Blue Raiders pull out 74-71 win over FIU to remain in first

O'Neil leads team with 19 points and eight rebounds

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MIAMI - Middle Tennessee played solid defense in the final seconds against Florida International on Thursday night to pull out a 74-71 win and remain in a tie for first place in the division. FIU's J.C. Otero hit a three-pointer with 16.9 seconds on the clock to cut the Blue Raider lead to three but free throws by senior Montarrio Haddock at the 13.7 mark proved to be the winning points. FIU made a free throw with 4.8 seconds to play but senior Calvin O'Neil stole an inbounds pass with two seconds left for the Blue Raider win. O'Neil pulled down a team high eight rebounds and collected two steals while holding the Golden Panthers' Marvin Roberts to just three field goals. Offensively, he ended the game with 19 points after going 6-13 from the field and 7-10 at the charity stripe. Haddock aided the Blue Raider offense with 14 points and grabbed four rebounds and blocked a shot on defense. All five Blue Raiders were in double figures as senior Desmond Yates (11), junior James Washington (12) and freshman James Gallman (13) also helped guide the offense throughout the night. Middle Tennessee shot 46 percent from the field, pulled down 33 rebounds, two blocks and seven steals. FIU shot 41.5 percent from the field but had 34 rebounds, two blocks and five steals. The two teams were very even overall but free throws made the difference in the end as Middle Tennessee made 21 to FIU's 19. "You just win and advance. Florida International is playing really well and have lost their last five games on last possession games. Calvin O'Neil came up big again for our team. In the end we faced some adversity and came up with some 50/50 balls. Our 1-3-1 zone was aggressive tonight and helped us.

We have to bounce back and play for the championship on Saturday which will be fun," head coach Kermit Davis said. The Blue Raiders are now 12-5 in Sun Belt play which is the most wins since joining the league in 2000-01. It is also the 36th road win by the Blue Raiders since 2002-03 which is the most road wins by a Sun Belt team during the span. The Blue Raiders recorded their 18th win of the season which is the most in the regular season since 2004-05 when the Blue Raiders posted a 18-12 mark prior to the Sun Belt Tournament. Middle Tennessee remains tied for first place in the East Division of the Sun Belt Conference heading into the final game of the regular season on Saturday. FIU began the second half strong outscoring the Blue Raiders 12-5 to take a 47-43 lead with 16:09 to play. A three-point play by O'Neil gave Middle Tennessee a one-point advantage, 53-52, with 13:13 on the clock. As the minutes ticked down, the Blue Raiders used key rebounds and free throws to maintain a 57-53 lead with eight minutes to play. Gallman hit back-to-back treys to pad the lead for Middle Tennessee 65-57 with 6:11 on the clock. Neither team had a field goal after the 5:20 mark until Russell hit a three-pointer with 1:05 left in the game to cut the Blue Raider lead to three, 68-65. O'Neil hit a jumper at the 37.3 second mark to extend the lead to five as FIU began to foul to try and get the ball back. The two teams traded fouls and with 16.9 seconds on the clock, FIU's Otero hit a three-pointer to make it a two-point game, 72-70. The two teams traded points to begin play with neither taking more than a two point lead. The Blue Raiders stopped FIU on two straight possessions while taking a three-point lead, 29-26. FIU closed the gap to one but then Washington hits two free throws and a three-pointer making it a six-point lead, 34-28 with three minutes to play. The two teams continued to trade points at the end of the half. FIU's Russell hit a three-pointer at the buzzer to cut the Blue Raider lead to three, 38-35 at the half. O'Neil guided the Blue Raiders throughout the first half scoring 10 points and pulling down five rebounds. Washington added eight of his own after going 2-3 from behind the arc. As a team, Middle Tennessee shot 48.1 percent from the field while pulling down 13 rebounds and three steals. The Blue Raiders will round out the regular season on Saturday, Feb. 27 at 6 p.m. when they play Florida Atlantic in Boca Raton, Fla.

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