Raiders push ahead to conference semifinals

Will play UALR 8:30 p.m. Monday night

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HOT SPRINGS, Ark. - Middle Tennessee overcame a poor first half performance to slam FIU 73-38 on Sunday night to advance to the semifinals of the Sun Belt Championships. The Blue Raiders shot a blistering 57.1 percent from the field in the second half ending the game shooting 44.4 percent from the field. Senior James Washington led all scorers with 19 points while sophomore James Gallman scored 11 points. "I thought our team came out and competed really, really hard. We were in a hurry offensively. I thought we missed some really good opportunities in the first half in transition. Visiting with our guys at half time, I said guys play hard let's just slow down offensively we've got some great opportunities in the brink let's just finish them," head coach Kermit Davis said." I thought James did a great job. We shared the ball really well in the second half and we continued to try to play very hard defensively. So it was a good way to start the tournament." FIU had just one player in double figures and shot just 22.9 percent from the field. Defensively, Middle Tennessee had three players with five rebounds ending the game with 40 total. The Blue Raiders also had four blocks and 15 steals with sophomore JT Sulton recording a team high five picks. "We played so hard in the first half and we just had so many opportunities in the break that we missed. In the second have we got those opportunities and just made them. I was proud that we got to go to our bench Kerry, Shawn Jones, Rod Emanuel, Jimmy Oden got to play," Davis said. It is the first time since the league moved the tournament to Hot Springs that the Blue Raiders have won a game. It is Middle Tennessee's largest margin of

victory in the Sun Belt Championships since joining the league in 2001. The 35-point margin of victory is also the largest by a Middle Tennessee team in its league tournament in school history. Middle Tennessee has now reached the semifinals of the tournament five times since joining the league and is 2-2 in those contests. Middle Tennessee has held its last two opponents under 40 points. It is the first time this has happened under Davis. The two teams battled in the first half with Middle Tennessee maintaining the lead. With a 19-15 lead, Washington converted a three-point play to put the Blue Raiders up seven, 22-15, with 28.7 seconds to play. Then Oden had a big steal and was fouled by an FIU player putting him at the foul line. Oden made both ends of the 1-and-1 making it 24-15 with 13 seconds remaining in the half. Middle Tennessee took a 24-17 lead into the break. Middle Tennessee shot just 28.6 percent from the field in the first half with no one player scoring more than five points. The team held FIU to just five field goals and 19.2 percent shooting. Defensively, Middle Tennessee had 19 rebounds, six steals and four blocks. The Blue Raiders started the second half by going on a 9-2 run in the first two-and-a-half minutes of play extending its lead to 14, 33-19. Middle Tennessee then proceeded to hit five treys to run its lead to 33, 57-24, at the 12-minute media timeout. Starting at the 28.1 second mark of the first half the Blue Raiders outscored FIU 38-7. Middle Tennessee will play in the semifinals of the Sun Belt Championships Monday, March 7 at 8:30 p.m. in Summit Arena in Hot Springs, Ark. The game will be broadcasted on the Sun Belt Network, CSS locally in Murfreesboro with Dave Odom and Mike Morgan on the call. Chip Walters and Kyle Turnham will have all the action on the Blue Raider Network as well.

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