Blue Raiders shakedown rival Western Kentucky in seniors' home finale

Team locks in first round bye at SBC tourney

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee's seniors ended their careers a perfect 4-0 against rival Western Kentucky with a 57-39 win on Senior Night at Murphy Center. Honored in a pregame ceremony for their contributions during their time in blue, the four players gave the 4,912 fans in attendance quite a show against the Hilltoppers. Senior James Washington ended the night with eight points and seven assists. The St. Louis, native connected with sophomore JT Sulton for five buckets in the first four-and-a-half minutes of play. "On my visit two years ago, Coach (Davis) talked about Western and how they dominated the conference. I promised him that we wouldn't lose to them. Going out on Senior Night, I am 4-0 against them," Washington said. "Winning this game and going to Hot Springs with a win is big. We had some real good practices this week, and we need to have some real good practices coming this week, getting some momentum for the tournament. We haven't gotten to the NCAA Tournament yet, but hopefully we can do that at Hot Springs." "We have played extremely well against Western the last two years, and now our team has got some confidence against Western, and it was the other way three or four years ago. We kinda got the monkey off our back last year here. I think our guys have a lot of confidence now," head coach Kermit Davis said. "There is a great appreciation for our seniors on how much this game means. For Chris (Massaro) and our whole athletic department, the games with Western mean a lot. We played Vanderbilt here this year, but this is our biggest home game in our

players' minds." Sulton led all scorers with 18 points after going 8 for 11 from the field. R-sophomore Jason Jones added 10 points for the Blue Raiders and had six rebounds to give assistance to the defense. As a team, Middle Tennessee (15-15, 10-6) shot 40.7 percent in the game but took advantage of Hilltopper turnovers to score 23 points. "J. T. Sulton came out with great confidence. He's been shooting the ball extremely well lately, he's had great practices. He got two quick fouls tonight, or he maybe could have put up some really big offensive numbers. He came back and made some huge buckets for us down the stretch," Davis said. Middle Tennessee grabbed 40 rebounds on the night led by senior Trevor Ottley with seven while freshman Shawn Jones added six of his own. Western Kentucky (14-15, 8-8) had 36 rebounds including 11 on the offensive side of the ball with Steffphon Pettigrew pulling down a team high eight. The Hilltoppers struggled offensively posting a 30.4 shooting percentage on the night with Pettigrew being the only player to score in double figures with 15. For the first time since 1936, Middle Tennessee held the Hilltoppers to less than 40 points. It is also the first time since the 1930 season that the program has won four straight against its biggest rival. With the win, Middle Tennessee locked in the second seed in the East Division and secured a first round bye at the Sun Belt Championships. Middle Tennessee will find out who it will face in the Sun Belt Championships later in the week. Due to inclement weather, the North Texas vs. UALR game scheduled for earlier in the year had to be postponed and will be played Tuesday night. The Sun Belt will release the bracket for the conference tournament on Wednesday, March 2. "We have counted eight or nine teams that we feel like have a legitimate chance to win the tournament, and Western is definitely one of those teams. There are some match-ups that teams like better than others, so who's to say whether playing three games or four is better. It's going to be balanced, and there is going to be a ton of close games," Davis said. Sulton scored the first 10 points for Middle Tennessee giving the team a 10-6 lead with 14:08 on the clock. The Blue Raiders maintained their lead and a trey by Washington made it a nine-point game, 20-11, with right a seven minutes on the clock. The Hilltoppers cut it to three, 20-17, with 4:23 on the clock but then Middle Tennessee scored seven straight, 27-17, to take its lead back out to 10 with 2:37 remaining in the half. The Blue Raiders scored one more basket after a steal and then layup by Oden to take a 29-19 lead into the break. Middle Tennessee shot 40 percent in the first half led by Sulton with 10. The Blue Raiders held Western Kentucky to just 26.9 percent from the field and allowed no player to score in double figures. The Blue Raiders had 19 rebounds which was less than Western Kentucky's 23 but scored 15 points off turnovers to aid them in the half. Western Kentucky used an 11-4 run to open the second half and cut the Blue Raider lead to three, 33-30, with 13:41 on the clock. Then McDonald hit a trey to tie the game at 33. Washington broke the tie on the next play with a three of his own, 36-33. Charles then made a bucket to take the lead out to five, 38-33. Middle Tennessee never looked back and extended its lead to 15, 51-38, with 3:40 remaining in the game. The Sun Belt Championships will be held in Hot Springs, Ark., March 4-8. Tickets for all sessions are $83 and on sale through the Blue Raider Ticket Office by contacting 1-888-YES-MTSU or by visiting goblueraiders.com. Check goblueraiders.com for continued information on Middle Tennessee at the Sun Belt Championships. Later in the week the league office will release the official tournament bracket as well as the All-Sun Belt teams.

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