Middle Tennessee turns back rival Western Kentucky, 80-74

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee borrowed a page from Western Kentucky's repertoire to capture an 80-74 win in front of a season-high 7,097 at Murphy Center Thursday night.

- **Photos:** MT vs. WKU Gallery

The Hilltoppers (20-6, 11-2) had won six Sun Belt Conference games - including five on the road - in their final possession this season, but with the game tied 73-73 with 1:05 remaining it was Middle Tennessee that made the game-winning plays down the stretch. The Blue Raiders outscored Western Kentucky 7-1 in the final 54 seconds to secure the victory.

"I think what you saw tonight was what Western Kentucky fans have been doing for their team for 30-to-35 years and that's willing them to win," Middle Tennessee coach Kermit Davis said. "Our crowd was outstanding and I think they really willed us to win down the stretch. They were into the game and our players fed off of that. It was a great college basketball game between two teams that are playing well down the stretch."

Middle Tennessee (15-11, 7-6) won for the seventh time in nine games and ended Western Kentucky's eight-game winning streak to keep alive its hopes of a first-round bye in next week's Aeropostale Sun Belt Conference Championships at the Murphy Center.

The Blue Raiders' win against their longtime league rival, coupled with Arkansas State's loss at Louisiana-Lafayette, moved Middle Tennessee into a tie for second in the league standings. If the Blue Raiders defeat Florida International in the regular-season finale Monday they will earn the No. 2 seed and accompanying bye in the tournament.

Marcus Morrison and Adam Vogelsberg led the Blue Raiders with 20 points each, while Fats Cuyler cashed in with 11 points. Bud Howard finished with eight points and a game-high eight rebounds for the Blue Raiders. Western Kentucky was led by Anthony Winchester's game-high 23 points.

Middle Tennessee's defense was actually a big key in the second half as the Blue Raiders held the tandem of Winchester and Courtney Lee to a combined nine points in the final 20 minutes.

"I don't know that we did anything differently on defense," Vogelsberg said. "We lost (Winchester) in the zone a few times in the first half and he also hit some tough shots. He and Lee are great players, and they have a very talented team, but coach really emphasized staying with them in the second half and I think we did a much better job of knowing where they were on the court."

The game was a classic battle throughout but it reached a point of intensity down the stretch as the crowd literally stood for the brunt of the final 10 minutes and every shot and play was critical down the stretch. Trailing 68-66 with under three minutes remaining, Cuyler buried a 3-pointer from the corner to give the Blue Raiders a 69-68 lead at the 2:57 mark.

Middle Tennessee increased the lead to 73-68 on Tim Blue's baseline dunk with 2:22 remaining, but the Hilltoppers came storming back much as they have all season.

"It was a war all night and we knew it was going to be that way until the final horn," Morrison said. "That's a great basketball team and we feel like we are playing really well right now. I have never been on a team that beat Western Kentucky so this is big. It's a great feeling."

Western Kentucky tied the game 73-73 on Benson Callier's 3-pointer with 1:03 remaining but that's when the Blue Raiders continued to do what they have done well during their vast turnaround - show character and make plays.

Morrison was fouled and hit two free throws with 54 seconds remaining to give the Blue Raiders the lead for good, 75-73, and Winchester missed two 3-point attempts down the stretch. Middle Tennessee connected on 9-of-10 free throws in the final two minutes to seal the win.

The Blue Raiders play host to Florida International Monday on "Senior Night." Tipoff is 6:06 p.m.

POSTGAME NOTES

FOUR IN A ROW: For the first time in 16 years, Middle Tennessee has now put together four straight winning seasons. Thursday's exciting 80-74 win over Western Kentucky assured the Blue Raiders of a winning campaign by moving their record to 15-11. The last time Middle Tennessee had four straight winning seasons was 1986 through 1989.

MORRISON PLAYS BIG: Senior Marcus Morrison's best game of the season came at the right time for the Blue Raiders on Thursday night. Morrison pumped in 20 points on 6-for-12 shooting to go along with seven rebounds, four assists, and two steals in 29 minutes. It marked the fourth 20-point game of his career and matched his season-high set earlier this year in a win over Freed-Hardeman.

DEADLY TANDEM: With four made three-pointers in the win over WKU, Fats Cuyler and Adam Vogelsberg became the most prolific long range duo in single-season history at Middle Tennessee. The pair has now combined for 122 three-pointers on the year to surpass the tandem of Mike Dean and Tommy Gunn (118 in 2004). Vogelsberg now has 65 treys this season to tie Chris Rainey and Torrey Moore for fourth place all-time, and Cuyler ran his total to 57 to rank ninth.

VOGELSBERG ANSWERS: In the last meeting at Western Kentucky back on Jan. 7, Adam Vogelsberg struggled with his shooting by making only 1-of-6 shots from the field, but on Thursday he atoned for his sub-par game. The junior scored 20 points, including 17 in the second half to key the Blue Raiders' victory over rival WKU. It marked Vogelsberg's third 20-point game of the season.

BYE WITHIN REACH: With the victory over Western Kentucky, Middle Tennessee can earn a bye in next week's SBC Tournament with a win over FIU at home on Monday or a loss by Arkansas State on Saturday at New Orleans. The only other time Middle Tennessee has earned a bye in the SBC Tournament was during its inaugural season back in 2002-03.

PLAYER OF THE GAME: Adam Vogelsberg was voted the Alexander Automotive Family Player of the Game against Western Kentucky by members of the working media.

TIDBITS: Under Kermit Davis, the Blue Raiders are now 52-8 when leading at the half ... Adam Vogelsberg has now hit 21 straight free throws heading into Monday's game against FIU ... MT is a perfect 7-0 this year when scoring 80 or more points ... MT became just the second SBC team to score 80 or more points against the Hilltoppers (ULL had 81) ... Guard Bud Howard equaled his career-high with eight rebounds off the bench to pace the Blue Raiders ... MT is now 4-6 against WKU under Kermit Davis.

Head Coach Kermit Davis
"You have to give Western Kentucky credit. They cause you havoc. They're very athletic and they play you hard. I thought we got tight, but finally we settled down. Kevin [Kanaskie] was a little unsure about himself early, and I think Fats [Cuyler] came in and did a better job."

"We will know going into Monday. We're prepared and it's Senior Night and we have to win. We're in second place. If we get the bye, then we're in the quarterfinals and that's exactly where you want to be."

Marcus Morrison

- "It feels real good to beat Western. It was a war. We know it is going to be a war every time we play them. It's my first time beating them, so it feels good."
- **On putting the first game against Western Kentucky behind them:**
"We put that game out of our minds as soon as it happened. They came out and played great

at their place. We couldn't withstand the pressure at that point in time but we think we got a lot better, a lot more poised and more mature."

- **How big was this win?**
  "It makes all the practice, all the blood, sweat and tears all worthwhile to come out and play in front of a big crowd like that."

On the mindset down the stretch
"When they got up by five, Coach [Davis] brought us together and said, 'Just keep playing and don't put your head down.' We knew it was going to go down all the way to the end. It was a war."

Adam Vogelsberg
Was this a must-win in terms of getting the first-round bye?
"It helps but I don't think it was a must-win, but it definitely helps. Maybe we can still get the bye, but if we don't it's still a big confidence boost for us."

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