Blue Raiders rally falls short, 70-68

Blue Raiders erase 15-point deficit in final minutes before losing by two

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JONESBORO, Ark. - A frantic comeback ended just short, as Middle Tennessee cut a double-digit deficit to one in the final seconds before falling to Arkansas State, 70-68, Monday night at the Convocation Center. ASU led by one point at halftime but pushed the lead to as many as 15 points in the second half thanks to Blue Raider turnovers and the lid on the bucket when there was a shot. Middle Tennessee made just two of its first 16 shots after halftime and committed 19 turnovers in the contest, tying for the second most this season. Arkansas State did something it hasn't done all season as well, and that's hit free throws, making 28-of-45 for the game, including 12-for-16 in the first half. ASU's missed allowed the Blue Raiders to get back in the contest in the final three minutes, but Jazmine Taylor and Brittney Hiles both knocked down key foul shots in the final minute to preserve the victory for the home team. ASU led 59-44 with 5:20 remaining before Middle Tennessee put on a frantic run, with Jackie Pickel igniting the spree with a pair of 3-pointers. Amber Holt, who scored a game-high 31 points, including 20 in the second half, also hit a trifecta, and was fouled on another 3-point attempt, hitting all three at the charity stripe. But Taylor made one free throw with 9.8 seconds left and after Holt's three foul shots, Taylor made two more. Latoya Barclay was fouled on an inbounds play at halfcourt with 0.6 seconds remaining and hit one free throw for the Blue Raiders, but Holt was unable to tip the miss and the clock ran out. Angie Criner came off the bench to lead ASU with 17 points, while Sherina Scott

added 13 and Taylor had 10, including 8-of-12 at the foul line. No other Blue Raider scored ion double figures besides Holt, who was 8-for-15 from the field and 13-of-16 at the foul line. The Blue Raiders led for much of the first half until the final minutes when ASU put together a 10-5 run to take a 33-32 advantage at the break. Holt scored 11 points in the half but none in the final seven minutes, while Starr Orr had eight, including two 3-pointers. In fact, Holt did not score a basket from the 6:43 mark in the first half until hitting a jumper from the baseline with 8:28 remaining in the game. The Blue Raiders led by five on three occasions, but 11 first-half turnovers allowed Arkansas State to stay in the game. Veronica Smith's 3-pointer from the wing tied the score at 30 and Ebonie Jefferson's baseline layup with 1:01 left gave ASU its first lead since the 17-minute mark in the first half. Middle Tennessee stays on the road, taking on Troy Thursday at 7 p.m. before returning home Sunday to face New Orleans at 2 p.m. **RADIO SHOW ON THE MOVE:** The Rick Insell Radio Show is making a move for the rest of the year, starting with the next show. All of Insell's shows will take place at Coach's Grill at 127 SE Broad Street, starting with the next show on Tuesday, January 15, at 6 p.m. The show will then take place every Monday for the rest of the season at 6 p.m.

POSTGAME NOTES

HOLT JOINS ELITE COMPANY: Senior Amber Holt became the 20th player in school history with more than 1,000 points with her two free throws with 15:34 remaining in the game. Holt becomes the fastest player to ever reach 1,000, breaking Priscilla Robinson's previous record of 55 games (1990-91, 1991-92). The Arkansas State contest was Holt's 51st career game. Holt also became the fifth player in five seasons to pass the 1,000-point mark for the Blue Raiders (Patrice Holmes, 2003-04; Tia Stovall, 2004-05; Chrissy Givens and Krystle Horton, 2005-06). Holt has 1,019 as a Blue Raider and will next set her sights on Jessica Beaty (1,056, 1994-97) and Carlita Elder (1,065, 1996-99). **PICKEL FINDS THE RANGE:** Sophomore Jackie Pickel has struggled from 3-point range this season but found the groove against Arkansas State, helping the Blue Raiders mount a frantic comeback in the final minutes of the contest. Pickel hit a pair of 3-pointers and was 2-of-5 from behind the arc in the game. Pickel had made just 2-for-12 from 3-point range over the last six games. Middle Tennessee made 7-of-21 from behind the arc in the contest, including two each from Amber Holt and Starr Orr. Orr had made just 2-for-15 over the last eight games before hitting her pair versus ASU. **HOLT HAS BIG NIGHT DESPITE LONG DROUGHT:** Senior Amber Holt scored a game-high 31 points versus Arkansas State, hitting 8-of-15 shots from the field and 13-for-16 at the foul line. But she did not score a basket for 18:15 of the game, hitting a 3-pointer with 6:43 remaining in the first half and not scoring another bucket until the 8:28 mark of the second half. Holt scored 12 of the team's final 14 points in the game over the final two minutes. **MORE ON HOLT:** Senior Amber Holt posted 30-plus points for the sixth time this season, scoring 41 in the contest. It moves Holt into second place on the single-season list for 30-point games, ahead of Jamie Thomatis (2001) and Chrissy Givens (2006, 2007) and behind the single-season mark of nine held by Tawanya Mucker (1988). **TIDBITS:** Sophomore Chelsia Lymon started for just the second time this season and only the fourth time in her career ... Amber Holt set a career-high for free throws made with 13 and free throw attempts with 16. She surpassed her previous bests in both categories (11 FT made, 15 FT attempts) set in the last game, versus Florida Atlantic. Holt has four double-digit free throw contests this season. She also played all 40 minutes for the eighth time this season and the fifth in the last six games ... The loss snapped a three-game winning streak for the Blue Raiders over Arkansas State and was just the fifth win all-time in the series for ASU. Middle Tennessee is now 3-5 all-time in Jonesboro. **POSTGAME QUOTES**

Middle Tennessee sophomore guard Jackie Pickel

On if the comeback was too late

"It was very frustrating. About four or five minutes to go in the game, their crowd really started to get

into it and we gave up without anybody knowing we were giving up. Then when we started to make a run, it was a little too late." **On the missed shots at the end of the game**

"We had it. We should have hit our shots at the end. I had a wide open shot that I should have hit."

On her 3-point attempt at the end

"It felt like it was in. You never know. It hit the back of the rim and we didn't have a chance to get the rebound. It put them on the line and moved the lead up for them." **On the thinking of shooting a 3-pointer in that situation**

"We had four guards in the game. We had Amber [Holt] inside and we were hoping if she couldn't get anything then we could kick it outside and make a 3-pointer." **On Amber Holt's play**

"She has put us on her back all year. The other role players have to step up and hit shots early. We wouldn't have been in that situation if we would have made our shots earlier." **Middle Tennessee head coach Rick Insell**

On the overall play of the game

"We just didn't play good basketball tonight. We never got into our offense. We struggled all night from every position. I couldn't say there was anyone at any position that stood above any other. We didn't do a good job. We did a very poor job in everything we did. When you do that against a team like Arkansas State, you can't expect to win." **On having some breakdowns in the defensive press**

"You just can't do that. We had some breakdowns on our press. We can't get into our press because we have people that don't know what we are doing up front. We just stand there when we are trying to spot instead of tagging up. We are playing bad right now. When you do that against a team like Arkansas State, they are going to take advantage of it." **On making the game close at the end**

"We've been able to bring most of our games in close. When you are playing someone on the road, you don't need to put yourself in that hole. If you do that, you are going to have to suffer the consequences. We took ourselves out of any kind of at-large bid tonight. Now, we are going to have to get our team ready for the rest of conference play. We'll bounce back." **On rebounding Arkansas State's missed free throws**

"If we rebound their missed free throws, we would have won this basketball game. It just wasn't the young kids, it was everybody. When you play terrible, you play terrible."

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