Blue Raiders open league play with win over Trojans

Middle Tennessee closes homestand with three-straight wins

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee started its run towards a Sun Belt Conference title where the league's head coaches picked it in the preseason, to finish first, with an 82-46 triumph over East Division foe Troy Saturday evening inside the Murphy Center in Murfreesboro, Tenn. The Blue Raiders defended the prediction of winning the division with their largest win in the nine-game series versus the Trojans, holding the visitors to a series-low 46 points.

The Lady Raiders did it with a balanced offensive attack, connecting on the outside and inside and using their defense to force 30 Troy (3-6, 0-1 Sun Belt) turnovers, converting them into 30 points.

Sophomore Emily Queen led the outside effort, converting a career-high 6-of-7 from behind the 3-point line among her 7-of-12 overall field goals on her way to a career-best 20 points. She hit a triple from the left corner to match her previous career high of 17 at 4:52, then drilled another trey at 4:02 from the opposite corner to push her second-half alone scoring tally to 16 points.

Queen also hit a pair of 3-pointers for the team's first two buckets of the second stanza, as Middle Tennessee (8-4, 1-0 Sun Belt) rained in a team season-high 14 shots from long range. The 14 triples tie for fifth in school history with five other games.

Anne Marie Lanning and Jackie Pickel each added three 3-pointers to the effort, while Chelsia Lymon capped the outside shooting firing squad with a pair from long distance.

While the Blue Raiders were dominating from long range, junior Alysha Clark controlled the paint, netting 31 points and grabbing 10 rebounds for her fourth double-double at MT and 42nd overall of her career. Clark topped the 30-point barrier for the third time this season and seventh in her career while registering a 10-of-15 field goal and 11-of-13 free throw performance. Queen nearly matched her on the boards with nine caroms, helping the Lady Raiders to a 37-31 advantage on the glass.

The first half started sluggish for both teams with Middle Tennessee storming back for a five-point cushion, 7-2, after allowing Troy to score the game's first points. The Trojans, however, scored five straight, capped by a Donette McNair steal and layup at 15:38 to knot the scoring a 7-7. The Blue Raiders then reeled off the next eight points and eventually pushed their edge to 10, 24-14, with 9:30 remaining in the stanza.

Middle Tennessee held a 10-point cushion with 6:41 left following a Clark three-point play and increased it to a half-high of 11 points, 39-28, following a Queen 3-pointer at 2:08. Troy's Kirsten Smith knocked down a set of free throws for the final points of the half and the teams entered the break with the Lady Raiders ahead, 39-30.

The Blue Raiders then cracked down on defense during the second 20 minutes, limiting the Trojans to 6-of-24 (25.0 percent) field goals and just four charity tosses for only 16 points. Conversely, MT poured in 43 points on a 13-of-26 (50.0 percent) half and shot 9-of-10 from the foul line in the frame.

McNair finished with 15 points on 7-of-9 field goals to pace Troy, while also grabbing a team-high seven boards. Alyce Shearing added nine points, as the Trojan starters netted 43 of the squad's 46 points.

Middle Tennessee will take eight days off for the holidays before concluding their non-conference slate with a 2 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 28 game at Tennessee Tech in Cookeville, Tenn. Troy will battle league foe Western Kentucky Monday in its final game before the holidays.

Head Coach Rick Insell

On tonight's win

"We had two good practices and I felt like we were really prepared coming into this game. Troy is going to show people how good they are before it is over with. We shot the ball good the second half and when we shoot 3-pointers like we did then it makes it tough for other teams."

On Middle Tennessee's defense

"The big thing you have to look at is we held them to 16 points in the second half. Defensively, we changed our presses and half-court defense. I thought Emily Queen not only had a great offensive game but she was responsible for holding down [Kylie] Morrissy who is an all-conference player and one of the best in the Sun Belt. That is big to hold her to eight points."

On the success at home

"I think more than anything it is our fans. I was told by the other coaches in the conference when I came here that we didn't have hardcore fans at Middle Tennessee like they have at Arkansas State and Western Kentucky. I disagreed from that from the start and we have built something here. Our

players were embarrassed with their performance in the win against Austin Peay. That is one of the things they have dwelt on this week. They wanted to really get after Troy tonight and they did."

On the play of Brandi Brown and Alysha Clark
"I thought with Alysha and Brandi getting foul trouble that the other players really stepped up tonight. We did have some unforced turnovers and if you take that out then we only had about 11. We can live with that, but we have to do a better job taking care of the basketball. Brandi was altering shots and was being aggressive defensively. That is what we want her to do in there. I am very happy for our team."

On the team's rebounding success
"We have been working on it and doing our drills with more focus and intensity than in the past. We had to work on some things and we are not anywhere we need to be because we have so much room to improve as a team. I am very happy with this win and being 8-4. We will take this and build on it."

On the upcoming break
"It will give us a chance to get our legs back and our minds flushed out. We have had a pretty tough schedule thus far. When you go looking at who we started with and come down the list - Indiana, Oklahoma, LSU, Tennessee, Alabama and Louisville. That is a pretty impressive list of teams that we played. I am very confident about the way we have played up to this point."

Junior forward Alysha Clark
On getting into foul trouble
"I knew I couldn't be overly aggressive and needed to play smart. I know how to play with fouls with me being in my fourth year. I know what to expect and what not to do, but I can't just go out there and lay down. I have to be a defensive presence even if I do have four fouls."

On her offensive play tonight
"They were feeding me. This game I just wanted to go out and reward my teammates. They are going out and doing a good job of getting me the ball inside. I missed 11 shots last game so I had to go out and finish for my teammates."

On the team's rebounding success
"Early on in the season we weren't stressing guards rebounding and it really showed. Coach Insell has really been focusing a lot on guards crashing the boards and us boxing out in practice drills. We are carrying it over to games and everyone is being aggressive going to the boards."

Sophomore forward Emily Queen
On three-point shooting
"Once I got into the flow of the game I was able to get the feel for it. We have really changed how we shoot our 3-pointers in practice and made it more aggressive. It is really starting to pay off. Our team did a great job tonight of finding the open person."

On the upcoming break
"This break is much needed right now. Everyone's legs are getting a little bit tired. This win felt really good and we are going to come back hungry after the break looking to get some more."

Troy Head Coach Michael Murphy

On the change of play in the second half
"I just think that Middle Tennessee changed. They were just a little bit more efficient at rotating back. We did a good job of handling their press in the first half. In the second half, I thought we got a little bit in a hurry. We were forcing things, committed some fouls and missed some makeable shots that we were making in the first half. If you are going to stay in the game and give yourself a chance to win, that's how you have to score because that is where the opportunities are going to come. In the first half, we did a really good job of it. In the second half, we just didn't. You've got to give that credit to Middle Tennessee because I thought defensively they just turned it up in the second half. They played hard the whole game, but so did we. We didn't make the shots in the second half that we made in the first half. It's pretty much that simple."

On starting out 0-1 in conference play
"It's not even Christmas yet. We have a lot of games to play. One game isn't going to dictate how our season goes. We just got to move on and review the tape. Grade the tape, look at it and try to learn from it. We do that with everybody. We don't change how we do things depending on the outcome of the game or who the opponent is. We try to stay consistent in our work ethic, in how we do things and why we do things."

On Middle Tennessee's long conference win streak at home
"I am not big into streaks. I'm not big into the lucky rabbit's foot. Every game is what it is. You just prepare for it like it's the most important game on the schedule because it is. When that is over, regardless of the result, you move on because that's all you can do."

Newspaper Box Score Troy vs Middle Tennessee 12/20/08 7 p.m. at Murfreesboro, Tenn. (Murphy Center) At Murfreesboro, Tenn. (Murphy Center) MIDDLE TENNESSEE 82, TROY 46 TROY (3-6, 0-1 SBC) McNair, Donette 7-9 1-1 15; Shearing, Alyce 4-7 1-2 9; Smith, Kirsten 2-8 4-5 8; Morrissy, Kylie 2-8 4-4 8; Roper, Larelle 1-3 1-2 3; Selfe, Jacklyn 1-7 0-0 2; McAppion, Sarah 0-1 1-3 1; Manuel, Tenia 0-1 0-0 0; Lindley, Lucy 0-0 0-0 0; Realph, Danielle 0-0 0-0 0; Davis, Brittnie 0-3 0-0 0. Totals 17-47 12-17 46. MIDDLE TENNESSEE (8-4, 1-0 SBC) Clark, Alysha 10-15 11-13 31; Queen, Emily 7-12 0-0 20; Pickel, Jackie 3-9 0-0 9; Lanning, Anne Marie 3-10 0-0 9; Lymon, Chelsia 2-7 2-2 8; Brown, Brandi 0-2 3-4 3; Davis, Shytoria 1-3 0-0 2; McFadden, Molly 0-0 0-0 0; Garrett, Dana 0-0 0-0 0; Stewart, Tina 0-1 0-0 0. Totals 26-59 16-19 82. Troy..... 30 16 - 46 Middle Tennessee..... 39 43 - 82 3-point goals--Troy 0-8 (; Shearing, Alyce 0-1; Smith, Kirsten 0-1; Morrissy, Kylie 0-2; Roper, Larelle 0-1; Selfe, Jacklyn 0-1; Davis, Brittnie 0-2), Middle Tennessee 14-36 (Queen, Emily 6-7; Pickel, Jackie 3-8; Lanning, Anne Marie 3-10; Lymon, Chelsia 2-7; Stewart, Tina 0-1; Brown, Brandi 0-2; Clark, Alysha 0-1). Fouled out--Troy-None, Middle Tennessee-Brown, Brandi. Rebounds--Troy 31 (McNair, Donette 7), Middle Tennessee 37 (Clark, Alysha 10). Assists--Troy 6 (Smith, Kirsten 2), Middle Tennessee 15 (Lanning, Anne Marie 5). Total fouls--Troy 19, Middle Tennessee 16. Technical fouls--Troy-None, Middle Tennessee-None. A-2911

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