Survive and advance: Blue Raiders go forward in SBC Championships

Four players reach double figures in 69-62 win against Red Wolves

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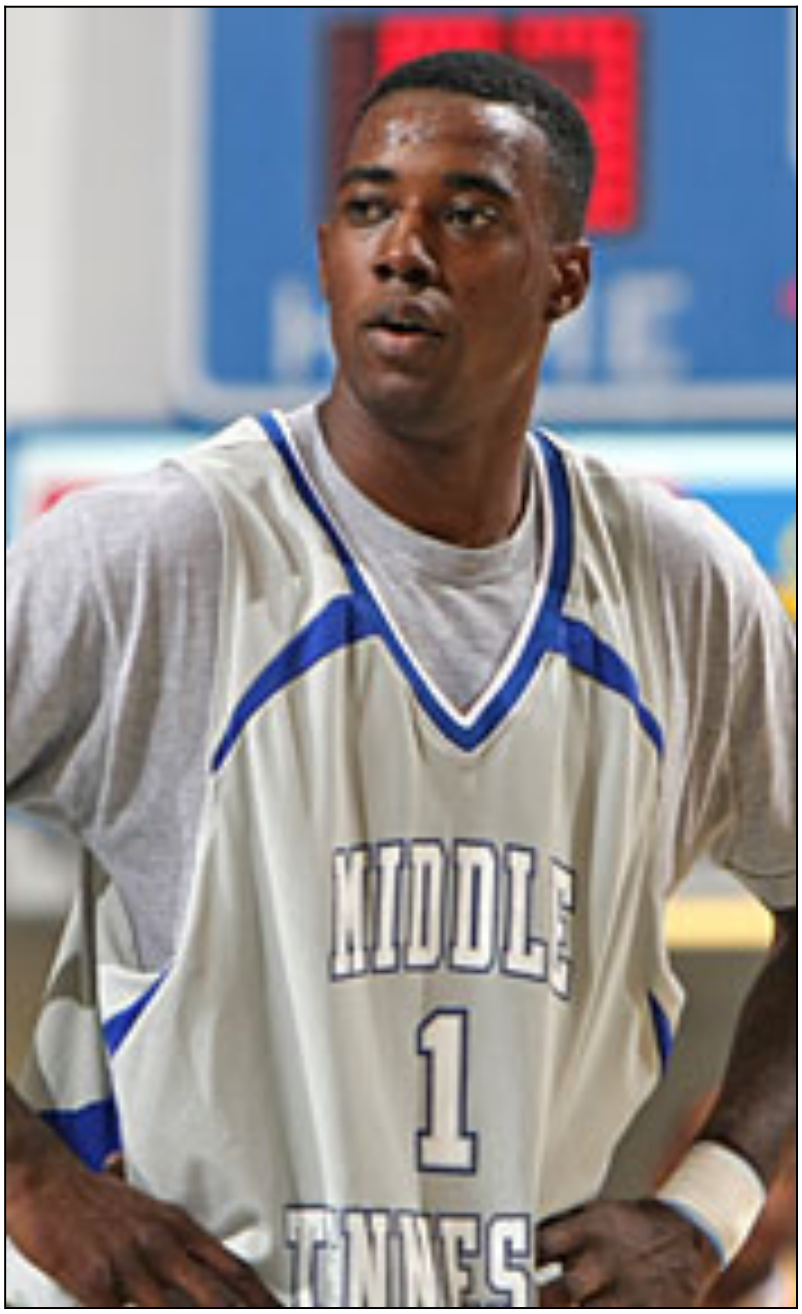

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee took the first step toward what players hope will be a Sun Belt Conference Championship, and subsequent berth into the NCAA Tournament, with a 69-62 win against Arkansas State in the first round of the SBC Championships at Murphy Center Wednesday night. The Blue Raiders (18-13) enjoyed one of the more balanced attacks of the season with four players in double figures, one with nine and another with eight as they controlled the game and trailed for only 1:04 of the 40-minute game of survival. Kevin Kanaskie led Middle Tennessee with 13 points and tied for team-high rebounding honors with six in a solid 40 minutes of action. Montarrio Haddock continued his late-season surge with 12 points and five rebounds in 27 minutes off the bench, and the game also signaled the resurgence of silky smooth senior guard Nigel Johnson, who scored 11 points, pulled six rebounds, dished out three assists and had no turnovers in 33 minutes of competition. Desmond "Boogie" Yates added 10 points; Eric Allen tallied nine points and five rebounds in 15 minutes and Demetrius Green finished with eight points and five rebounds as Middle Tennessee received marvelous contributions from a

pack of players. Middle Tennessee advances to the quarterfinal round which will be held at the Summit Arena in Hot Springs, Ark., where it will face No. 4 seed North Texas Sunday at 3 p.m. It marks the seventh straight year the Blue Raiders have advanced to the quarterfinal under Head Coach Kermit Davis. The fifth-seeded Blue Raiders played like a tournament-tested team in answering Arkansas State runs with clutch baskets in key situations and defending with a will to win, particularly during a tone-setting first half in which they allowed just 23 points on nine Red Wolves' field goals. Middle Tennessee improved to 7-1 in its last two tournaments, capturing the Basketball Travelers Tip-Off Tournament in Springfield, Mo., in December by winning three games in three days and it was 3-1 in the SBC Championships last season. The Blue Raiders are 9-2 in tournament action dating to the 2007 SBC Championships. Any number of players could have been chosen as player of the game but junior guard Eric Allen had his most significant game as a Blue Raider in his biggest game to date. Allen came off the bench with nine points on 3-of-4 shooting, including 2-of-2 from 3-point range, but it was more than his sweet stroke that helped spur the Blue Raiders to victory. He was active on the boards and his defensive presence was a factor. Allen collected three of Middle Tennessee whopping 17 offensive rebounds. Leading 57-50 with under five minutes remaining, Allen supplied the dagger with a long 3-pointer from the top of the key to provide the game's biggest lead, 60-50 with 4:14 remaining. He had also drained a trey on Middle Tennessee's previous field goal attempt. It proved even bigger when Arkansas State (13-17) answered with back-to-back 3-pointers to trim the Blue Raider advantage to 60-56 with 3:21 remaining. Allen was everywhere but the play that drew the approval of the audience was one of tremendous hustle. With the game hanging in the balance Allen tipped a Blue Raider miss toward the Middle Tennessee bench. He then sprinted after the ball, hurdled 6-foot-10 center Theryn Hudson on the bench, and tossed it over his head to a teammate to keep the possession alive. More importantly, Middle Tennessee finished the possession with Johnson's layup to put it back ahead, 62-56, with 2:45 to play. As impressive as Allen was, Johnson was equally inspiring as he controlled the game and used his speed and agility to get others involved with a high level of success. His back-to-back 3-pointers midway through the first half helped create some cushion. The Blue Raiders took control of a tightly-contested first half down the stretch and held a 28-23 lead at the break. They came out strong in the second half and extended the cushion to nine but Arkansas State battled back to grab a 40-39 lead with 11:32 remaining. Kanaskie answered with a driving layup to quickly stake Middle Tennessee back to the lead. The Blue Raiders never trailed by more than one and each of the three times Arkansas State took a lead, Middle Tennessee regained it on its following possession. **Middle Tennessee Postgame**

Blue Raider Head Coach Kermit Davis

On tonight's game:

"I thought Arkansas State played really well. They were very tough and physical especially in the second half. Our balance was good tonight; we had four guys in double figures and almost six so we spread the ball around and attacked the basket really well tonight. I thought we got good bench play tonight, especially from Montarrio Haddock and Eric Allen. They came in with a lot of energy. I thought Nigel Johnson had a lot more energy tonight. He was really athletic at the rim and great off the dribble. It was a good team effort. These first round games are always like this though, they come down to the wire and we're happy to win." **On guys with less experience sparking the team:**

"I thought it was good tonight. Montarrio gave us a big lift in the first half and Eric's energy was contagious in the second half. When he rebounds well, his 3-point shots go in. It's amazing how that works. Our bench play was critical tonight and I was very proud of those guys." **On being able to go to Hot Springs now:**

"Everybody wants to get to Hot Springs and we all wish everybody could go so all the student-athletes could feel what that's like. We understand why we can't, but it is a relief for us as a coaching staff. We've won another tournament game and that makes us 7-1 in our last 8 tournament games including last year and Springfield. So that's the positives we talk about. We have to be better to beat North Texas, but I'm pleased with the direction we're going." **On this week's practice:**
"Nigel's had his best two practices this week in a long time. It was great to see that. Montarrio and Eric both have been great the last couple days in practice. It was nice to see Eric play that way in front of his parents." **On Desmond Yates and Demetrius Green having to play better:**
"I love Desmond, but he hast to get better. He has to guard and be more physical and I don't know what we're going to have to do. He has to be a lot tougher for us to continue. The biggest thing is guard play and we got really good guard play tonight. I thought Demetrius was better tonight. He had eight points and five rebounds. Another thing was we had 17 offensive rebounds and that's big against a good rebounding Arkansas State team." **Senior guard Nigel Johnson**
On making 3's in first half:
"I had been in a shooting slump so when I made those two shots, I got my confidence back. I felt like I could play more aggressive after that. Nobody has really been respecting my shot this season because I haven't been making it. So they left me open and I was able to step up and make those shots." **On being 'over the hump' in moving on to Hot Springs:**
"It's a relief to play the first game here at Murphy Center. You don't want to lose because then you're out and never made it to Hot Springs. Now where there and we have to play hard like we can and win the championship and get into the NCAA Tournament." **On playing North Texas again:**
"We know we can play better than what we did against them the last time. We played them well in the second half; we just didn't play good in the first half. We just have to pick up from where we left off in the second half and have another good game against them." **Junior guard Eric Allen**
On playing well tonight:
"I felt like I needed to bring a lot of energy today. Usually when I play with a lot of energy I'll rebound well and hit those shots. We all really wanted to win this game and keep playing. We want to go to the 'Big Dance.'" **On playing well at home:**
"It was good tonight. I didn't want to go out like that. I really haven't had a decent game at home and I did tonight so it feels good." **Junior forward Montarrio Haddock**
On playing in first Sun Belt Tournament:
"There wasn't much pressure. We're used to playing in big games this season so we just wanted to play well and keep on winning." **Arkansas State Head Coach John Brady**
On the game:
"I came in the locker room and I asked the players what was the difference in the game and they said second-chance opportunities and you look at the stat sheet and it's 17. In a close game on the road that's the difference. Everything else was fine. We defended in the second half and had a decent field goal percentage. They got to the foul line more than we did. The difference in this game was 17 offensive rebounds. I thought the effort of our team was fine. I thought we played hard but they just beat us on the glass a little bit. We just had crucial moments when we couldn't limit them to one shot. That's kind of where we are. When you go through something like we've gone through and lose 11 games by four points or less and 15 games by seven points or less you've got to overcome that by doing something special." **On the play of Daniel Bryant:**
"Well he's learning. He's getting better. He had a couple of offensive charges that we'll watch and he'll learn not to do but he's getting better. He's a 20-year-old freshman that hasn't played ball in two years. He's got a lot to learn but he's getting better. The more minutes he's gotten the more productive he's been. He's going to be a good player. He's got quickness. He can make baskets and

drive by you. I think all the players we have here are going to be a lot better next year because of what they went through this year."

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