

Second-half comeback not enough as Blue Raiders fall to WKU

Opponent for first round of SBC Championships will be announced Sunday

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. -

Middle Tennessee dug itself a big hole before putting together a strong second half comeback but the first half proved too much to overcome as WKU clinched the SBC championship with a 68-49 win in front of 5,128 at Murphy Center Saturday night. The Blue Raiders (17-13, 10-8) were led by Montarrio Haddock's 13 points off the bench. Kevin Kanaskie and Calvin O'Neil added 10 points each, followed by Demetrius Green and Desmond "Boogie" Yates with six apiece. Green, Johnson and Kanaskie were honored on "Senior Night" in a pregame ceremony and then Kanaskie broke Kerry Hammonds' all-time record for games played when he started in his 122nd contest. Kanaskie gave Middle Tennessee a 3-2 lead when he drained his first shot 42 seconds into the game but it went downhill for the Raiders from there. WKU (21-8, 15-3) ran out to a 39-17 halftime lead with hot shooting from the field. The Hilltoppers



shot 56 percent (15-of-27), including 5-of-11 from 3-point range, in the first half. Middle Tennessee put up a good fight in the second half, pulling to within 44-40 on Eric Allen's layup with 12:15 remaining. The game was on at that point; however, the Blue Raiders' foul trouble quickly became a

factor. Yates helped start Middle Tennessee's second half run but he fouled out 3:14 into the second half and guards Green and Johnson had four fouls each seven minutes into the half. They also would foul out. The Blue Raiders were down 46-42 following Haddock's spinning, pull-up jumper in the lane with 10:21 remaining but A.J. Slaughter's long 3-pointer with one second on the shot clock began a 10-2 run that enabled them to regain control with a 56-44 lead with 6:21 remaining. Orlando Mendez-Valdez led a balanced WKU attack with 19 points. He also pulled five rebounds and dished out five assists. Sergio Kersch and A.J. Slaughter scored 13 each for the Hilltoppers. Middle Tennessee is assured a first-round home game in the SBC Championships, which begin Wednesday. The Blue Raiders will play Wednesday at 7 p.m., but final seeds and first-round opponents will not be decided until the regular season is completed Sunday with North Texas at Denver. **Middle Tennessee Postgame Quotes**

MT Head Coach Kermit Davis

On tonight's game:

"I thought Western Kentucky came out with a lot of pop and zip. Orlando Mendez-Valdez, in my opinion, is the MVP of the conference. He made great shots and at this time of year the guys your team counts on have to play well. The guys we're counting on haven't played well and the guys Western is counting on are playing well, so that was the difference tonight. College basketball is guard-oriented and we had really poor play in the perimeter tonight and they played really well." **Was the frustration not finishing the comeback or getting down that much in the first half?:**

"The first half was really bad. To get down by that much, and being as ineffective on defense as we were, are big problems. Also on offense I thought we got really good shots we just didn't make any of them. It's disappointing that Mendez-Valdez was hitting 28-footers and we were missing 6-footers. So they just won it." **On run in second half:**

"I don't know that it was more aggression on our part. I think Western just had a little let down. That's happened to us before, you get up big and then you have a little let down defensively. We made some shots in the second half and I thought our energy level was high. We just fought foul trouble."

On challenge to keep team up going into the tournament

"I don't talk about momentum. You can't sugarcoat that we just got beat by a rival at home. We have to be mature to take some challenges and be better. So we just got beat tonight. It starts with the players we count on and those guys have to be better. If that doesn't happen we won't be around very long (in the tournament)." **On Mendez-Valdez's play"**

"He and Kevin Kanaskie are out of the same mold. Every time you see him he's making a big play for them. They have other good players but in my mind he's the one who makes them go. As an opposing coach, if you could take one guy off their team he'd be the one." **Senior guard Kevin Kanaskie**

On not finishing run in second half:

"We just couldn't get that one more stop we needed. We would foul or they'd get an offensive rebound. We just couldn't get over the hump." **On frustration being in first half or not finishing comeback in the second half:**

"It was definitely the first half. You can't beat Western by starting the way we did. We played better the second half but it still wasn't good enough." **On Middle Tennessee career:**

"I feel like yesterday was my freshman year and it's gone by really fast. We've played well during my career. The assists are all on my teammates because you can't get an assist by yourself, so we've played some good games but we need to finish it off right." **Junior forward Montario Haddock**

On state of the team going into the tournament:

"We're down right now but we have two days of practice to get back at it. I know we'll pick it up and be alright." **WKU Head Coach Ken McDonald**

On WKU letting Middle Tennessee comeback in the second half:

"We let up our intensity a little and might have been a little tired. But Middle is a good basketball team. They aren't just going to fold. They fought back hard and started to get aggressive driving the ball and we didn't react well for a six or seven minute stretch. But when they got it down to a four point game we were able to settle down and extend our lead." **On being able to extend game leads:**

leads:

"We started guarding the ball better and got a couple of charges. We didn't keep our heads down and rallied and came out with a better effort and more aggression on both ends." **On closing out game:**

game:

"We rebounded the ball when we needed to. We played as a team, but didn't move the ball as good as we needed to in the second half. Against a good set defense you are not going to get a good set shot and we took some tough ones. But we kept our heads up and fought hard."

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