

Youthful Blue Raiders improving against one of nation's toughest schedules

Team has won four of five entering Wednesday's home game vs. Arkansas State

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. -

The Middle Tennessee men's basketball team has had to grow up quickly this season and based on the results the Blue Raiders are not suffering from growing pains. Despite playing one of the nation's toughest schedules with the youngest team in the Sun Belt Conference, Middle Tennessee enters its league home game against Arkansas State Wednesday firmly entrenched in the top half of the conference standings as the halfway mark of the league race approaches. The Blue Raiders (8-9, 4-3) are tied for fourth overall in the SBC standings as they prepare to play host to Arkansas State (9-10, 4-3) Wednesday. Tipoff at Murphy Center is 7 p.m. Middle Tennessee starts four sophomores and a senior and brings three freshmen and a senior off the bench. Of those nine, four players have not played in a Division I basketball game until this season. Entering play this week, Middle Tennessee's strength of schedule is ninth in the nation, which leads all Sun Belt teams, while the Blue



Raiders' RPI is 117th in the latest RPI Report - second among SBC teams. One would think the abundance of youth, coupled with such a demanding schedule, would



make things even more difficult; however, the Blue Raiders have shown tremendous signs of maturity by winning four of their last five and putting themselves in the thick of the SBC race. "I think the biggest thing that has happened is that we have continued to make progress and we have been a very good practice team," said sophomore guard Calvin O'Neil. "We took some hits early but I think those games against tough competition helped make us better. The thing we looked at was the fact that we have been in all but two games and we've been competitive. As we have grown and developed and continued to improve we have found ways to start winning these games. "Everyone says our future is bright, and we know it is, but we feel like we have a chance to do something pretty special this year, too." Following is a breakdown of where Sun Belt men's basketball teams rank nationally in regard to strength of schedule and RPI. **Strength of schedule**

9. Middle Tennessee

- 25. Louisiana-Lafayette
- 48. Western Kentucky
- 103. Florida Atlantic
- 121. South Alabama
- 129. UALR
- 148. Arkansas State
- 174. Troy
- 178. Louisiana-Monroe
- 211. North Texas
- 219. Florida International
- 243. New Orleans
- 323. Denver

RPI

- 62. Western Kentucky
- 117. Middle Tennessee**
- 136. South Alabama
- 141. North Texas
- 155. Florida Atlantic
- 193. Louisiana-Monroe
- 202. Troy
- 222. UALR
- 225. Arkansas State
- 259. New Orleans
- 274. Florida International
- 298. Louisiana-Lafayette
- 336. Denver

HOOP AND HOLLER FOR A DOLLAR: Middle Tennessee fans will have a chance to take advantage of \$1 tickets for Wednesday's game against Arkansas State. All tickets for Wednesday's game have been priced at \$1 as Blue Raider fans have an opportunity to "Hoop and Holler For a Dollar," in a key Sun Belt game against the Indians. It is also the first game that students are back in

school and one lucky student will win cash just for attending the game!!! One student's name will be picked in the second half and if that student is in attendance, he/she has five minutes to claim the cash!!! Don't forget to wear your Rowdy Raider T-shirt and sign up for a chance to win hundreds in cash. All students are admitted free with a valid student ID. **ROAD WARRIORS:** Middle Tennessee is 4-0 on the road in the Sun Belt Conference, which makes it just one of three teams nationally with four conference road wins and no defeats entering play this week. The other two are East Tennessee State and Delaware State. The Blue Raiders are also just one of four teams in program history to enjoy a four-game conference road streak at any point in the season. The others occurred in 1986-87, 1981-82, and 1974-75. The longest conference road win streak in school history is five (1974-75). **WHERE THEY RANK:** Several Middle Tennessee players are prominently ranked in the league standings, led by sophomore point guard Kevin Kanaskie, who is No. 8 nationally in assists (6.1) entering play this week. In all games, Kanaskie ranks first in the SBC in assists, third in assist/turnover ratio (2.06), seventh in free-throw percentage (.782), 11th in 3-point field goal percentage (.407), 12th in 3-point field goals made (2.06 per game), and 21st in scoring (12.4). Kanaskie also is ranked in six categories in SBC games only, including first in assists (6.57), and he's among the Top 10 in free throw percentage, 3-point field goal percentage, 3-point field goals made, and assist/turnover ratio. He ranks 16th in scoring in SBC contests at 14.4 points per game. Freshman standout Desmond Yates also has made his mark in his debut season in the league. Yates is seventh in the SBC in field goal percentage (.511), and 26th in scoring (10.9). In SBC games only, Yates is among the leaders in field goal percentage, free-throw percentage, and scoring. Kyle Young is second in the SBC in field goal percentage (.620), and 18th in rebounding (5.2), while he's first among league leaders for field goal percentage (.667) in SBC games only. Tim Blue is ranked among league leaders in field goal percentage, rebounding, and blocked shots, while Nigel Johnson leads the SBC in free-throw percentage, both overall and in SBC games only. He's shooting 87 percent from the line in all games and 89 percent in SBC games only. Johnson also ranks 14th in SBC games only. Theryn Hudson is 15th among SBC leaders in blocked shots with 0.65 per contest. **ON THE HORIZON:** Middle Tennessee's next home game, Jan. 27, against Louisiana-Lafayette will feature a promotion Blue Raider fans - past and present - are sure to enjoy. It will be "80s Theme Night" as Middle Tennessee celebrates the 25th anniversary of the Blue Raiders shocking upset of Kentucky in the 1982 NCAA Tournament. Fans are encouraged to come dressed in their favorite 80s outfit, and there will be a special halftime salute as players from the 1982 squad are recognized. The current Blue Raider team will be wearing 1982 retro jerseys and all music will be hits from 1982. Additionally, this game will serve as "Legends Night," as former players from all previous Middle Tennessee teams are invited to talk a walk down memory lane. As an added bonus, it's "Take A Kid To The Game Night." Parents buy one adult price ticket for \$10 and your child gains free admittance.

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