Blue, Young go out in style on Senior Night

Blue Raiders turn back FAU, 79-59; Play at Troy in first round of SBC Tournament Wednesday

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee brought a halt to a pair of five-game streaks here Saturday night, ending its five-game losing streak and bringing to an end Florida Atlantic's five-game win streak in a 79-59 triumph on Senior Night at Murphy Center.

The Blue Raiders (13-16, 8-10) made sure seniors Tim Blue and Kyle Young closed the regular season on a winning note as they scored a season-high 79 points on 53 percent (29-of-55) shooting from the field to sweep the season series from the Owls (15-14, 10-8).

Four Blue Raiders scored double figures in the balanced offensive attack, led by Calvin O'Neil's 15-point performance - the second-highest output of his career - while Blue continued his late-season surge with 14 points and seven rebounds. Nigel Johnson tallied 11 points to produce double-figure scoring in consecutive games for the first time this season, and stellar sophomore point guard Kevin Kanaskie continued his season-long stretch of solid

play with 11 assists and no turnovers to go with seven points. Young contributed eight points.

Middle Tennessee moved into a three-way for eighth with the win; however, it will have to travel to Troy for the first round of the Sun Belt Conference championships Wednesday at 7 p.m., as the Trojans earned the No. 8 seed by virtue of the tie-breaker and the Blue Raiders will be the No. 9 seed.

Guard play was really the key factor in the contest as the Blue Raiders' starting guard combination of O'Neil, Kanaskie, and Johnson combined for 33 points, 19 assists and just one turnover. Kanaskie became the first Middle Tennessee player to dish out double figures in assists in three games during the same season, while O'Neil's five assists were the second-highest of his career and he had no turnovers. The Blue Raiders had a season-high 21 assists as a team on 29 field goals made.

"It's about guard play and our guards had 33 points, 19 assists and one turnover," Middle Tennessee head coach Kermit Davis said. "When you get guard play like that you are not going to lose very many times. We had great unselfishness with 21 assists and 29 baskets made. Those guys were very good tonight."

Middle Tennessee led the game wire-to-wire, controlling a close contest in the first half and then breaking it open with a 43-point second half on the way to the 20-point win. In addition to the 53 percent shooting clip from the field the Blue Raiders also knocked down 85 percent (17-of-20) from the free-throw line.

Middle Tennessee held an opponent to less than 60 points for the 11th time this season and the Owls managed just 38 percent shooting from the field (16-of-42). The Blue Raiders, who lead the Sun Belt in scoring defense, allowed just seven second-half field goals as they pulled away in the contest.

POSTGAME NOTES

GOING OUT IN STYLE: Middle Tennessee honored seniors Tim Blue and Kyle Young during a pregame ceremony on "Senior Night" and the Blue Raiders sent the duo out in style. Middle Tennessee improved to 4-1 on Senior Night under Head Coach Kermit Davis, including four straight wins. The seniors combined for 22 points in the win with Blue scoring 14 points and pulling seven rebounds and Young added eight points. The 14 points are the fourth-highest of the season and mark the 26th double-figure scoring game of his career. Blue also led the team in rebounding for the 20th time.

SENIORS ALSO WIN OFF COURT: Young and Blue have been winners on the court but they are also highly-successful student-athletes. Young already has earned his Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration and is working on his Master's, while Blue is on target to earn his diploma in May. Both seniors were joined by people instrumental in shaping their lives during a pregame ceremony. Blue was joined by his parents, Felicia and Reginald Washington, and his uncle, Willie Denson. Young was joined by his parents, Peggy and Spence Young, who have seen the great majority of all of their son's collegiate contests at Middle Tennessee.

KANASKIE IN CLASS BY HIMSELF: Sophomore point guard Kevin Kanaskie became the only player in school history to produce three double-figure assist game in the same season with 11 against Florida Atlantic, while committing no turnovers. Kanaskie, who is one of the nation's top assists men, also had 12 in an earlier game at Florida Atlantic and a career-high 13 assists against

Louisiana-Lafayette. Kanaskie has an eye-popping 7.2-to-1 assist-to-turnover ratio in those three games with 36 assists and just five turnovers. They are also three of the top 11 assists games in school history.

KANASKIE IN CLASS BY SELF II: At the end of the regular season sophomore guard Kevin Kanaskie is doing something no Blue Raider has in the 84-year history of the program. Entering the postseason Kanaskie is the only player to lead his team in scoring (12.3), 3-pointers (63), assists (178), and steals (30) in the same season. He moved into seventh on the single-season 3-point field goals made list with one against Florida Atlantic - his 63rd of the season. Kanaskie has hit at least one 3-pointer in 17 straight and 28 of 29 games. The only contest in which he failed to connect from beyond the arc was at Memphis.

KANASKIE MOVES UP CAREER LIST: With 11 assists against Florida Atlantic Kevin Kanskie has now accumulated 252 in his career, as he passed Greg Joyner (1977-79) to move into ninth on the career assists list at Middle Tennessee. The State College, Pa., native also has 178 on the season, which is fifth on the single-season list. He entered the week ranked No. 11 nationally in assists and his 6.1 assist average this season is third-best on the single-season list at Middle Tennessee. It is the highest single-season average since Gerald Harris averaged 6.7 in 1988-89. He has had nine games with eight assists or more this season which are the most ever in a single season by a Blue Raider point guard.

YOUNG A WORKHORSE: Kyle Young continued to move up the Blue Raider ranks for durability against Florida Atlantic. Young played in his 116th career game - the third most in school history - and made his 87th career start to tie Richard Duncan for seventh most. Young will tie Lee Nosse for second on the career list for games played with his 117th appearance at Troy Wednesday. The career mark for games played is Kerry Hammonds' 121.

O'NEIL COMES UP BIG: Sophomore guard Calvin O'Neil has one of his best career games against Florida Atlantic with a team-high 15 points on six-of-nine shooting and five assists and no turnovers. The 15 points were the second-highest scoring output of his career and just two points shy of his career high of 17. The six field goals tied his career high and his two steals tied a season high. The five assists are the second most in his career. O'Neil has 11 assists and one turnover in his last two games.

JOHNSON ON UPSWING: Nigel Johnson helped spark Middle Tennessee to its highest scoring output of the season with his second straight solid performance Saturday. Johnson scored 11 points on 3-of-4 shooting from the field - all 3-pointers - to give him double figure scoring games in succession for the first time as a Blue Raider. He scored 10 at Troy last Thursday. The three 3-pointers are also a career high for Johnson.

UNSELFISH PLAY SPARKS TOP OUTPUT: Middle Tennessee scored a season-high 79 points against Florida Atlantic Saturday and a key was the unselfish play exhibited by the guards. The Blue Raiders had a season-high 21 assists on their 29 field goals made and the starting trio of guards (Kevin Kanaskie, Nigel Johnson, and Calvin O'Neil) combined for 19 of them with just one turnover.

45TH UNDER DAVIS: Middle Tennessee's win against Florida Atlantic was its 45th in the Sun Belt Conference under Head Coach Kermit Davis. The 45 wins represent the fourth most of any league member since the 02-03 season, Davis' first at Middle Tennessee.

ANOTHER DEFENSISVE SHOWPIECE: Defense has been a trademark of the Blue Raiders all season and they put together another sterling performance against Florida Atlantic. The Owls were limited to 59 points, marking the 11th time this season the Blue Raiders have held an opponent to 59 points or less and they are 10-1 in those contests. Middle Tennessee leads the Sun Belt in scoring defense, allowing just 64 points per contest. The Blue Raiders entered the Florida Atlantic game third in the Sun Belt in field goal percentage defense and held the Owls to 38.1 percent from the field (16-of-42). It marks the 11th time this season Middle Tennessee has held an opponent to 40 percent or less from the field and the Blue Raiders are 11-0 in those contests.

BLUE FINISHING STRONG: Senior Tim Blue is putting together his best stretch of the season at the most important time. He has scored double figures in three of the last four games, including 14 against Florida Atlantic, and he has seven or more rebounds in three of the last four games. Over the last five games Blue is averaging 10.6 points and 6.2 rebounds while shooting 60 percent (22-of-37) from the field.

DOUBLE FIGURES FOR YATES: Blue Raiders Freshman of the Year candidate Desmond Yates registered double figures for the 17th time this season with 10 against Florida Atlantic Saturday. Yates has led the Blue Raiders in scoring nine times in his rookie season and has scored 21 or more four times.

FAST BREAKS: Kevin Kanaskie made his 40th consecutive start against Florida Atlantic Saturday night, the longest such streak on the team. Kanskie is averaging 15.8 points over the last five games ... Dino Hair tied his career high with seven points against Florida Atlantic ...The Blue Raiders improved to 3-0 against Florida Atlantic ... The Blue Raider reserves outscored Florida Atlantic's 24-4 and Middle Tennessee also owned a commanding 34-4 edge scoring in the paint ... Middle Tennessee has hit at least one 3-pointer in 333 games ... The Blue Raiders improved to 68-6 under Davis when outshooting the opposition.

Postgame Quotes
Middle Tennessee Head Coach Kermit Davis
On the team's win against FAU:
"It's about guard play. Our guards had 33 points, 19 assists and one turnover. When you get guard play like that, you're not going to lose very many times. I thought Tim Blue was more active on his senior night. I wish Kyle [Young] could have gone out the right way. He had five personal fouls and I wanted him to be a guy at the end that would come out and get the respects from the fans he has earned. He got a great ovation but I wish he could have come out under different circumstances. I thought we had more guys to play. We shot 53 percent and gave up 38. With those stats, you have a great chance to win the game."

On the team shooting 53 percent:
"We had great unselfishness with having 21 assists and 29 baskets made. We got to the free throw line a little bit. We were a little bit more conscious on the inside-out. I thought Theryn Hudson had the potential to have a really big game, but he stayed in foul trouble."

On the play of Calvin O'Neil:
"I thought he was much more aggressive. I thought Kevin Kanaskie gave him some great pitches ahead. Calvin was aggressive going to the rim. The most athletic play he made was the tip. Hopefully his aggressive play will carry into tournament play."

On the past few practices:
"Our practices have been really good most of the year. They are resilient guys and fun to be around. I thought we had really good turnaround time after the Troy game. Yesterday we were really physical in the hour-and-a-half practice and hopefully we can continue this momentum into the tournament."

Senior Forward Tim Blue
On the tonight's win:
"I think we worked hard in practice these last couple of days and it really came together tonight."

On what the win means heading into postseason play:
"I think [the win] was great timing. It was our last regular season game. We had lost five straight and to get that last win before going to the [Sun Belt Conference] Tournament gives a little momentum."

Senior Forward Kyle Young
On tonight's win:
"It was the best offensive output all year and we held [Florida Atlantic] to under 40 percent. That was one of our goals for them game. It wasn't just an offensive game it was also a defensive game. I thought for the most part a lot of players came out and played really well. We have to have more than two players play well every game to win games and I thought we had five, six or seven - it might have been the whole team that played well."

Looking ahead to postseason play:
"I think teams forgot about us but tonight winning the way we did was good. Nobody is going to look at us. FAU is still a good team. They are still probably one of the top teams right now in the conference because they beat a lot of the top teams coming into this game. It is nice to get this win and you have to give credit to the whole team, it was a team effort."

Sophomore guard Nigel Johnson
On tonight's win:
"I think it gave us momentum into the [Sun Belt Conference] Tournament."

On his play:
"Coach [Kermit Davis] likes when I drive. I make everyone else better when I drive and find the open man. He wants me to be an offensive threat where I drive and find the open man. That was my goal for the night."

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