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Team defense keys Raiders in 57-45 triumph

Squad holds UALR to just 22 points in second half

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MOBILE, Ala. - Middle Tennessee used a 12-2 run to start the second half and limited UALR to just 22 points after the break, as the Blue Raiders advanced to the Sun Belt Tournament championship game for the fifth straight season with a 57-45 triumph Monday at Mitchell Center. The Blue Raiders will take on rival Western Kentucky for the title Tuesday at 3 p.m.

[Amber Holt](#) scored 33 points with 10 rebounds, [Chelsia Lymon](#) netted 14 points and [Emily Queen](#) added four assists and eight rebounds in the victory, sending Middle Tennessee into its sixth consecutive SBC Tournament championship game.

Holt and Queen's efforts on the boards helped the Blue Raiders win the rebounding battle, 34-25, and Queen's defense on First Team All-SBC player Nikya Hughes was terrific, keeping the Trojan senior scoreless in the second half after she netted 12 points in the first half.

Middle Tennessee (21-10) trailed 23-18 at halftime, the least amount of points for the Blue Raiders in the first half this season and the second fewest under head coach Rick Insell in the opening 20 minutes. But the squad fed Holt to start the second half, as the senior scored the first 12 points after the break before [Brandi Brown](#) knocked down a huge 3-pointer from the top of the key.

A pair of technical fouls on UALR (23-8) also helped change the momentum in the second half, the first one on head coach Joe Foley at 9:53. Brown hit both of those free throws in between a 3-pointer from the corner by Lymon and a driving layup by the Blue Raider senior that put Middle Tennessee ahead, 40-35.

Another 3-pointer from Lymon, this one from the top of the key, gave the Blue Raiders a 45-38 edge with 5:45 remaining. UALR never got closer than five and the lead went back to eight after UALR's bench was whistled for a technical with 3:30 left. Brown made 1-of-2 foul shots before Holt and Lymon iced the game with six straight free throws in the final 1:25.

Middle Tennessee shot 48 percent from the field in the second half after making just 29 percent in the opening 20 minutes. The Blue Raiders were also 0-for-3 from 3-point range in the first half but made 3-of-4 after intermission, all very big shots in the final outcome.

Hughes was the only double-figure scorer for UALR.

In the first half the Blue Raiders failed to make shots against UALR, just like in the first meeting this season, shooting only 28.6 percent from the field (6-for-21). Holt was 4-of-11 and scored 12 of the team's 18 points, while the other seven players were 2-for-10.

UALR started hot, especially Hughes, making 3-of-6 from the floor in the early going. The team cooled a bit before getting hot again, as the Trojans made four of their final seven shots in the half and took a 23-18 lead into intermission. Hughes scored 12 points for UALR, including the first seven of the game.

SBC TOURNAMENT STREAK NOW AT 15: Middle Tennessee won its 15th straight Sun Belt Tournament contest with Monday's semifinal victory over UALR. The Blue Raiders have not lost in the SBC Tournament since falling in the finals of the 2003 tourney to Western Kentucky in Bowling Green, Ky. Middle Tennessee upped its record all-time to 19-3 in the SBC Tournament, including 17 victories in the last 18 games. The Blue Raiders are now 41-16 all-time in conference tournament with 10 tourney titles.

HOLT WITH ANOTHER DOUBLE-DOUBLE: [Amber Holt](#) posted her eighth double-double of the season and the 11th of her career against UALR, scoring 33 points with 10 rebounds. It was the 11th 30-point game of the year for the senior and her 19th outing this season with eight or more rebounds. Holt has posted a double in three of her last five games this season and is averaging 10.4 rebounds per contest over those five outings.

QUEEN CONTRIBUTES IN OTHER WAYS: [Emily Queen](#) has found a niche in the last two games, handing out a career-high four assists in both contests, and the freshman continues to hit the boards hard for the Blue Raiders. Queen grabbed eight rebounds in



Chelsia Lymon scored 14 points and her defense limited UALR's Anshel Cooper to only eight in Middle Tennessee's 57-45 semifinal victory Monday at the Sun Belt Championships. (Aaron Thompson)

the victory over UALR after collecting nine in the quarterfinal win against Troy. Queen upped her season average in rebounds to 5.9 per game and is averaging 6.9 boards per contest in her 23 starts this season.

HOLT ADDS TO SINGLE-SEASON RECORDS: Senior [Amber Holt](#) continues to rewrite the single-season record books at Middle Tennessee, moving into first place for free throws in the victory over UALR. Holt was 15-for-18 at the foul line, moving out of a tie for first with Robin Hendrix (1981) and all alone at the top. Holt was already the single-season leader in points (846), scoring average (27.3), FG made (321), FG attempts (622), FT made (186) and 30-point scoring games in a season (12). She also ranks eighth in rebounds (257).

TIDBITS: Senior [Starr Orr](#) played in her 117th career game, tying Cortney Neeley (1996-99) for sixth on the career list. With her next game played, she will tie Jonelda Buck (1996-99) and Natalie Sneed (1995-98) for fourth all-time ... Senior [Latoya Barclay](#) tied her career-high for the sixth time this season with four rebounds. The Blue Raiders won the battle of the boards versus UALR, 34-25, and are 9-1 this season when outrebounding their opponent ... Sophomore [Chelsia Lymon](#) played a career-high 40 minutes in the contest. Senior [Amber Holt](#) also played all 40 minutes, her 13th 40-minute game of the year ... Middle Tennessee posted team season-lows in field goals made (18), field goal attempts (42) and 3-point field goal attempts (7). The Blue Raiders also held UALR to a season-low 25 rebounds ... Middle Tennessee upped its all-time mark to 12-3 against UALR and 1-0 versus the Trojans in the Sun Belt Championships.

POSTGAME QUOTES

Head coach Rick Insell

"I thought in the first half we got caught up doing what they wanted us to do, like walking the ball up the floor and getting into that one-possession game, and that's not what we're all about. At halftime we came back out and picked the tempo up. We wanted to push the ball more the second half and when we're able to do that it broke Chelsia (Lymon) loose for a three and then [Brandi Brown](#) hit a big three for us. I think all of that was off of transition so we wanted to push the ball at a little quicker pace than we did early."

Talk about the title game and the adversity and injuries you have had being down to eight players:

"We're down to the elite eight. We don't look good walking into the gym and we don't look good warming up but when they pitch it up in the air we're pretty tough. They care for each other and they play well with each other and we get along great off the court. When you got a team like that you're going to have good things that's going to happen around them. We've been denied several times in the last four or five games and they've never panicked they came out they executed and they got down free throws and got big rebounds. Tomorrow is going to be a tough game. Western (Kentucky) knows us. We didn't have to scout Western. Western knows us. We know what they're gonna do. They're going to go to (Crystal) Kelly and we're gonna go to (Amber) Holt."

Senior forward [Amber Holt](#)

What things did you all do differently in the second half?

"Just attack. When we attack that's what people can't stop. And if they stopped the drive we had an outside shooter. Basically they just couldn't stop our transition."

Was there any panic when you guys were struggling in the first half?

"We never panic. As soon as you panic, that's when things go downhill."

Sophomore guard [Chelsia Lymon](#)

On making adjustments at halftime

"It was just a matter of playing better defense. (UALR) set a lot of picks. We had to get through picks. It was just about team defense and in the locker room they were stressing helping each other with picks through talk. Communication was the key."

On facing Western Kentucky in the championship game

"We just want to come out and play basketball. It's going to be an exciting game. It's going to be an emotional game, and it's going to be all about who sets the tempo and who keeps the tempo going throughout the game. We're going to go to sleep tonight and wake up thinking about playing a very emotional and competitive game."

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