Blue Raiders capture Basketball Travelers championship with convincing win vs. Missouri State

Middle Tennessee wins third straight, 63-51

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SPRINGFIELD, Mo. - Middle Tennessee's basketball team is coming home for the holidays with a championship trophy in tow. The Blue Raiders (7-5) captured the championship of the Basketball Travelers Tip-Off Tournament by shocking host Missouri State, 63-51, in front of 5,758 at JQH Arena Monday night, capping a strong tournament run in which they won all three games by double figures in a three-night span. It marked the first time Middle Tennessee swept a three-game in-season tournament since 1956 when it won the Capital City Tournament - a span of 52 years. It also marked the Blue Raiders' second holiday tournament championship in four years under Head Coach Kermit Davis. And the finale was never in question as Middle Tennessee stormed out to a commanding 35-10 lead and never trailed from start to finish. Tournament MVP Desmond "Boogie" Yates led the Blue Raiders with a game-high 22 points on 10-of-13 shooting and All-Tournament selection Demetrius Green tallied 10 points. Eric Allen had his most solid game as a Blue Raider with nine points and four rebounds and Calvin O'Neil tallied seven points and three steals. Kevin Kanaskie capped a strong tournament with six points, a game-high six rebounds and four assists, and Nigel Johnson continued to progress from an early season knee injury with six points and seven assists against just two turnovers. "I'm proud of our team and the way they handled themselves in this tournament," Davis said. "It was our third game in three days but we were really sharp and crisp. The first 15 minutes of the game was the best I've had a team play in 27 years. It was really impressive to watch. We ran great offense and the defensive intensity was strong. This is a great way to head into the holidays." The Blue Raiders shot a blistering 65 percent (17-of-26) in the first half to set the tone for the championship game and led wire-to-wire. They cooled off a bit in the second half when they shot 41 percent but still managed to shoot 56 percent (24-of-43) for the game. On a night when offensive execution was astounding the defensive intensity did not slip as Middle Tennessee limited Missouri State to 38 percent (20-of-52) shooting, forced 19 turnovers and collected 11 steals. "We had slipped a little defensively in some earlier games and we had to get our defense back into the game in order to get back on track,"

Yates said. "We did that throughout this tournament and you saw the results. I am so proud of our team. Missouri State is a good team and it's hard to win here. We really bounced back this weekend and we did something that hasn't been done at Middle Tennessee in a long time so that's special and it was great to be part of a championship win. It's a great way to go into the holidays and get ready for (Sun Belt) Conference play." Yates keyed Middle Tennessee's strong start that took the crowd - and Missouri State - out of the game early. Yates scored 13 of Middle Tennessee's first 17 points as the Blue Raiders bolted to a 17-6 lead with 14:10 remaining. They stretched the advantage to a resounding 25 points, 35-10, on O'Neil's jumper with 6:30 remaining. Yates picked up his second foul late in the first half and with Middle Tennessee's leading scorer on the bench Missouri State made a run and closed the gap to 38-30 with 17:33 remaining to get the crowd back into the game; however, Yates stopped the rally and quieted the crowd with a 3-pointer from the baseline. He scored five straight points and the Blue Raiders stretched their lead back to double figures and never allowed the Bears (7-4) to make a serious run the rest of the way. Johnson continued to return to the form that makes him one of the quickest guards in the Sun Belt as well as one of the leagues top playmakers each game of the tournament. His seven assists Monday tied a career high. O'Neil also tied a career high with three steals and Montarrio Haddock added three steals. Middle Tennessee will have a well-deserved break before returning to action at North Texas, Dec. 31.

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