Men fall short against East Division leader

J. Jones scores team high 20 points

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - A weak first-half shooting performance and lack of physical play proved troublesome for the Blue Raiders Thursday night against Florida Atlantic in a 71-61 loss at Murphy Center. Middle Tennessee (7-10, 2-2) shot just 29.2 percent from the field in the first half and had just 14 rebounds, six less than the Owls (13-6, 5-0). The Blue Raiders picked up the pace in the second half from the field and connected on 20 of 24 free throws to help keep it close against FAU. "I thought we had some opportunities in the first half, we just missed some point-blank shots around the goal, and our 'bigs' tonight were 4 for 22. We just missed shots right at the rim, got intimidated by a couple of blocked shots, which is very disappointing. But even as poorly as we played, we were only down by seven, and missed a dead layup to cut it to five at the half," head coach Kermit Davis said. Redshirt-sophomore Jason Jones again led the offensive charge for Middle Tennessee as he scored a team high 20 points. J. Jones ended the game 7 for 11 from the field and 6 for 8 from the free throw line. The Memphis, Tenn., native also had a team high eight rebounds to assist the defense. Senior James Washington was the only other Blue Raider in double figure scoring with 16 as he made six of seven free throw opportunities. Defensively, Middle Tennessee ended the game with just one less rebound than FAU, who had 32, and grabbed 13 on the offensive side of the ball. Junior Trevor Charles added assistance with seven rebounds and three players had four offensive rebounds. "We shouldn't have been intimidated. We've played Tennessee and Vanderbilt; we scored against North Texas' bigs, so I don't know. We opened up and ran a set play

for J.T. (Sulton) and he shot a one-footer and got it blocked. We put Trevor Ottley in there, we put Shawn Jones in there, and we couldn't get a guy to get physical around the rim. If you go 4-22, can you remember a bad shot that any big took? You take them every time you play a college basketball game. They have done it before in games, and we've got to get them back to being physical around the rim," Davis said. "It seems like when our bigs play well, we win, and when they don't, we lose. In the North Texas game, James Gallman and James Washington only had one field goal between them, and we won. Our bigs were so good, and the scoring was so balanced, and they just scored around the goal. Tonight, we just weren't very physical. And we've got to get better guard play, too. We had six assists tonight, and if we make half of those shots around the rim, we have at least twice that many. If we don't have to foul late, then we only give up 60 or 62 points." Florida Atlantic started the game shooting well and posted a 51 percent from the field with four scoring in double figures. The Owls were led by Raymond Taylor who scored a team high 26 after going 8 for 13 from the field and made all seven of his free throws. "Give Florida Atlantic credit. Raymond Taylor took over the game in the second half, made great decisions, made critical shots. We got it down to six late, Jason Jones shot an ill-advised three. Then we got it to six again under two, and Kerry (Hammonds) couldn't stop Taylor's dribble penetration. He got inside us, and it went up to nine, or we could maybe have gotten that thing to a one-possession game," Davis said. "Last year we did a good job on Taylor. But he's very fast with the ball, and I thought he did a very good job on James Washington. He denied him the ball at the court; he's a very well-conditioned player. He doesn't get tired, and he really competed on the defensive side. James got a few baskets late, but I thought Taylor did a good job the whole night on him, and Taylor's a really, really good free thrower at the end of the games." The two teams traded points to begin play but the FAU started to pull away and a trey by Gantt made it a five-point game, 15-10. Then the Owls went on an 11-5 run to take a 10-point lead, 26-16 with 1:15 to play. Washington hit a trey for Middle Tennessee with 36 seconds on the clock to cut the lead to seven and give the Blue Raiders a little momentum going into the half. The Blue Raiders shot just 29.2 percent in the first half as FAU took a 26-19 lead. J. Jones guided the team in the first half going 3 for 4 from the field to score eight points. He also grabbed a team high five rebounds. The two teams traded points to open the second half with FAU keeping an eight-point lead, 36-28. FAU continued to keep the Blue Raiders in check taking a nine-point lead, 46-37, at the eight-minute media. Middle Tennessee continued to battle and after a technical foul by FAU's McCoy, Washington made a free throw followed by a trey on the next possession cutting the lead to five, 63-57, with 1:43 to play. FAU's Taylor made a layup and turned it into a three-point play after being fouled by Ottley to put the Owls back up eight, 66-57, with 1:17 on the clock. The Blue Raiders will be back in action on Saturday, Jan. 15 when the face Arkansas State in Jonesboro, Ark. Tipoff is set for 7:05 p.m. and Chip Walters will have the call on the Blue Raider Network.

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