Players answer bell to secure gut-check victory at FAU

Allen, Kanaskie key 74-68 win

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BOCA RATON, Fla. - When Middle Tennessee needed it most the Blue Raiders answered their biggest gut-check of the season, coming from behind on the road to dispose of Florida Atlantic, 74-68, to clinch a winning season and a first-round home game in the SBC Championships. Four Blue Raiders tallied double figures, led by Kevin Kanaskie's season-high 24 points and career-best nine rebounds. Reserve Eric Allen provided his greatest game in a Blue Raider uniform when the team needed him most, answering the bell with his first career double double. Allen scored 17 points and pulled 11 rebounds - both career highs, to help rally Middle Tennessee (16-12, 9-7). Calvin O'Neil finished with 13 points and Desmond Yates tallied 12 points. The win ended a four-game SBC losing skid for the Blue Raiders under adverse situations. The Blue Raiders were playing without forward Montarrio Haddock, who was serving a one-game suspension, and Demetrius Green suffered a sprained ankle 10 minutes into the game and did not return. Kanaskie woke up with a viral illness Saturday morning and was less than 100 percent. On top of that, Blue Raiders Nigel Johnson and Yates were saddled with foul trouble throughout the game and combined to play 43 minutes. Through it all, players battled and continued to step to the forefront as the Blue Raiders secured a much-needed win. "I am so proud of this team and the way they have responded in practices and battled here tonight," Middle Tennessee Head Coach Kermit Davis said. "We had several players step up in this game and contribute to the win but that's what had to happen to win this game. We just need to continue to make progress and put ourselves in the best position for the tournament." Kanaskie was treated for his viral illness prior to and after the game but he played like the All-SBC guard he is with a gutsy effort that included 40 minutes of action

and a refuse-to-lose attitude. His play was complimented by the exemplary performance provided by Allen, who was replaced Green following the ankle injury and provided a major spark. Allen's performance included 6-of-12 shooting, including two 3-pointers, to go with 11 rebounds and an assist in 29 minutes of action. Upon entering the game, he never exited, and O'Neil's efforts also were paramount. O'Neil scored his 13 points on 3-of-6 shooting, including 7-of-9 from the free-throw line, along with four rebounds and two assists. The Blue Raiders trailed 31-29 at halftime and saw Florida Atlantic stretch the lead to five midway through the second half. Trailing 59-54 with less than six minutes remaining, Middle Tennessee players hit five of their next six field goal attempts to ignite a 14-4 run that culminated with Yates' baseline jumper that provided a 68-63 Blue Raider cushion with 41 seconds remaining. Four different Blue Raiders - O'Neil, Allen, Kanaskie, Yates - hit shots during the game-changing stretch that began with Allen's layup to narrow the deficit to 59-56 with 5:57 remaining. Yates followed with a jumper to close the gap to 59-58 with 5:25 remaining and then he hit a pair of free throws to give the Blue Raiders their first lead of the second half, 60-59, with 4:41 remaining. Clutch baskets from Kanaskie, O'Neil and Allen completed the comeback win that provided Middle Tennessee with its sixth winning season in seven years under Davis. The Blue Raiders close out the road portion of their regular-season slate at FIU Thursday. **NOTES:** Head Coach Kermit Davis moved into a tie for sixth on the all-time SBC Coaching Wins List with his 60th against FAU (the total does not include wins in the SBC Championships ... The Blue Raiders secured their sixth winning season in seven years under Davis, making him one of two coaches in school history to produce winning six winning campaigns in his first seven seasons. The other was Bruce Stewart ... Middle Tennessee secured its 70th win against SBC opponents under Davis (including SBC Championships). That total is fourth most of any league member since 2002-03 ... The win was Middle Tennessee's 29th SBC road victory since 2002-03, which is the third most road wins of any league member since Davis' hiring in 2002-03 ... Calvin O'Neil's 13 points marks the 15th time he has scored double figures as a Blue Raider. The team is 13-2 in those games, including 5-0 this season ... Desmond Yates scored double figures for the 71st time in 92 games.

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