

Butler 74, Middle Tennessee 65: Blue Raiders crumble

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MILWAUKEE — The dream ended with Giddy Potts barricading himself in a bathroom stall, undone by everything he did not do, sobbing because he accepted blame.

Minutes earlier, Potts' season shattered on the BMO Harris Bradley Center floor, where the biggest game of his career devolved into a horror show impossible to forget. Potts, the second-leading scorer for No. 12 Middle Tennessee State, had taken eight shots and missed them all. When his team needed him most, the box score printed out blank.

"He thought he lost the game," coach Kermit Davis said. "He's such a critical reason why we're here and what a great year we had. I hate it for him that it happened on this stage tonight."

Instead the stage belonged to fourth-seeded Butler, whose white-hot shooting early and pristine execution late were enough for a wire-to-wire victory against a team many believed would be this year's dark horse. The Bulldogs scored points on their final eight possessions — including 10 makes in 12 attempts from the free-throw line — to upend the Blue Raiders, 74-65, and advance to the Sweet 16.

"Players win games," Butler coach Chris Holtmann said. "We've got really good players, and they had a heck of an effort."

The effort showed early as the Bulldogs surged to an early lead. Perhaps in the pregame huddle, or perhaps in the shoot-around earlier in the day, the figurative hot hand of guard Avery Woodson expanded to the rest of his teammates and lingered for 30 minutes.

Woodson, who drained 5 three-pointers in the first half against No. 13 Winthrop on Thursday, was part of a three-headed attack that made six shots from beyond the arc in the opening 20 minutes Saturday night. There were two triples apiece for Woodson (7 points, 5 rebounds), fellow guard Kamar Baldwin (13 points, 4 assists) and forward Kelan Martin (team-high 19 points, 6 rebounds) as Butler raced to a 13-point lead.

When Martin swished his final shot of the half — a three-pointer from the corner off a piercing diagonal pass — the Bulldogs capped a 21-11 spurt that staggered Middle Tennessee.

"We almost went into a little panic stage a little bit," Davis said. "We tried to cheat out. We lost assignments and just got out of our defense."

A queasy offensive performance by the Blue Raiders (40% shooting in the first half) worsened the sting of Butler's barrage. From the opening tap, Potts appeared nervous at best and calamitous at worst. His loose ball-handling fractured three possessions before the first media timeout and a fourth at the 17-minute mark of the second half.

As Potts crumpled, Davis stomped the sideline in perpetual rage. He shrieked at Potts, who bickered with teammate Reggie Upshaw before halftime. He bellowed at role players Tyrik Dixon and Aldonis Foote for attempting shots and passes that strayed from their traditional roles.

"It was not nerves at all," Davis said. "Maybe a little frustration, you know. Our team just didn't play with the identity that we played with most of the year."

Still, Middle Tennessee clung to life, its collective spirit dragged from the depths by leading scorer JaCorey Williams. As momentum barreled toward Butler, Williams unleashed a personal 6-0 run made louder by his primal screams and punches to his own chest. A three-pointer by Upshaw on the next possession sent the Blue Raiders to halftime trailing, 36-31.

With nothing from Potts, who was benched for a portion of the second half, sophomore Antwain Johnson offered an unlikely source of scoring from an otherwise barren backcourt. By halftime, Johnson eclipsed his season average of 4.4 points per game. By crunch time, Johnson's courageous shot-making resembled the type of performance expected from Potts.

His back-to-back jumpers shrunk the Butler lead to 59-54 with 4:29 remaining. He finished with 19 points on 8-of-12 shooting to raise his season high by a bucket.

"I was just trying to win," Johnson said.

But Middle Tennessee would draw no closer. A deflating three-pointer by Butler big man Andrew Chrabaszcz — his first and only attempt of the game — nudged the lead to six as the Blue Raiders started to panic. The Bulldogs shut the door by making 10 of 12 free throws in the final three minutes.

When the dream ended, Potts drove toward the hoop for a meaningless attempt in the closing seconds. He sliced inside the three-point line, worked his way toward the paint and flung up a prayer that went unanswered.

All he could do was cry.