

Blue Raiders drop road contest to Lady Vols

Middle Tennessee is led by 28 from Alysha Clark

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KNOXVILLE, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee battled for 40 minutes and had a couple runs to put a hint of a scare into No. 7/10 Tennessee, but the Lady Vols pulled through for an 81-52 victory Thursday night inside Thompson-Boling Arena in Knoxville, Tenn.

Tennessee jumped out to an 18-6 lead over the opening eight minutes behind eight points from freshman Shekinna Stricklen. The Blue Raiders, however, did not quit and junior Alysha Clark scored her eight-straight point for the visitors at 11:24 to ignite a 13-2 spurt. Three-consecutive 3-pointers, one each by juniors Jackie Pickel, Brandi Brown and Chelsia Lymon, were part of the run, which brought Middle Tennessee (5-4) within one, 20-19, at 7:33.



The Lady Vols quickly turned the tide again and scored the next 10 points, featuring a pair of lay-ins from Kelley Cain, to increase their advantage back to 11, 30-19, with 4:39 to play in the half. Layups by Brown and Clark sandwiched another triple from Lymon and MT brought the deficit down to single digits one last time, 32-23, with 2:02 on the clock. However, eight-straight points by Tennessee (7-1) closed the half, including a trey from Sticklen from 33 feet at the buzzer, and the hosts entered intermission with a 41-23 edge.

The lead stayed around 20 during the early stages of the second half and Clark again went to work. The two-time Sun Belt Conference Player of the Week netted the first 10 points during the stanza for the Lady Raiders before junior Dana Garrett hit a running baseline jumper at 12:12 for a 53-35 score.

Middle Tennessee clamped down on defense after Vicki Baugh tallied a putback at 16:06 to give UT 53 points. The Lady Vols did not score again until the 11:52 mark and then added their next points from the foul line at 7:43 following a Blue Raider technical foul.

MT brought the gap down to 18 one last time, 66-48, on a Brown layup at 4:47. However, Tennessee used a 15-4 run down the stretch for the final margin.

Clark finished with a game-high 28 points on 11-of-21 field goals. She also connected on 6-of-9 free throws, attempting all but two of the team's shots from the charity stripe. Clark grabbed a team-high eight rebounds.

Brown finished with 11 points and seven boards. The Blue Raiders lost the rebounding battle by six, 35-29, but held the Lady Vols to 15 below their national-leading average.

Stricklen posted 20 points for Tennessee, but only three came after halftime. Angie Bjorklund chipped in 16 markers, while Glory Johnson added 11 to give the Lady Vols a trio in double figures. Stricklen hauled down a team-high six caroms.

Middle Tennessee will return to the friendly confines of the Murphy Center for its next game, a 4 p.m. Sunday tip against its third SEC opponent of the season, Alabama. The contest will be broadcast live on Comcast/Charter Sports Southeast (CSS).

Middle Tennessee head coach Rick Insell

Opening Statement

"We won't play anybody like Tennessee the rest of the year. With their size, we weren't able to score down low because they put their big kids in there and were able to isolate the inside. It was tough for our kids. I was really proud of the way we played. We played hard and didn't quit all the way through the game. I'm disgusted with the loss, but we played a team that is one of the best in the country. They are also one of the youngest teams in the country. They played a lot better than what they've looked like on film, though."

On if he has any concerns after three straight losses

"I don't have any concerns. I thought my kids played pretty good. The 23 turnovers - we've got to do a better job taking care of the ball. It was 27-17 in points off turnovers. Usually the last three years we've averaged 13 turnovers a game but for some reason this season we aren't taking care of the basketball. If we get back to 13-14 turnovers a game, I don't know if we can beat a Tennessee, but it won't be a 30-point game."

On the play of Alysha Clark

"Cagey, isn't she? She's got tremendous body control and great foot work. You have to give the players who are giving her the basketball credit too. She's got a big motor, she's very tenacious and she's never going to quit. We get the most out of her. I'm real proud to be her coach. Again you've got to give those young ladies that give the ball to her credit. They are working hard and they're unselfish."

On what Tennessee did that he hadn't seen on film

"They shot the ball extremely well tonight. Some of those looks they got they weren't as open as they looked. We had a hand in their face and on the ball. They're young and they're going to make some mistakes like they've been making, but with the schedule Tennessee plays, Pat's coaching staff and the athletes they've got, they're going to be alright. They'll be tough at the end of the year. It won't surprise me to see them in the Final Four. I felt like Tennessee gave us more problems and challenges than Oklahoma. They ran more people at us. Alysha was having to fight four kids that were 6-4 and 6-5 - that's tough. When Pat's able to do that, by the end of the year I see great things

on the horizon. I'm just glad you'll be coming to Murfreesboro next year.

Junior forward Alysha Clark

On point guard Chelsia Lymon fouling out

"When we have players foul out we have to have other people step up, and we need to have confidence in our back-up point guards. It hurts us because we lose experience at the point when Chelsia (Lymon) goes out. We can't have inexperience there. They have to grow up quick. Coach tells them that in practice all the time.

On Tennessee's size advantage

"We played against Oklahoma and LSU against other big girls. I know what to expect; I've always played against bigger girls. I know that I can't shoot over them so I have to use my quickness and my mind to work around them and go around them. It's hard because I don't have a clear, open look at the basket. I have to think about a lot of things."

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