Five Blue Raiders reach double figures in 81-58 win vs. Troy

Team wins 10 of last 15 to finish third in SBC; Will play UL-Monroe in first-round tourney game

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee capped what has been a strong second half to the season with its most resounding conference victory of the year, turning back visiting Troy, 81-58, in the regular-season finale at Murphy Center Saturday.

The Blue Raiders (14-14, 11-7) won for the 10th time in their last 15 games and finished the regular season third in the overall Sun Belt standings. The 11 conference wins are the most ever by a Middle Tennessee team in the Sun Belt and the most league wins for a Blue Raider team since the 1997-98 squad won 12.

Middle Tennessee will open the Sun Belt championships against No. 13 seed Louisiana-Monroe in a first-round game at Murphy Center Wednesday at 7:30. Tickets are general admission and are on sale at the Middle Tennessee Ticket Office for $12. Children's tickets are $6. Middle Tennessee students are admitted free and student-guest tickets are available for $6.

As for the Troy game, Middle Tennessee had it clicking on all cylinders from the outset. The Blue Raiders built as much as a 19-point first-half lead and never trailed.

"I thought we handled the week of practice well," Middle Tennessee head coach Kermit Davis said. "It was one of the best weeks of practice since I've been here. The guys were looking forward to

coming to the gym everyday and staying late. They had a lot of excitement which is a good thing to have at the end of February and we played like it. We came out and were sharing the ball. We had five guys in double figures and shot 63 percent and nearly 50 percent from 3-point. You can't do much better than that."

Kevin Kanaskie continued his scorching late-season superlatives with a season-high 22 points, game-high, on 8-of-11 shooting. The junior guard was 4-of-7 from 3-point range and also had four assists and two steals. As good as Kanaskie was, Nigel Johnson turned in one of his best all-around games as a Blue Raider. The junior from Memphis narrowly missed a triple double with 14 points, seven assists and seven rebounds. Demetrius Green capped a solid night by the three Blue Raider starting guards with 11 points and a career-high seven assists.

The three Blue Raiders guards combined to score 47 points, shoot 9-of-17 from 3-point range, collect 15 rebounds, dish out 18 assists and collect five steals.

"It doesn't get much better than that," Davis said. "Those three guys were outstanding tonight. When you get guard play like we did tonight it's hard to get beat. I was very proud of all those guys."

While the guards were phenomenal the inside game was not lacking. Theryn Hudson just missed a double double with 13 points and eight rebounds and Desmond Yates added 13 points and four rebounds. Yates and Hudson combined to shoot 10-of-15 from the field and the Blue Raiders improved to 7-1 when they are both in double figures.

Middle Tennessee, which vaulted to a 21-7 lead 5:11 into the game and increased the margin to 49-34 at halftime, shot 64 percent (31-of-49) from the field including a sizzling 45 percent (9-of-20) from 3-point range.

The 23-point win was Middle Tennessee's largest margin of victory in Sun Belt play this season and the 58 points were the fourth-fewest for Troy this season.

Middle Tennessee had assists on 20 of their 31 field goals with Green (7), Johnson (7) and Kanaskie (4) combining for 18 of them.

POSTGAME QUOTES:
Middle Tennessee Head Coach Kermit Davis
On tonight's game: "I thought we handled the week of practice well. It was one of the best weeks of practice since I've been here. The guys were looking forward to coming to the gym everyday and staying late. They had a lot of excitement which is a good thing to have at the end of February and we played like it. We came out and were sharing the ball. We had five guys in double figures and shot 63 percent and nearly 50 percent from 3-point. You can't do much better than that."

On the team's balance tonight:
"We've been able to absorb different games from different guys and tonight we were better. We had almost six guys in double figures. Early we shot the ball well from 3 with Nigel and Kevin. And when they cut the game to 10 we did a good job of getting the ball inside. We just shared the ball really well against their zone."

On team playing together:
"They were good together tonight. I thought (Demetrius Green) shared the ball with seven assists. I

thought Nigel got back to playing like he did two weeks ago. He had some hustle plays like diving on the floor; he was all over the place. And Kevin's back playing like Kevin. When he got three fouls we decided to stay with him because we thought we needed him on the floor and he did a nice job of playing with those."

On momentum going into the tournament:
"I buy into the notion of practice. When you start getting a bad feeling in practice you may make some shots. But when you have the right attitude in practice that's when you know your team is ready to make plays late in the season."

Junior Guard Kevin Kanaskie
On tonight's team efficiency:
"Well we see it all the time in practice. When we work it around and get good shots, we usually make those."

On domination in the paint:
"The more touches we get Theryn and Desmond the better. They've both been playing well in practice and our main point was to get it to them."

On shooting well today:
"I got lucky tonight I guess."

On playing the first round at home:
"Yes it'll be good. We don't have to take a long bus trip."

Junior Guard Nigel Johnson
On momentum going into the tournament:
"Yes we wanted it to be like that because this is our home floor. We knew Troy scored 63 in the second half against Florida Atlantic and so we wanted to be real aggressive and get back on transition."

On the team's balance tonight:
"When our team is playing better together we're a great team."

On the team's mentality going into the tournament:
"We're trying to play with the same intensity and try to make it to the championship."

Troy Coach Don Maestri
On the loss to Middle Tennessee:
"Middle Tennessee shot the ball really well tonight. They shot over 60 percent from the field and 40 percent from the 3-point line. To start the game it looked like they were shooting 100 percent. They were just lighting it up. They got off to a great start. They played well tonight offensively. They bothered us defensively. We couldn't execute well in the last 10-to-12 minutes of the game. We were down by eight and they held up defensively. They have really turned their season around. They have the best record over anyone from the West Division. They have the third best record in the East Division. I don't look at divisions. They are the third best team in the whole league this year. Division seeding doesn't mean a thing. You play 18 games and they have the third best record in the league. I'm not knocking the setup of the conference, but if I was in their shoes I would want to have the bye for being the third best team in the Sun Belt. That's just how it falls."

On if the win at Troy helped Middle Tennessee turn their season around:
"I think that was a big win for them. [Kevin] Kanaskie made two free throws with four or five seconds left to give them a victory. There are some points in the season that teams have an epiphany. You have two or three epiphanies that can change your whole season. I think that win really helped them. It was something that propelled them to knowing that they could win in close games and could win on the road. You can practice all you want, but you can't duplicate this stuff in practice. It's impossible, it must happen to you in game situations. Kanaskie can't practice two free-throws when you're down one with five seconds left in the game. You have to do it in a real game. If it's successful for you, it helps you become a better and confident team. I'm a little partial, but I think Coach Kermit Davis is one of the best total coaches in this conference. There is no stone left unturned with him. He's one of the rare guys in college basketball and Middle Tennessee is fortunate to have him."

On having some frustrating losses this season:
"This has been a frustrating season for us because when Little Rock beat us with four seconds to beat us they dribbled the ball the length of the court and they beat us. It's been piggy-backed to last season. Last year we had a three point lead over Western Kentucky and we loss the game in the final seconds. Those types of experiences are very disappointing and frustrating. They say it all evens out, but it hasn't for the last two years. It's frustrating. The same group of kids haven't had they feel that it evens out. In every game it's a challenge for them to really say if we can play well tonight, we can come out with a win. I don't think they doubt their heart. I don't think there is any doubt that they can beat anybody in the league, but it hasn't come through for them."

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