Lady Raiders Turn Back UALR on Senior Day

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Senior-day turned out to be pay back time for Middle Tennessee as the Lady Raiders returned the favor to Arkansas-Little Rock with a 71-54 victory Saturday in the Murphy Center in the final home game of the year.

After dropping the first meeting with UALR, earlier in the season, the Lady Raiders were determined to keep a strong hold on the top spot of the Sun Belt East and proved their tenacity Saturday afternoon. Prior to the game, seniors Yamil Cordero, Jennifer Justice and Keisha McClinic were honored as family members were on hand to celebrate the accomplishments of the trio.

When the whistle blew, all bets were off as the Lady Raiders jumped out to a 6-0 lead to start the game off three straight lay-ups by sophomore Tia Stovall. UALR got in the scoring column when Jocelyn Love was fouled and hit two free throws at the 17:32 minute mark.

Arkansas-Little Rock looked like they might make the game interesting when the Lady Raiders 15-2 lead was cut to one, 15-14, off a 12-0 run by the Trojans. Middle Tennessee closed out the final eight minutes of the first half with a 15-3 run to lead by 13, 30-17, at the half.

Middle Tennessee took control in the second half and made sure UALR wasn't a threat again. The Lady Raiders led by as much as 27, 67-40, with four minutes left in the game, when Head Coach Stephany Smith began to clear her bench to allow every player to see time.

Freshman Krystle Horton led the Lady Raiders with 18 points and also had four rebounds and three steals. McClinic, Patrice Holmes and Stovall each added 10 points in the contest. McClinic's four steals in the game gives her a total of 91 on the season and she needs just two more to break the single-season record.

Middle Tennessee returns to the road on Thursday in what is shaping up to be a major showdown in Western Kentucky. The possible match-up for first place in the East tips off at 7 p.m. in Bowling Green, Kentucky.

NOTES:

NINTH SBC WIN: Today's victory over Arkansas-Little Rock marked the ninth conference victory of the season, which equals the most Sun Belt Conference wins in Lady Raider history. The Lady Raiders finished 9-5 in league play last season and were 9-7 in 2000-01.

11 AT THE GLASS HOUSE: Middle Tennessee closed out the 2003-04 home season with a record of 11-2 at the Murphy Center. The 11 victories are the most at home since the team finished an identical 11-2 in 1999-00. The most home wins ever recorded by a Lady Raider team was 13 back in 1984-85.

SMITH SETS WIN MARK: Following today's win, the Lady Raiders ran their season record to 19-6 which is the most victories in a single season for head coach Stephany Smith. With two regular season games and the conference tournament remaining, the Lady Raiders need just one more win to reach the 20-win plateau. The last time a Lady Raider team topped the 20-win mark was 1995-96 when that squad finished 24-6.

HORTON SHINES ... AGAIN: If Krystle Horton has not done enough this season to warrant the Sun Belt's Freshman of the Year award, then the league needs to take a quick review of the voting procedures. The first year player from nearby Riverdale High School in Murfreesboro, recorded her 20th double figure scoring game of the year when she tallied 18 points on 7 of 8 shooting against UALR. Horton also added four boards and three steals in just 25 minutes of action. Heading into the final two regular season games of the year, Horton leads the Lady Raiders in field goal percentage (.557) and is second in scoring average (14.7). During the month of February (6 games), Horton is averaging 18.3 points, 5.5 rebounds, and is shooting a sizzling 64.7 percent from the field (44-68).

PLAYER OF THE GAME: Members of the media voted the three seniors as the Alexander Automotive Family Tri-Players of the Game. Keisha McClinic, Jennifer Justice and Yamil Cordero were all honored.

SENIOR DAY: Middle Tennessee honored its three seniors today as the Lady Raiders played their final home game of the year. Keisha McClinic, Jennifer Justice and Yamil Cordero suited up for their final home game today.

36-0: The Middle Tennessee bench shutout Arkansas-Little Rock's reserves on Saturday, 36-0. It was just the eighth time this year that MT's bench has outscored the opposition, but in those eight contests the Lady Raiders have a record of 7-1.

TIDBITS: During the pregame, players Tia Stovall, Jenne Webb, and Chrissy Givens sang the National Anthem ... Yamil Cordero received her first collegiate start today ... The Lady Raiders have won nine of their last 10 conference games, including five in a row ... Stephany Smith is now 40-11 (.784) during her career in the month of February ... The Lady Raiders are now 4-0 since Tia Stovall made it back into the starting lineup ... Keisha McClinic, ranked third nationally in steals, helped her cause on Saturday by recording four to give her 91 on the season. The 91 thefts ties Kim Webb's mark for the second most in a single season and is only one shy of the all-time record of 92 established last year by Patrice Holmes ... Chrissy Givens hit a career-best five field goals en route to equaling her personal high of 10 points in the win over UALR ... Patrice Holmes only had two turnovers versus UALR, which was her fewest in five games.

NEXT UP: The Lady Raiders will travel to Western Kentucky on Feb. 26 to take on the Lady Hilltoppers in critical East Division battle. Tip off is scheduled for 7 PM.

QUOTES:

Head Coach Stephany Smith:

Senior Day and being first place: " I think us being in first place was the sweetest thing of all the things today. It was nice that our seniors had an opportunity on getting some playing time including Yamil Cordero. I thought that it was a good team effort and I think everybody is excited to be in the position that we are in. And they feel pretty good about the way we are playing. I did expect to this to be a special season for us and I hope that this season is far from over."

Bench effort: " Well somebody had to step up because of Ciara's (Gray) absence. We had worked our selves into a rhythm of our rotation. And with her going out with a season ending injury some one had to step up. And it is a credit to how hard our team practices every single day. I also think Cartia (Baily) also raised our energy level when she went into today. I thought she played extremely hard, and was one of the more impressive players off the bench."

Scoring of Arkansas Little Rock: " This was not the tenacious defensive effort that you saw on Thursday night. I wish that it would have been. The game was a little more casual than I wanted. But, you have to be proud of this basketball team and what all they have accomplished. They are sitting in first place with nineteen wins"

Western Kentucky game next week: This game is huge road trip for us. We have two games left in the season. If we win them both, we win a share of the championship."

Guard Keisha McClinic:

" It took me awhile to get going, I have to let the game come to me. I take it slow and not try to rush it. We came out there ready to play and gave it our all. It was a fun game to just go out and give it our all."

Forward Krsytal Horton

On Thursday's game against Western Kentucky: "I think it is big because they beat us here last time and because of the game last year that we lost. I think it is a very big game and we have to go out there and be focused and play hard."

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