Church Dominating in 5-1 Victory

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MOBILE, Ala. - Middle Tennessee's BJ Church allowed one run in a season-high seven innings and the Blue Raiders got two hits and two runs from Chuck Akers to defeat South Alabama, 5-1, and win the Sun Belt Conference series here Sunday afternoon at Stanky Field. Church (2-0) got out of just one jam and reliever Eric Blevins tossed two scoreless innings, working around an error in the eighth and two hit batters in the ninth, to secure the win. The Blue Raiders (26-15, 8-7 SBC) got three runs in the third, two unearned, and plated two insurance runs in the eighth in support of Church. The win was the first series victory over South Alabama in Mobile in two tries and the second consecutive road series victory for Middle Tennessee. The Blue Raiders also stand above the .500 mark at the end of a weekend series for the first time since the end of the 2001 season. It was also the 10th win in the last 14 games for the Raiders. "We were able to get some clutch hits, timely hits," Middle Tennessee head coach Steve Peterson said. "This was a big series win. It really gives our team a lot of confidence and we stay in the hunt for the conference championship. I've said publicly many times that the road to a championship leads through South Alabama. It's not the easiest thing to do, win a series in Mobile, but we were able to get it done today." Peterson gave much of the credit for Sunday's victory to Church and catcher Eric McNamee. "Church was outstanding today. He had a really good fastball and pitched smart to all of [USA's] righthanded hitters. And McKenry did a very good job motivating both of his pitchers throughout the game." The Jaguars scored first on Sunday, getting a run in the second when Justin Hawarah singled with two outs and scored on Jansen Rayborn's double to center. The Blue Raiders came right back to take the lead, helped by an error to start the rally. Chase Eakes reached on the error with one out in the third on a routine grounder to Guillermo Martinez at short. Jeff Beachum then singled through the rightside before Eric McNamee's chopper over Rayborn's head at first tied the game at one. Chuck Akers followed with an RBI single to center, but McNamee was thrown out at third on the play. Derek Phillips then singled to right to score Akers for a 3-1 Middle Tennessee advantage. South Alabama threatened to tie the game in the bottom of the inning when Brad Gordon singled with one out and Clark Secchiari was hit by the pitch. Both runners moved up on a wild pitch and last week's SBC

Player of the Week, Adam Lind, was at the plate. Church challenged Lind with 2-0 and 3-1 fastballs and struck him out with a full count heater. Josh Touchstone then lined out to end the threat, USA's only real chance to score again against Church. The Jaguars did not have another inning with more than one baserunner against Church, who struck out eight and did not walk a batter in seven innings. He allowed the one run on five hits in his longest outing of the year. Middle Tennessee added two insurance runs in the eighth against USA starter Joey Doan. McNamee walked and Akers put down a perfect bunt, right in the triangle area between the pitcher and first and second baseman. After a popout, Brett Carroll laced a double down the rightfield line, scoring McNamee. Nate Jaggers then lined out to right, plating Akers for a 5-1 Blue Raider lead. Doan (1-6) took the loss, giving up five runs, three earned, on nine hits with two walks and five strikeouts. Peterson added that next weekend's series against Western Kentucky becomes that much more important. "This win keeps us in the hunt for the league title and it makes the Western Kentucky series a huge series. They are one of the hottest swinging clubs in the league." Shane Kemp and Beachum also added two hits to go with the two from Akers. Middle Tennessee finishes its current five-game road swing with a pair of games at Memphis on Tuesday and Wednesday at 7 p.m. and 2 p.m., respectively.

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