

# Blue Raiders turn back defending champs, 59-51

## Even league record at 2-2

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**MOBILE, Ala.** - Road wins in the Sun Belt Conference should not surprise Middle Tennessee fans. After all, no league member has won more away from home than the Blue Raiders since Head Coach Kermit Davis' hiring prior to the 2002-03 season. Middle Tennessee's riveting 59-51 win against defending Sun Belt champion South Alabama; however, is one that carries a lot of weight as it came in the Jags' league home opener and enabled the Blue Raiders (6-8, 2-2) to climb back to even in the conference race as they travel home to face Troy Saturday at 2 p.m. The gutsy win was the Blue Raiders' 20th conference road win under Davis and players called the defensive showpiece a gut-check and character triumph. "This was a game that was going to tell us a lot about ourselves," said senior forward Kyle Young, who finished with 10 points on 5-of-8 shooting and pulled six rebounds. "This was a big win



and allowed us to get back to even in the league race after a slow start. Our team is getting better with each game and our young players are progressing well. We have to build on this." The Blue Raiders swept their first SBC road trip of the season as Desmond Yates and Kevin Kanaskie led the way with a game-high 12 points and Young finished with 10. Nigel Johnson added nine points and Calvin O'Neil finished with eight. The big story, once again, was defense and rebounding. The SBC's best team in scoring defense held South Alabama to 51 points on 36 percent shooting from the field.

The 51 points were the second fewest of the season for the Jaguars, who were limited to one field goal in the final 10 minutes of the first half as the Blue Raiders fought their way back into the game. It was on the glass where the Blue Raiders dominated and controlled the game. Davis has been stressing rebounding and Middle Tennessee answered with a 43-22 edge on the glass and it completed the two-game road swing with a whopping 83 total rebounds after pulling 40 at Florida International. The 43 rebounds were a season high for the Blue Raiders. Tim Blue pulled a game-high 10 rebounds and Kanaskie yanked a career-high seven caroms. Johnson and Young each pulled six. The Blue Raiders dominated the defensive glass as they allowed just six offensive rebounds, leading to just two second-chance points for the Jaguars (7-7, 1-2). "It's just kind of what we are - a team that is doing it with defense and rebounding," Davis said. "I'm proud of our guys and the progress we are making in those areas. Prior to this road trip I was disappointed with our rebounding but we continue to work and grind in those areas and our players have been receptive to coaching as evidenced by what they did on this road trip." Middle Tennessee rallied from behind in the first half to carry a 27-23 lead into the half and the second half materialized into a back-and-forth battle that featured clutch baskets, key free-throw shooting, staunch defense, and a refuse-to-lose attitude by the Blue Raiders, who built a 30-23 advantage out of the half only to see the Jags battle back and take a 38-36 lead on Stephen Cowherd's 3-pointer with 12:09 remaining. That's exactly when the Blue Raiders flexed their collective muscle. Young's 17-foot jumper tied the game 38-38 with 11:40 remaining and Blue provided Middle Tennessee a 40-38 advantage at the 9:31 remaining. From there, Middle Tennessee never trailed although the teams were separated by just one possession throughout the vast majority of the competitive contest the rest of the way. South Alabama trailed 47-46 with 4:45 remaining but the Blue Raiders allowed just two field goals the remainder of the way. On the offensive end, Young's jumper with 2:50 remaining stretched the lead to 49-46 and, following another defensive stop, Desmond Yates took a pass from Kanaskie glided to the glass and dropped in a layup for a 51-46 lead with 1:05 remaining. It would be the last field goal attempt of the game for Middle Tennessee, which connected on eight straight free-throw attempts in the final 42 seconds to seal the win. Kanaskie was four-of-four from the line down the stretch, while Johnson and O'Neil were perfect on their two attempts. Middle Tennessee was 12-of-13 from the charity stripe in the game - all in the second half - for a 92.3 percent showing. South Alabama came out strong and built an early 21-12 advantage but Middle Tennessee used a 15-4 run over the final 8:01 of the first half to turn the deficit into a 27-23 halftime lead. The run was keyed by strong inside play by Young, Yates and Theryn Hudson. In fact, Young's dunk on an alley-oop from Kanaskie with 1:57 remaining pulled the Blue Raiders even 23-23. Yates' putback with 59 seconds remaining in the half gave the Blue Raiders their first lead since early in the game, 25-23, and Young's offensive rebound and putback sent Middle Tennessee into the half with a 27-23 edge. **NOTES:** Kevin Kanaskie was 7-of-7 from the free-throw line and is perfect in 19 attempts from the charity stripe in four SBC games, which leads the league ... Nigel Johnson, who was 3-of-4 from the line against the Jags, is 15-of-17 in SBC games ... Middle Tennessee's 43 rebounds are a season high. The Blue Raiders had 83 rebounds in the two-game road trip after pulling what was then a season-high 40 caroms at Florida International ... Middle Tennessee improved to 6-0 this season when holding the opposition to 58 points or less. The Blue Raiders are holding opponents to 64.1 points per game on the average and have held eight of their 14 opponents to 65 points or fewer ... Kyle Young entered the game second in the SBC in field goal percentage and is now shooting 61.5 percent (48-of-78) after connecting on five of eight attempts against South Alabama ... Young played in his 101st career game and made his 77th career start ... Middle Tennessee has hit at least one 3-pointer in 319 consecutive games ... The Blue Raiders are 61-4 in 65 games under Davis when outshooting the opposition. They improved to 57-10 under Davis when leading at the half, as well as 64-12 when

leading when five minutes remaining ... The Blue Raiders notched their 20th SBC road win under Davis, which is the most of any current league member since the start of the 2002-03 season.

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