

High-Scoring Blue Raiders Notch 18th Win With 91-81 Triumph At FIU

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MIAMI, Fla - Middle

Tennessee's offense is clicking on all cylinders and the Blue Raiders revved into high gear as they completed the regular season with a 91-81 win against Florida International in front of 809 at Pharmed Arena Monday night.

The Blue Raiders (18-11, 7-7) will now turn their attention to the Sun Belt Conference Tournament and will face New Mexico State in a first-round game in Denton, Texas Friday at 8 p.m.

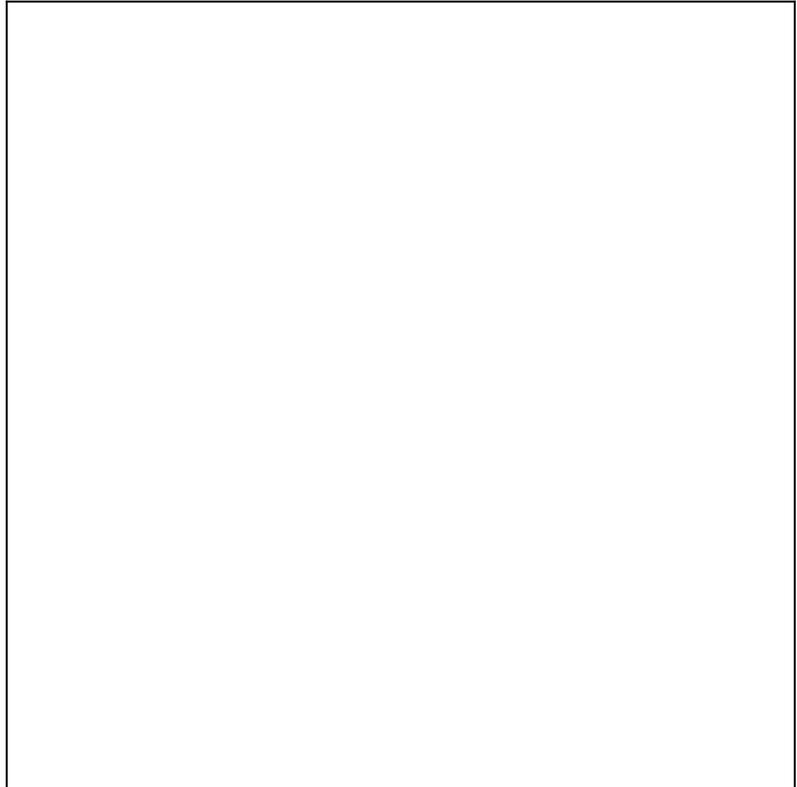
An offense that has piled up more than 80 points in five straight games for the first

time since the 1990-91 season was in sync again Monday night as Middle Tennessee shot 49 percent (27-of-55) from the field and a sizzling 53 percent (10-of-19) from 3-point range as five players scored double figures.

"We shared the ball and got everyone involved and when we do that we can be a good offensive basketball team," said junior guard Fats Cuyler, who led Middle Tennessee with a career-high 20 points. "We have been playing well from an offensive standpoint and we wanted to carry that momentum into the tournament. This was a big win for our team and a nice way to end the regular season."

Cuyler knocked down 6-of-9 shots, including 3-of-6 from beyond the arc, to lead the offensive uprising, while senior Michael Cuffee continued his solid play with his fifth double double of the season with 19 points and 10 rebounds. Cuffee was 5-of-7 from the field and made both of his 3-point attempts. Bryan Smithson had a solid all-around game with 12 points, six assists, just one turnover and four assists, while Mike Dean added 12 points, three assists and four rebounds. Marcus Morrison rounded out Middle Tennessee's five players in double figures with 10 points.

The Blue Raiders started strong and jumped out to a 16-4 lead less than eight minutes into the game and maintained the advantage throughout as it carried a 43-30 lead into the half. Florida



International (11-16, 4-10) made two big runs in the second half, cutting the lead to six on one occasion and seven on another but each time the Golden Panthers got back into the game, a host of Blue Raiders stepped up with back-breaking baskets to regain the momentum.

Not only were the Blue Raiders solid from the field, but they were also clutch at the free-throw line, knocking down 20-of-25 attempts in the second half, including eight straight in the final minute to seal the win. Middle Tennessee was 27-of-35 from the line for the game.

NOTES: Middle Tennessee has scored 80-plus points in five straight games for the first time since the 1990-91 season ... The 18 regular-season wins equal the most since the 1997-98 season when the Blue Raiders had 18 wins prior to conference tournament play ... Middle Tennessee has increased its number of wins each of Head Coach Kermit Davis' three seasons, going from 16 in 2002-03 to 17 in 2003-04 to 18 this season ... Middle Tennessee improved to 6-0 against Florida International under Davis and has won seven straight in the series ... Bryan Smithson hit all four of his free throw attempts and has now connected on 25 straight charity tosses and he has hit 27-of-28 against Sun Belt opponents ... Michael Cuffee has hit 12-of-16 attempts from the field in his last two games ... Former Middle Tennessee quarterback Wes Counts, who now resides in West Palm Beach, Fla., was on hand to watch his alma mater Monday night ... Florida natives Fats Cuyler and Marcus Morrison had more than 20 family members in the stands for the game ... The Blue Raiders improved to 14-0 this season when leading at the half and 17-1 when leading with five minutes remaining.

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