Blue Raiders knock off defending champs in SBC quarterfinals

Reach SBC semis for third time in five seasons

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LAFAYETTE, La. - Middle Tennessee continued its postseason magic by pulling off one of the most monumental upsets in the 31-year history of the Sun Belt Conference Championships, knocking out defending champion and No. 1 seed South Alabama, 63-60, in overtime. The quarterfinal win at the Cajundome in Lafayette, La., marked the first time a No. 1 seed has not reached the tournament's semifinal game since Old Diminion failed to reach the final four in 1983 and it is only the second time in SBC Championship history that the top-seeded team failed to reach the semifinals. Middle Tennessee will face fifth-seeded North Texas in Monday's semifinal contest at 6:30 p.m. The game will be televised on ESPN Plus and will be carried locally on Comcast, Channel 27. "It's a big win for our team and we know it's an upset but we don't look at it that way," said sophomore point guard Kevin Kanaskie, who tallied 12 points. "We are playing well right now and we expected to win this basketball game. It was hard-fought by both teams and it was a good way for us to start the tournament." Middle Tennessee's collection of super sophomores keyed the win as Theryn Hudson led the squad with 13 points on 6-of-6 shooting from the field, while Kanaskie contributed 12 points and a team-high eight rebounds, and Calvin O'Neil added 11. Freshman Desmond Yates also was in double figures with 10 points and sophomore Nigel Johnson came up big with eight points and seven

rebounds. The ninth-seeded Blue Raiders are the lowest seeded team to reach the SBC semifinals and the gut-wrenching triumph catapults Middle Tennessee into the semifinals for the third time in five seasons under Head Coach Kermit Davis. "This was a character win for our team against a very good South Alabama team," Davis said. "Our players hung in there and battled and made winning plays but our team has been playing well down the stretch and our players really believed they were going to win this game." And it was certainly one for the ages. Middle Tennessee (15-16) knocked down 6-of-8 free throws in the final 29 seconds of overtime to seal the heart-stopping triumph and the rock-ribbed Blue Raider defense continued its season-long impressive play by limiting the Jaguars (20-11) to just one field goal in the extra period and that came with 12 seconds remaining. "I thought it was a very hard-fought basketball game by both teams," South Alabama coach John Pelphrey said. "Forty minutes wasn't enough so we went that extra five. Middle Tennessee just had some clutch free-throw shooting down the stretch, down to that last second. Middle Tennessee has the No. 1 defense in the league and then we're right there behind them so that made for a very low-scoring game." The game was tied eight times and saw 11 lead changes and the second half and overtime proved to be the most dramatic with six lead changes and six ties. South Alabama took the first lead of the extra period when Daon Merritt hit one of two free throws but Hudson provided what proved to be the game-winning basket with an offensive rebound and putback with 3:52 remaining to provide a 55-54 advantage. After a series of missed shots by both teams, Middle Tennessee extended the lead to 57-54 on a runner by Kanaskie with 35 seconds remaining. A Merritt free throw with 30 seconds remaining trimmed the advantage to 57-55, but O'Neil extended the advantage back to three by hitting one of two free throws. After a big stop on the defensive end it became a matter of sealing the deal at the charity stripe and the Blue Raiders delivered. After Yates provided Middle Tennessee a 63-60 lead with six seconds remaining Davis opted to have Kanaskie foul Merritt with two seconds remaining. Merritt missed his first attempt and then misfired on the second one intentionally before time ran out on the defending champs. The Blue Raiders almost won the game in regulation. Ernest Little's dunk with 1:14 remaining evened the score at 53-53 and the Blue Raiders turned the ball over with 44 seconds remaining. Demetric Bennett missed a jumper with 11 seconds remaining and Young clutched the rebound and hit Kanaskie with the outlet pass. His 12-footer with five seconds remaining in regulation rimmed out to provide the additional five-minute period. Rebounding also was once again a big key as Middle Tennessee won the battle of the boards, 38-27, and allowed just six offensive rebounds. The Blue Raider guards were crucial as Kanaskie, Johnson, and O'Neil combined for 20 of the 38 rebounds. Kanaskie tied his career high with eight rebounds, as did Johnson with seven. "Our guards have been doing a great job on the boards and that makes a big difference in rebounding," senior forward Kyle Young said. "When your guards are rebounding the way ours have been lately that makes it so much easier for the big men."
NOTES: Middle Tennessee has reached the SBC semifinals for the third time in five seasons under Head Coach Kermit Davis (2003, 2004, and 2007) ... Middle Tennessee improved to 7-1 when Calvin O'Neil scores double figures, including seven straight wins. O'Neil had 11 points against South Alabama. The only game in which he scored double figures and Middle Tennessee did not win was at Tennessee in the opener when he scored 11 ... Kevin Kanaskie moved into a tie with Freddie Martinez for fourth on the single-season 3-point field goals made list with 66 after making one against South Alabama ... Kyle Young moved into a tie for fourth on the career games started list with 89, joining Kerry Hammonds and Randy Henry. He also played in his 118th career game, which is second on the career list. The career mark for games played is 121, which is held by Hammonds ... Kanaskie made his 42nd consecutive start, tops on the team ... O'Neil has scored double figures in three straight for the first time in his career ... Middle Tennessee is now 3-1 in neutral site games against South Alabama ... Middle Tennessee led the Sun Belt with six road victories in league play

and its win against South Alabama marked the eighth win over league team away from Murfreesboro and second in the 2007 SBC Tournament after winning at Troy in the first round.

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