Lady Raiders Advance to Sun Belt Tourney Championship

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BOWLING GREEN, Ky. - Middle Tennessee (22-7) earned a spot in the Sun Belt Tournament Championship for the second straight season with a 64-61 win over Denver (14-15) Monday.

Denver made it interesting down the stretch thanks to the hot hand of Pioneer Ragan Neblett. With 1:32 to play and Middle Tennessee enjoying a 10 point lead (57-47), Neblett was fouled attempting a three-point shot and hit all three free throws. After a turnover by the Lady Raiders, Neblett came back down and drained a three to pull Denver to within four, 57-53, with 1:04 to go in the game.

After junior Patrice Holmes connected on a pair of free throws, Denver's Kaitlyn King came down and drained a huge three to cut the lead to three (59-56) with 53 seconds left on the clock. Solid free throw shooting by Middle Tennessee in the final minute kept Denver at bay as the Lady Raiders hit 5-of-8 from the charity stripe to keep Denver at bay.

Holmes scored a game-high 23 points, and Krystle Horton added 16 points and 10 boards. Horton grabbed more offensive boards (8) then Denver (6). As a team, the Lady Raiders out rebounded Denver 44-29.

Early on, the Pioneers were on fire, jumping out to a 16-6 advantage seven minutes into the game. But the Lady Raiders came back and actually took a two-point halftime edge thanks to Horton's lay-up as time expired.

Middle Tennessee never trailed again and built its lead to as many as 14 (55-41) with 3:23 to play before Denver attempted a late rally.

The Lady Raiders will play in the Sun Belt Tournament Championship game at 3 p.m. Tuesday

against No. 3 seed Western Kentucky.

NOTES:

CHAMPIONSHIP TIME: No. 4 seed Middle Tennessee advances to play the winner of the New Mexico State-Western Kentucky game in the Sun Belt Tournament Championships on Tuesday at 3 p.m. on ESPN Plus.

BACK-TO-BACK: Middle Tennessee has reached its second straight Sun Belt Conference Championship game. The Lady Raiders lost to host Western Kentucky 86-83 last season.

WE LOVE TO WIN: The Lady Raiders won for the third straight time and eighth game in the last nine tries.

HOLMES LOVES TOURNEY TIME: Patrice Holmes scored over 20 points for the second straight game for the Lady Raiders and has 45 points over two games. She set the tournament record last season with 74 points in three games and has tallied at least 20 points in four of the last five Sun Belt Conference Tournament games.

MCCLINIC HITS THE CENTURY MARK: Senior Keisha McClinic recorded her 100th steal against Denver on Monday. She shattered the single season record earlier this year and continues to add to her total.

HORTON SHINES: Freshman Krystle Horton put together a solid second game as she had 16 points and 10 rebounds. It is the sixth double double of the year and 10th consecutive game she has scored in double figures.

TIDBITS: Middle Tennessee dominated the glass grabbing 44 rebounds and only allowing 29 for Denver ... Every player who saw action in the game contributed to the scoreboard against Denver ... After scoring sporadically throughout the season, Ditte Jakobsen has made her presence known lately in the scoring column as she has scored in the last six games.

QUOTES:

MT Head Coach Stephany Smith:

"I thought we did a really good job on the offensive boards. As a rule, our entire conference, with the exception of Louisiana-Lafayette, is a man-to-man league. For the first 10 games of the year, we faced nothing but zone. In conference play, we played 95 percent against man-to-man. Denver's zone was not expected. They played in a zone and were successful in it. We were a little rusty and didn't come out strong."

MT Guard Patrice Holmes:

"We had to get our timing against the zone and attack it. We settled for a lot of outside shots instead of attacking. We really didn't show any emotion in the first five minutes of the game. As the leader and captain of this team, I felt like it was up to me to take over and get our team into the game."

MT Forward Krystle Horton:

"We did not look for the open spaces in the zone in the first half. In the second half we looked for the open spaces and scored."

Denver Stephanie Hart:

"It was a battle out there and a very physical game. That was one of the things (rebounding) that we needed to do in order to win and I think they did a really good job of coming at us in getting more than one shot."

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