J. Jones to help guide team against unbeaten Denver

Game with SBC West Division leader set for 7 p.m. Saturday

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - With half a dozen new players coming into the men's basketball program this season, everybody knew it was going to take some time to mold them into an effective unit. Freshmen needed time to mature, transfers needed time to learn Coach Kermit Davis' system. The first newcomer to consistently prove that he needs to be on the floor is Jason Jones, a transfer from UTEP, who sat out last season. Now a sophomore, Jones has come on strong and will lead the Blue Raiders against Denver in the Murphy Center on Saturday night at 7 pm. In the last nine games, including all six Sun Belt Conference battles, Jones has scored in double figures each time. He is currently the team's No. 2 scorer, behind senior James Washington, but in conference games only, Jones leads Washington, 15.0 to 14.7 ppg. Jones is also the teams leading rebounder. Middle Tennessee will need every point and rebound they can get from Washington, Jones and everyone else if they are to knock off unbeaten Western Division leader Denver Saturday night. Guard play will be critical in overcoming Denver's unusual offensive play with four guards who are all excellent shooters. The Pioneers have caught fire since the holidays, and come to town with an eight-game winning streak. Davis is pleased with Jones' efforts so far. "He is out there all the time with Rob Moxley or Win Case over the last month or six weeks, working on conditioning, shooting, dribble moves, just a bunch of different things on the floor." "I think he sensed that he needed to step

up for this team. He's cut down on his turnovers, except against Troy, but when he's played well, he's rebounded." Rebounding has, indeed, been a key to Jones success. "I think the strongest part of my game is slashing and getting to the rim, but I love to get rebounds. That gets me going, but on the offensive end, I'm a slasher". Having played quarterback for his high school team in Memphis, Jones is used to getting hit, and has no fear of driving the lane, despite being smaller than opponent's big men. "If the game plan is to take it inside against a shot-blocker, then I'm going to try to pump-fake and try to foul him out." Another thing that Jones does well is see the open man and get the ball to him. Against Tennessee State, James Gallman was one of the beneficiaries of Jones' talent. Jones found Gallman open for five three-pointers. "Jason driving like he does helps me," noted the sharp-shooting Gallman. "He'll drive on anybody, he's just a playmaker. Every time he drove, I'd just fill it up." What has been the key to his emergence as a key player? "I'm, being a little more dedicated now, staying in the gym more, preparing myself, knowing what I have to do. Rebounding is the key to my game. If I get rebounds, my game will progress. "I talked to Coach Davis a couple of times about what I'm doing wrong, what I needed to improve on. He said I needed to drive the ball more, get my teammates more involved in the game. He also said I need to get a lot of rebounds at my position. Jones has accomplished this emergence as a key player, despite having to sit out several minutes in each game to catch his breath. "I have always had a sinus problem, but it is bothering me more now because I have also been sick. I use an inhaler, drink some Gatorade and try to get back out there and compete. I should be over this pretty soon, though. It's a temporary deal. "He got a little tired against Troy, he had five turnovers, which is not typical for Jason. He's been playing great, and rebounding the ball well." said Davis. Jones credits his success to a re-focus after he transferred to Middle Tennessee. "Two years ago, I was starting as a true freshman at UTEP. I was a defensive role player, a key defensive player. When I came here, I came in with the mentality that I need to do what was right to help MTSU improve. I try to play as many positions as possible to help the team out, whether it was point guard, shooter or even center if I need to. "The main thing is to get the "W", so I have to work hard every day in practice." A "W" against Denver would be a great way to start a stretch run toward another conference championship for the Blue Raiders. Tipoff is set for 7 p.m. on Saturday, Jan. 22 at Murphy Center. Saturday's game will feature the 1977-78 Middle Tennessee men's basketball team in the annual "Legends Reunion Night".

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