

# Great Blue Raider run ends in SBC Championship game

## Middle Tennessee falls, 67-57, to rival WKU

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**MOBILE, Ala.** - A memorable run in the second-half of the season saw the Middle Tennessee men's basketball team land in the Sun Belt Conference Championship game, but a strong second-half run by Western Kentucky denied the Blue Raiders a tournament title as the Hilltoppers captured a 67-57 win in front of 5,234 at the Mitchell Center here Tuesday night. Middle Tennessee won 10 of its last 13 to reach the title game for the second time under sixth-year Head Coach Kermit Davis but the Blue Raiders finally ran out of gas against an experienced Western Kentucky team that featured senior leadership and SBC Player of the Year Courtney Lee. However, it was a sophomore that denied Middle Tennessee (17-15) the



SBC title and its first trip to the NCAA Tournament since 1989. Forward Jeremy Evans poured in a double double with 20 points, 14 rebounds and he shot 8-of-9 from the field to earn Most Valuable Player honors. "Evans was a major factor in the basketball game," Middle Tennessee coach Kermit Davis said. "We allowed him to have a big game inside and that made the difference. We didn't play as well as we needed to win that game. Western Kentucky made all the hustle plays and all the toughness plays. They have a talented team and I believe they will be a good representative for the Sun Belt in the NCAA Tournament." Desmond Yates and Kevin Kanaskie were named to the SBC All-Tournament team after a strong run here in Mobile, Ala. Yates led the Blue Raiders with 16 points against the Hilltoppers (27-6) and Kanaskie added nine points and three assists. Demetrius Green tallied 12 points and eight rebounds and Theryn Hudson finished with 10 points. A critical factor against the Blue Raiders was foul trouble against Nigel Johnson, who played just 14 minutes and did not score. He fouled out early in the second half. "We had some key players who didn't have one of

their better games and we can't have that in a game like this," Davis said. "I'm very proud of our team and the run we made. You can't fault the effort and we are excited knowing we have every player on this team coming back in addition to the players we gain. We made a lot of progress and we can carry that over. It's just a disappointing ending to what was a great finish to the season." Middle Tennessee led throughout the first half and owned a 28-21 advantage after Yates' short jumper with 6:16 remaining in the first half, but WKU went on a 6-0 run and closed the half with a 3-pointer from Orlando Mendez-Valdez to go on top 34-31. From there it was all downhill for the Blue Raiders as they were outscored 8-1 in the first five minutes of the second half and the Hilltoppers gained a 42-32 lead. Middle Tennessee could never make sustained runs against the strong WKU defense even though the Blue Raider defense played well enough to keep the team in the game. WKU outscored Middle Tennessee 19-9 on second-chance points but the real difference was at the charity stripe, where the Hilltoppers outscored Middle Tennessee 25-10 in a 10-point game. WKU was 25-of-29 from the line, while the Blue Raiders were 10-of-16 and did not reach the bonus until 7:07 remaining. Despite the disappointing ending to the season, Middle Tennessee still can take some pride in its tremendous run and the fact it returns all of its players and likely will be the preseason favorite to win the SBC East Division.

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