

# Sun Belt's top rivalry takes center stage

## WKU turns back Blue Raiders on ESPN2

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**BOWLING GREEN, Ky.** - The Sun Belt Conference's best rivalry took center stage when Middle Tennessee and Western Kentucky battled before a national television audience on ESPN2 Saturday. It proved to be a beneficial showing for the SBC as the Blue Raiders and Hilltoppers put forth valiant efforts before Western Kentucky eventually sealed the win late in the second half and took a 65-53 win in front of 6,397 at Diddle Arena. Senior Tim Blue came up large for the Blue Raiders and narrowly missed a double double with 12 points and nine rebounds, both game highs. Kevin Kanaskie added 11 points for the Blue Raiders, who also received seven points from Theryn Hudson and Nigel Johnson. Western Kentucky's balanced scoring



attack was paced by Jeremy Evans, Tyrone Brazelton, and Courtney Lee, with 11 points each, and A.J. Slaughter added 10 as the Hilltoppers improved to 18-9 overall, 10-5 in the SBC. The game capped the end of a grueling stretch of games that saw the Blue Raiders face, in succession, East Division leader South Alabama, West Division leader Louisiana-Monroe, and Western Kentucky, which is currently in third place overall and controls its destiny in terms of garnering the third and final bye into the SBC Championships next month. "It's been a tough stretch of games against some very talented teams," Middle Tennessee coach Kermit Davis said. "We had our chances against Western Kentucky today but they made more hustle plays, getting to loose balls, and then making us pay when they had those second and third chances. Our team has been resilient all season and I know our players are going to bounce back and work hard to finish the regular-season strong as we position ourselves for the Sun Belt Tournament." Middle Tennessee's defense certainly was good enough to win the game, limiting the Hilltoppers to a season-low 65 points - 14 points below their season average. Darren Avery continued his defensive superlatives in the setback. He drew the tough assignment of guarding Lee, the Preseason Player of the Year, and the dynamic guard was

limited to the 11 points on 3-of-10 shooting from the field. It marks the fifth straight game Avery has started against the opposite team's top-scoring perimeter player and in each game that player has been held below his average. Blue produced one of his best games in recent weeks with his 12 points but Middle Tennessee's offense was consistent enough to complete a comeback and the Blue Raiders allowed too many second chances in the second half to rally. The game was tight and back-and-forth throughout the first half, which featured one tie and six lead changes. Hudson's layup with 6:30 remaining in the first half capped a 8-0 run that erased an 18-11 Hilltoppers lead and gave the Blue Raiders (12-14, 7-8) a 19-18 advantage. The Hilltoppers came back with an 11-1 run to take a 29-20 lead with 1:26 remaining in the half before the Blue Raiders closed the opening stanza with three straight points by Kyle Young to go into the break trailing 29-23. The Blue Raiders cut the lead to three on three different occasions in the second half but Western Kentucky had an answer each time and eventually turned the contest in its favor for good with a 15-6 run midway through the period to build a 46-35 lead. The Blue Raiders will face Florida International Thursday. Tipoff is 20 minutes following the conclusion of the women's game, which tips at 5:30 p.m.

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