Middle Tennessee pulls Sun Belt Shocker!!!

Blue Raiders stun league-leading South Alabama, 76-70

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Desmond Yates and Kevin Kanaskie combined for 44 points and Middle Tennessee had four players in double figures as the Blue Raiders shocked Sun Belt leader South Alabama, 76-70, in front of 4,914 at Murphy Center Thursday night.

The Blue Raiders (12-12, 9-5) led wire-to-wire and won for the eighth time in 11 games as they knocked the Jaguars (20-5, 12-2) out of first place in the Sun Belt's East Division. The South Alabama loss enabled Western Kentucky to move into first by one-half game. The Hilltoppers face Middle Tennessee at Murphy Center Saturday at 3 p.m.

Yates, who was named Sun Belt Conference Player of the Week Monday, scored a game-high 26 points on 8-of-10 shooting from the field and Kanaskie tied his season high with 18 points as he equaled his career high with five 3-pointers. Nigel Johnson and Demetrius Green each scored 10 for the Blue Raiders in the win.

"I'm most proud because of how well-coached (South Alabama) is and how hard they play and how much of a roll they were on," Middle Tennessee coach Kermit Davis said. "Their RPI was 32. You are talking about 334 teams and they are fighting for an at-large bid. When you start beating a team

that's won 17 of 18, that's saying something."

While the stars were plenty for Middle Tennessee in the exhilarating upset it was the all-around play of Kanaskie that weighed heavily. Not only did Kanaskie tie his season high for points and equal his personal best with five 3-pointers, but he also dished out a game-high six assists and pulled a game-high seven rebounds. If that wasn't enough, he also held South Alabama guard Domonic Tilford to a season-low two points - 12 below his average.

"We had a bunch of guys play well. It may have been Kevin Kanaskie's best game since he's been here all-around," Davis said. "The guy that really made a difference for them on the perimeter was (Domonic) Tilford, coming off eight 3s in the Troy game. Kevin did a good job on Tilford. He was right there with him on the catch with his heels way outside the 3."

Green's defense against Sun Belt Player of the Year candidate Demetric Bennett (along with relief from Darren Avery) was also a key. Bennett, who injured his right thumb early in the game, had his second-lowest scoring output of the season with nine. Bennett came into the game third in the Sun Belt scoring race at 20.6 points per contest. Bennett and Tilford combined to shoot 5-of-20 from the field.

Rebounding was also a factor as the Blue Raiders edged the Jaguars by one, 32-31, in the battle on the boards. Kanaskie and Johnson led the way for the Blue Raiders with a combined 13 caroms as Johnson pulled six and also added five assists.

Middle Tennessee, which enjoyed its second-highest scoring output of the season with 76 points, also shared the ball well as evidenced by equaling its season high with 16 assists. The Blue Raiders shot 53 percent (26-of-49) and were a crisp 47 percent (9-of-19) from 3-point range. The nine 3-pointers are the second most they have made this season.

The Blue Raiders jumped out to a 26-12 lead and increased it to 32-16 on Yates' layup with 6:24 remaining in the first half. Yates connected on his first seven field goal attempts on the way to his third highest-scoring total of the season. He and Theryn Hudson (4-of-5) combined to shoot 12-of-15 from the field.

Middle Tennessee led 43-29 at the half but you knew South Alabama had a run in them and the Jags didn't disappoint. In fact, Brandon Davis' layup cut the Blue Raider advantage to 64-61 with 7:52 remaining and capped a 12-0 run.

That's when the Blue Raiders showed their moxie, using an 8-4 run to extend the lead back to 72-65 with 2:04 remaining. Johnson's jumper in the paint with 7:21 remaining was big because it ended the 12-0 South Alabama run and pushed the lead to 66-61 and Kanaskie followed with his fifth 3-pointer one possession later to give the Blue Raiders a 69-61 cushion.

South Alabama got to within 69-65 with 3:18 remaining; however, Kanaskie followed with a 15-footer and the Blue Raiders were 6-of-8 from the free-throw line in the final 2:04 to nail down the win.

Middle Tennessee Postgame Quotes
Head Coach Kermit Davis
On the key to tonight's victory:
"I'm most proud because of how well-coached that team is, and how hard they play and how much of

a roll they were on. The two main factors for us were that we had to win the rebounding war, which we did by one, and try to go to line more than they did. That was a big stat for us."

On the quality of the win:
"Their (USA) RPI was 32. You're talking about 334 teams, and they're fighting for an at-large bid. When you start beating a team that's won 17 of 18, our RPI is going to take a nice jump."

On withstanding a second-half run from South Alabama:
"We got the game to 16, and then all of a sudden in a three-or-four minute stretch it got to about five or six. We took their blows and started getting some more stops, and were a little more efficient offensively."

On the play of Kevin Kanaskie:
"We had a bunch of guys play well. It may have been Kevin Kanaskie's best game since he's been here all-around. The guy that really made a difference for them on the perimeter was (Domonic) Tilford, coming off eight 3s in the Troy game. Kevin did a good job on Tilford. He was right there with him on the catch with his heels way outside the 3."

On guarding Demetric Bennett:
"On Monday Demetrius Green came to me and said, 'Coach, we've been doing some switching in the perimeter...let's not switch, I want to take (Demetric) Bennett.' I thought that was good being competitive. He and D.A. (Darren Avery) did a great job on Bennett, who is a great player."

On Desmond Yates only getting two shot attempts in the second half:
"That was partly my fault and the team's fault. He had 22 at the half. Give South Alabama credit, they bowed up and some more physical things with him. But I don't think we did a great job of really trying to rotate the ball and find him. We've got to do a better job in the second half of giving him more shot attempts."

On generating momentum:
"College basketball this time of year is a lot of emotion, teams getting on runs. It happens in every league. Our team is starting to feel good about themselves, and starting to think we're as good as any team in our league."

On Saturday's game against Western Kentucky:
"I have a ton of respect for Western Kentucky. I think they're one of the hardest-playing teams in college basketball from start to finish. We'll have to be at our best on Saturday. Their styles are different, but our team gets a misnomer that we're not trying to play fast. We're trying to play really fast. Western's going to try to play really, really fast, so we've got to get easy baskets in transition. The other big key is just trying to get back defensively, and make them run some halfcourt offense."

Sophomore forward Desmond Yates:
On having a productive night offensively:
"Coming in before the game I felt really good. I had good practices the last few days and saw the ball really well, so I was confident."

Junior guard Kevin Kanaskie
On maintaining a lead throughout the game:
"We let up a little bit when they came back, but they're a really good team and we knew they would

make a run. We were fortunate to hold them off."

On the difference between the first meeting and tonight's game:
"We didn't play well at their place. They outrebounded us by 18. We got them by one in this game, and the last three days in practice that was the focus."

University of South Alabama Coach Ronnie Arrow
On the loss to Middle Tennessee:
"They had good preparation time. That's what it is all about. They are well coached and have some very good talent. We just for whatever reason did not show up to play. I thought Daniel [Hayles] really brought some defensive effort to us. We just came out and stood around. I don't want to make any excuses. We just didn't really play well and they got after our butts."

On Demetric Bennett injuring his right thumb in the first half:
"That didn't have anything to do with giving up 76 points to Middle Tennessee, a team who averages 66 points per game. Needless to say, we didn't get the defensive effort we had been getting. When we don't do that, we stand around a lot."

On how to rebound after the loss:
"We will find out our character again. We have one day of preparation. For the life of me, I don't understand this schedule, but everybody is the same way. We get to drive seven hours and then look at Florida Atlantic's film. We will need to be ready to show up and beat them. I feel that our guys will show character and win."

On no longer being in first place in the Sun Belt East:
"It doesn't matter whether we were first or not, we still needed to win. The bottom line is the next game is the most important game of the year. The biggest fear as a coach is whether or not your team will show up to play to their capabilities. Tonight, for whatever reason I didn't prepare them enough to show up."

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