

Record crowd watches peaking Blue Raiders stop WKU

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- [Game Notes](#)
- [Players/Coaches Quotes](#)
- [Fan Quotes](#)
- [Photo Galleries: One, Two](#)

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee is peaking at just the right time.

The Blue Raiders clinched a berth in the Sun Belt Conference Tournament on a historic night when a school record 11,807 packed the Murphy Center to watch them deal rival Western Kentucky a 73-59 victory.

The Blue Raiders (15-11 overall, 7-6 SBC) controlled the game from the outset against the three-time defending Sun Belt Conference regular season and tournament champion to win for the fourth time in five games.

Mike Dean led four Blue Raiders in double figures with

19 points, including 4-of-8 from 3-point range to move into No. 7 on the single-season 3-point field goals made list with 60 treys. Another outstanding junior, Michael Cuffee, had his best game as a Blue Raider, registering his first career double-double with 16 points and 12 rebounds. He also contributed three assists. Tommy Gunn added 15 points and Bryan Smithson finished with 12.

Freshman Alex Weekes also came up large with a school-record eight blocked shots.

While the Blue Raiders demonstrated a balanced offense, it was the outstanding team defense the



team is known for that made life miserable for Western Kentucky (14-12, 7-6). The Blue Raiders limited the Hilltoppers to a season-low 30.3 percent, including a 26.8 percent clip in the second half.

Western Kentucky entered the game leading the Sun Belt in field goal percentage (.481) and featured the nation's leader in individual field goal percentage. Nigel Dixon was shooting a whopping 69 percent entering the game, but he was 2-of-12 against Middle Tennessee's suffocating defense.

The Blue Raiders trailed just once, 3-2, less than one minute into the game, and led by as many as 14 twice in the second half. The Hilltoppers pulled to within five, 60-55, with 1:40 remaining, but Cuffee scored seven of points down the stretch to hold off Western Kentucky.

Middle Tennessee concludes the regular season at home when it plays Florida International Monday. It will be the final home game for four Blue Raiders seniors - Gunn, Keith Connor, Steve Jackson and Marcus Robinson.

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