Guards come up huge as Blue Raiders shock No. 1 South Alabama

NCAA automatic berth at stake when Middle Tennessee faces rival WKU in Tuesday's title game

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MOBILE, Ala. - Good guard play is considered one of the more significant keys to advancing in the postseason. It's the biggest reason Middle Tennessee is in the Sun Belt Conference Championship game for the second time under sixth-year Head Coach Kermit Davis after the Blue Raiders shocked regular-season champion South Alabama, 82-73, in front of 6,397 at the Mitchell Center Monday night. Blue Raider guards Kevin Kanaskie, Demetrius Green, and Nigel Johnson - all juniors - combined for 63 points, 16 rebounds, 11 assists and seven steals, putting on an exhibition to help lead Middle Tennessee into Tuesday's championship game opposite rival Western Kentucky, which knocked off UALR, 70-55 in the other semifinal. "It's like I said and I'll reiterate the fact, No. 1 is how good a team South Alabama has, not just in the Sun Belt but nationally," said Davis, who notched career win No. 100 at Middle Tennessee. "There's no question that's an at-large team. They're going to go to the NCAA Tournament and I wouldn't be surprised if they win a game in the tournament. They're that good. I'm just really proud of our team. I thought the Middle Tennessee fans were absolutely super. I don't care what league, it doesn't matter. That's one of the best college basketball games you can watch on TV." Middle Tennessee (17-14) won its fourth

straight and tasted victory for the 10th time in 13 games and ended South Alabama's 16-game home win streak in the process. The Blue Raiders knocked off the Jags for the second time this season and improved to 4-2 against them over the last two seasons. Middle Tennessee also eliminated South Alabama in last year's conference tournament and improved to 3-0 against the Jags in SBC Championship play. Clearly the Blue Raiders have come light years from their 4-9 start. "We set a lot of goals at the beginning of the season and we saw that we weren't achieving our goals so we made a better effort of achieving them and standing as a team, praising each other," Johnson said. "Like we said, we couldn't have done any of this without our teammates. South Alabama is a very good team and we knew we were going to get their best shot." Kanaskie led Middle Tennessee with a team-high 23 points and nine rounds, while also dishing out four assists. Demetrius Green tallied 21 points, five rebounds and three steals, while Johnson added 19 points, six assists and three steals. Desmond "Boogie" Yates finished with 12 points and fought foul trouble throughout. "Nigel Johnson, Demetrius Green and Kevin Kanaskie controlled the game from an offensive standpoint," Davis said. "We only had 13 turnovers and that was important. The biggest key was that we found some ways to chase some loose balls down and we executed offensively." Middle Tennessee shot 50 percent (24-of-48) from the field, including 43 percent (6-of-14) from 3-point range, while also converting 82 percent (28-34) from the free-throw line. The Blue Raiders also battled on the boards with the Jags holding a slim 34-28 advantage and that was remarkable considering the significant foul trouble Middle Tennessee had to overcome. Yates and Hudson spent most of the first half on the bench with three fouls and they each picked up their fourth foul less than four minutes into the second half. Yates played just 22 minutes and Hudson saw action for 17. Despite this, Middle Tennessee was able to stay in the game because of exceptional guard play and strong bench support from Dino Hair and Darren Avery. "We kind of fought some foul trouble," Davis said. "I thought our bench was fantastic. Darren Avery and Dino Hair gave us outstanding minutes in the second half. Bench play was the biggest emphasis of our meetings (Sunday night). We said, 'Guys, we can't win tomorrow night without bench play.' When you play a physical team like South Alabama, they've got guys in foul trouble; we're going to have guys in foul trouble. It's jus going to happen in that physical of a game." Davis was right but the Blue Raiders didn't miss a beat despite the dire situation it faced most of the game. The largest lead for either team was Middle Tennessee's nine-point advantage in the second half while South Alabama's largest lead was three. The game featured eight lead changes and four ties but when Johnson's 3-pointer gave Middle Tennessee a 44-42 lead with 18:33 remaining, the Blue Raiders never trailed from there. Though the game remained close, Middle Tennessee had an answer for every South Alabama run and, for the most part, kept the partisan crowd out of the game. The Jags (26-6) pulled to within 49-47 on Daon Merritt's layup with 12:50 remaining but Middle Tennessee answered with a 7-0 run to stretch the advantage to 56-47 on the second of two made free throws by Johnson. South Alabama made another run and pulled to within 61-58 on Daniel Hayles' 3-pointer with 6:54 remaining but the Blue Raiders once again stretched the lead to eight, 69-61, when Johnson sank two charity tosses with 3:50 remaining. Middle Tennessee was 13-of-15 from the free-throw line in the final five minutes but perhaps the big play down the stretch was Yates' offensive rebound and tip-in with 1:11 remaining to put the team on top 76-71 just after Merritt had cut the deficit to three, 74-71 with 1:43 remaining. From there, Middle Tennessee outscored South Alabama, 8-2, to earn its second date in the SBC Championship game since 2003 - Davis' first year leading the Blue Raiders.

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