was their best first half showing since connecting on 64.0 percent in the first stanza against Florida Atlantic ... Middle Tennessee is now 49-7 under Kermit Davis when leading at intermission ... After suffering a knee injury at Western Kentucky, freshman Theryn Hudson missed the Blue Raider win over Arkansas State but made his return against UALR ... Adam Vogelsberg failed to hit a shot from the field for the first time as a Blue Raider when he went 0-for-4 against UALR ... Kyle Young, who is suffering from a hand injury, played a season-low 18 minutes in the loss to UALR ... Adam Vogelsberg has now hit 12 consecutive free throws after going 6-for-6 against UALR ... Tonight's announced crowd of 4,077 marks the fourth time in six home games this season the Blue Raiders have topped the 4,000 mark.

POSTGAME QUOTES

MIDDLE TENNESSEE HEAD COACH KERMIT DAVIS

Opening Statement :

"You talk about winning plays. Arkansas-Little Rock made all the winning plays tonight from a toughness standpoint. They have two posts that are rugged and physical. I was really disappointed in Fats [Cuyler], Marcus [Morrison], and Kyle Young. You have to give Little Rock all the credit, we had them down by 19 and they came back with some big shots. They made all the plays when they needed to."

Thoughts on when the momentum shifted to Arkansas-Little Rock :

"You try to get all you can get. It all started with three minutes remaining in the first half. We came into the second half shooting perimeter shots and they were getting all the defensive and offensive rebounds. They out rebounded us 43 to 26, and that was very disappointing."

Thoughts on how Coach Davis feels about his team after a tough loss to UALR:

"I like our team. We have a good makeup of guys who have great character. I like coaching our team. We have to fight thorough some injuries. Our deficiency was physicalness. I was disappointed in the three guys we were depending upon the most to help lead us through the game."

Overall impression on how Arkansas-Little Rock won 68-66:

"We have had too many nights where our guys have missed some easy shots. Tonight was clearly a night where we were not physical enough, and Arkansas-Little Rock deserved to win."

Thoughts on the up and down nature of the game:

"We had some great spells but it just turns on us and we could never get it back."

Senior forward/guard Marcus Morrison:

On Arkansas-Little Rock making a comeback in the second half:

They had pressure in your face all 20 minutes. Everything was going good in the first half. They kept their composure and they kept going even though they were down by 15.

Thoughts on having a letdown in the second half:

It's a concern; you can't have letups in the second half. You can't let your guard down and cruise control in the second half.

About the physical play of Arkansas-Little Rock in the second half:

This was a critical game and the big bodies had a toll on us at the end of the game.

Thoughts on being down late in the second half:

We have to keep playing. We have to make plays during crunch time in the last few critical seconds of the game.

Junior forward Tim Blue

On confidence as a scorer:

I just wanted to be aggressive and help us score any way we could on offense or defense. I just wanted us to win.

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