Blue Raiders reach SBC semifinals with 65-59 win vs. Troy

Middle Tennessee to face host South Alabama Monday at 6:30 p.m., on ESPN Regional

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MOBILE, Ala. - Two down, two to go. Middle Tennessee (16-14) turned back Troy, 65-59, in the quarterfinals of the Sun Belt Conference Championships here Sunday night to reach the semifinals for the fourth time in six seasons under Head Coach Kermit Davis. With two tournament wins under their belt the Blue Raiders are two away from securing the Sun Belt's automatic bid into the NCAA Tournament but first things first. Middle Tennessee will now turn its attention to No. 1 seed South Alabama in Monday's first semifinal at 6:30 p.m. "I know we are playing an at-large NCAA team, and regardless of what happens tomorrow night (South Alabama) will be in the NCAA Tournament," Davis said. "They have had an unbelievable year. They have been fantastic at home. They have a great environment. Our guys are really, really looking forward to playing them. I think they will have confidence against us and we certainly feel we can win the game as well." Middle Tennessee won for the ninth time in 12 games but the contest was not decided until the waning seconds. Desmond Yates led the Blue Raiders with a game-high 19 points on 7-of-11 shooting. Kevin Kanaskie and Demetrius Green each tallied 17 points and Theryn Hudson finished with nine but the game's most valuable player was Nigel Johnson, who was 1-of-7 from the field. Even though Johnson only connected for one field goal, it was one of the biggest of the game. And stats can't tell the entire story of a player who was listed as a game-time decision after suffering a sprained ankle and missing the entire second half of the first-round win against

Louisiana-Monroe. Johnson played the entire 40 minutes, yanked a career-high 12 rebounds and dished out a game-high seven assists with no turnovers. And then there was the only shot he hit in seven attempts. Leading 60-59 with the 35-second shot clock running down, Johnson nailed a 21-footer with one minute remaining to stake the Blue Raiders to a 63-59 advantage. "I was in a slump all game," Johnson said. "I just had to keep shooting to keep my confidence level up. I knew I would make the shot when the game was on the line. It was either win or go home." Early on it appeared the game was going to be a laugher as Middle Tennessee raced to a 17-6 lead and Troy did not connect on its first field goal until O'Darien Bassett hit a 3-pointer with 9:52 remaining. That 3-pointer proved to be the springboard for Troy, which outscored Middle Tennessee 23-14 and carried a 35-33 lead into the half. "As a team we had some bad fouls," said Kanaskie, who nailed four first-half 3-pointers. "They are a good team and they battled hard like we knew they would. Our team has a lot of character though and we were going to come out and battle hard in the second half." And so the Blue Raiders did. Middle Tennessee regained the lead on Green's 3-pointer on the first possession of the second half and maintained a narrow cushion until Jonus' two free throws put Troy on top, 52-51, with 4:32 remaining. It set the stage for a riveting finish. "The game was exactly what we expected from Troy," Davis said. "Troy was outstanding when they beat UL-Lafayette. The team had a renewed confidence level. We made some big shots down the stretch. We got timely stops. It was just a hard-fought quarterfinal game. You have to play your tail off and hope you are there at the end." Middle Tennessee took the lead for good when Kanaskie tickled the net with a 23-foot 3-pointer to give the Blue Raiders a 60-57 advantage with 1:52 remaining. After Bassett hit two free throws with 1:27 remaining, Johnson came up with his long 3-pointer to push the lead to four, 63-59. Green added two free throws down the stretch to account for the final margin. Middle Tennessee continued its fine shooting from the field, connecting on 52 percent (22-of-42) of its shots. The Blue Raiders dominated the boards, 29-15, including a whopping 11 offensive rebounds that helped lead to a 12-3 edge in second-chance points. Middle Tennessee's semifinal game vs. South Alabama tips at 6:30 p.m., and can be seen on ESPN Regional.

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