Blue Raiders look to clinch Sun Belt title when South Alabama visits Thursday

MT on the verge of back-to-back conference regular-season championships

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - The Blue Raider men's basketball team looks to clinch its second-straight Sun Belt regular-season title when South Alabama comes to town Thursday. Tipoff is slated for 7 p.m. CT and the game will air on ESPN3 with Chip Walters and Kyle Turnham on the call.

Tickets are now available for the Sun Belt Championship in Hot Springs, Ark. All-session booklets are $83 and fans can purchase by calling 1-888-YES-MTSU or clicking here. For more information about the tournament and Hot Springs, click here.

GAME INFORMATION
Matchup: South Alabama Jaguars (15-9, 12-4 SBC) at Middle Tennessee Blue Raiders (23-4, 15-1 SBC)
Date: Thursday, Feb. 21
Time: 7 p.m. CT
Location: Murfreesboro, Tenn.
Facility: Murphy Center
Tickets: Available here or by calling 1-888-YES-MTSU

MEDIA INFORMATION
TV: ESPN3
Play-by-Play: Chip Walters
Analysis: Kyle Turnham

Live Video - Live Audio - Live Stats

Twitter: @MTAthletics, @MT_MBB

SERIES INFORMATION

- Overall: MT leads, 16-12// As Sun Belt foes: MT leads, 14-9
- In Murfreesboro: MT leads, 6-5
- Under coach Davis: MT leads, 13-8
- First meeting: USA 55, MT 49 (12/8/79 in Murfreesboro)
- First Sun Belt meeting: USA 72, MT 64 (1/13/01 in Mobile)
- Last meeting: MT 60, USA 56 (1/5/13 in Mobile)
- Last year: MT 68, USA 47 (1/21/12 in Mobile) // MT 68, USA 52 (12/31/11 in Murfreesboro)
- Last USA win in Murfreesboro: USA 63, MT 57 (2/19/09)
- Current Streak: MT, 4 games
- Longest MT streak: 4 games (2/5/11 - present)// Longest USA streak: 4 games (12/4/82 - 12/28/01)
- Noteworthy: MT has won the last three meetings in Murfreesboro.

BLUE RAIDER FASTBREAK POINTS

- Kermit Davis is the Sun Belt's all-time winningest coach with 113 league wins. He broke the record at UALR in MT's 66-61 win on Feb. 16.
- MT can clinch its second-straight Sun Belt regular-season title and third in the last four years, in addition to the No. 1 seed at the league tournament with a win Thursday.
- MT is undefeated at 14-0 in home games this season, including one at Bridgestone Arena, and holds a 28-2 record at Murphy Center over the past two seasons. The Blue Raiders have won 26 straight regular-season home games, which is fourth-longest in the country.
- MT has won 12 in a row, the fifth-longest streak nationally and matching the third-longest in MT history, and 16 of the last 17 games.
- MT's 15 league wins are a school record, surpassing the mark of 14 set last season.
- MT is one of seven teams in the country 14-0 or better at home this year and one of three teams with at least 23 wins and nine road wins.
- MT is tied for seventh nationally with an .820 winning percentage over the past two seasons and tied for eighth with 50 combined wins in the last two years.
- MT currently ranks 20th nationally in scoring defense (58.0) and 14th in 3-point field goal percentage defense (.292).
- MT is tied for the third-most wins in the country, behind Gonzaga with 25 and Indiana with 24. Louisiana Tech and Wichita State also have 23 wins.
- MT ranks 17th nationally in defensive efficiency with a rating of 87.9 according to Pomeroy. The Blue Raiders have held six of their last eight opponents to 60 points or less and 13 of their last 16.

SCOUTING SOUTH ALABAMA

- The Jaguars have won four in a row and seven of their last eight, including a n 88-64 victory over Louisiana in their most recent outing last Thursday
- South Alabama is 6-4 on the road this year
- Augustine Rubit is averaging a double-double with 19.6 points and 10.7 rebounds per game
- Mychal Ammons is also averaging double-figure scoring with 11.2 points per game

- South Alabama has played three straight home games. Thursday marks the first road games for the Jaguars since Feb. 2 (19 days)

PREVIOUS MEETING

A second-half surge and a pair of late free throws from Bruce Massey sealed Middle Tennessee's 60-56 victory over South Alabama on Jan. 5 at Mitchell Center.

Nine Blue Raiders scored in the contest, led by Massey's 12 points. Shawn Jones also cracked double-figure scoring with 11 points. Neiko Hunter chipped in nine points, while Marcos Knight and James Gallman each added six. Knight and Kerry Hammonds led the Blue Raiders on the boards with seven rebounds each.

MT shot 42.6 percent from the field and held South Alabama to 37 percent shooting. The two teams matched each other with 37 rebounds, but the Blue Raiders held the advantage in bench points (25-19), points in the paint (32-20), and had just nine turnovers while forcing 11.

The Blue Raiders held a one-point advantage at halftime thanks to JT Sulton's steal with 22 seconds left and layup at the opposite end to make it 29-28. MT carried that momentum into the second stanza, opening the frame on an 11-2 run.

LAST TIME OUT

Head coach Kermit Davis became the Sun Belt's all-time winningest coach with Middle Tennessee's 66-61 victory over UALR on Saturday night at the Jack Stephens Center. Marcos Knight led four Blue Raiders in double-figure scoring with 15 points. Bruce Massey and Raymond Cintron scored 11 apiece and Kerry Hammonds tallied 10 points while matching JT Sulton with a team-high seven rebounds. MT's defense set the tone from the outset, allowing the Trojans just six field goals in the early stanza. It was Torin Walker's pair of free throws five minutes into the contest that gave MT a 7-6 lead, and the Blue Raiders never trailed in the remainder of the contest.

RECEIVING VOTES

MT is now receiving votes in both the AP and USA Today Coaches Polls. The Blue Raiders received votes in the coaches poll for the fifth straight week with 15 and entered the AP Poll for the first time this season with three votes.

ALL THEY DO IS WIN

With 23 wins, the Blue Raiders have clinched a winning season. This is the ninth winning season under Davis and fifth in the last six years for MT. MT has also cracked double-figure wins for six straight seasons. The Blue Raiders have won double-digit games at home in each of the past six years and nine of 11 seasons under Davis. MT now has back-to-back 20-win seasons for the first time since the 1987-88 and 1988-89 seasons. Ironically, in 1987-88, MT finished 23-11, went to the NIT and won two games, including one over Tennessee. The Blue Raiders followed that up with a 23-8 record and NCAA tournament berth where they beat Florida State before falling to Virginia.

SUN BELT'S WINNINGEST COACH

Kermit Davis became the Sun Belt's all-time winningest coach with MT's 66-61 victory at UALR on Feb. 16, 2013 with his 113th league win. Davis surpassed South Alabama's Ronnie Arrow who had 112 league wins.

STIFF COMPETITION

MT's four losses this season have come against some tough competition. The four teams that have beaten the Blue Raiders have a .775 (79-23) combined winning percentage. Florida currently ranks No. 4 in the coaches poll and No. 5 in the AP poll, while Akron is receiving votes in both polls.

HEADED TO C-USA

MT will join Conference USA for the 2013-14 season. Next year will feature a 16-game schedule for with each school playing every team in the league once and a geographic opponent twice (no divisions). Middle Tennessee's home and away opponent will be UAB. The 2014 C-USA men's and women's basketball tournaments will take place at UTEP.

SUSTAINED LEADERSHIP

On Jan. 5, MT women's basketball head coach Rick Insell earned his 183rd win to become the program's all-time winningest coach. Insell joined MT men's basketball head coach Kermit Davis, who set the school record on Dec. 29, 2011, as an all-time wins leader. MT is just one of four schools (Gonzaga, Sacred Heart and UALR) to have both their current men's and women's basketball coaches as all-time wins leaders.

RANKINGS

MT ranks the highest in the Sun Belt in all of the following:
NCAA RPI: 27
ESPN Daily RPI: 26
ESPN BPI: 44
Pomeroy: 29
Sagarin: 53
ESPN Mid-Major Poll: 3
Bleacher Report Mid-Major: 3

HOME SWEET HOME

MT has continued to defend its home court this season after finishing 15-2 in Murphy Center last year. The Blue Raiders are 14-0 in home games, including a win at Bridgestone Arena, and haven't lost a regular-season game in Murphy Center since Nov. 20, 2011 when MT dropped an 87-84 double overtime decision to Belmont. That's 26 straight regular-season home victories for the Blue Raiders. MT is 28-2 over the last two seasons in Murphy Center.

EXPERIENCED SQUAD

According to Ken Pomeroy, MT is tied as the second-most experienced team in the country with an average of 2.53 years, behind only Valparaiso (2.69) and matching Savannah State. The roster features a combined 13 juniors and seniors compared to four freshmen and sophomores.

DEEP BENCH

The Blue Raider bench accounts for 41.6 percent of the minutes, which ranks 15th nationally according Pomeroy. MT currently has nine players averaging more than 12 minutes per game. Seven of those are averaging more than 18 minutes. Nine different Blue Raiders have been the leading scorer and ten Blue Raiders have combined for 76 double-figure scoring performances.

BENCH PRODUCTION

The Blue Raider bench has outscored its opponent in all but one game this season, currently owning a 800-380 advantage, or an average of 29.6 to 14.1 points per game. MT's bench scored a season-

high 55 points against Troy on Feb. 9.

MAINTAINING THE LEAD

MT did not trail for three straight games from Feb. 2-9 or four of the last six. MT has not trailed after halftime in 11 of the last 12 games. The Blue Raiders are 19-0 this season when leading at halftime.

SWITCHING IT UP

Head coach Kermit Davis has used 11 different starting lineups this year. In all, 11 different Blue Raiders have started at least one game this year.

DOMINATING DEFENSE

Pomeroy ranks the Blue Raiders 12th in 3-point defense at 29.2 percent and 17th nationally in defensive efficiency with a rating of 87.9. MT held North Texas to 18.5 percent shooting in the first half of the Dec. 31 contest. That is the best field goal percentage defense for the Blue Raiders since Feb. 1, 2007 when MT held Denver to 18.2 percent (4-for-22) in the second half. MT also held North Texas to five field goals in the first half, a season-low for an opponent. It was the fewest field goals for an opponent in a half since Arkansas State had five on Jan. 19, 2012 in the second half.

INTIMIDATION FACTOR

Opponents haven't had much luck at the line against MT. The opposition is shooting 62.7 percent from the stripe, second-lowest in the country.

OUT-REBOUNDING OPPONENTS

The Blue Raiders have out-rebounded their opponent in 20 contests this season. MT currently owns a 997-825 rebounding advantage, or 36.9 compared to 30.6 rpg.

TAKING ON THE SEC

With the win over Vanderbilt on Dec. 21, MT has now beaten two SEC opponents in back-to-back seasons for the first time in program history. MT also beat Ole Miss on Dec. 8. The Blue Raiders defeated both Tennessee and Ole Miss last season.

The win over Ole Miss this year also marked the first win over an SEC opponent in Murphy Center since a 93-90 overtime victory against Vanderbilt on Feb. 1, 1995. MT is now 2-1 against the SEC this year (Lost to No. 10 Florida on Nov. 18) and has won four of the last six meetings against SEC opponents.

WINNING BIG

MT's 52-point victory over Troy on Feb. 9 was the largest margin of victory in a Sun Belt game in program history. MT's 82-50 win over UALR and 82-60 win over Louisiana marked the first time in 15 years the Blue Raiders beat consecutive conference opponents by at least 20 points. On Jan. 13, 1998, MT beat OVC foe Tennessee Tech, 80-60, then on Jan. 15 beat Austin Peay, 63-38.

TEAM OF THE WEEK

Middle Tennessee was named the Mid-Major Team of the Week by ESPN.com's Myron Medcalf on Dec. 13. The Blue Raiders earned the nod after knocking off Ole Miss, 65-62.

HIGH SCORING

The 97 points against Alabama State on Nov. 9 marked the most since MT scored 109 against Houston Baptist on Feb. 13, 2010. MT cracked the 90 plateau twice last season, scoring 90 against

Austin Peay and 94 against ULM.

CINTRON RECEIVES RECOGNITION

Raymond Cintron was listed at No. 39 on CBSSports.com's Top 50 shooters for the 2012-13 season. The San Juan, Puerto Rico, native currently ranks second in the Sun Belt with a 43.3 3-point field goal percentage and leads the team with 58 3-pointers this year. Against Akron on Dec. 2, Cintron sank four 3-pointers en route to a career-high 22 points. He hit a career-high six treys against Troy on Feb. 9.

Middle Tennessee will also face four shooters on the list throughout the 2012-13 season. Florida's Erik Murphy, Texas Southern's Omar Strong, Belmont's Ian Clark and Tennessee State's Robert Covington were listed among the top 50.

BROTHERLY LOVE

The 2012-13 MT squad features two sets of brothers. Marcos Knight is the older brother of Tweety Knight, with both joining the Blue Raiders via Chipola Junior College. Zane Gibson is the older brother of Gavin Gibson, both coming to MT from Baylor School.

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