

Blue Raiders reach 20-win plateau with victory at Denver

MT wins 15th straight overall, remains undefeated in SBC

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DENVER - Middle Tennessee opened February in the same fashion it had ended January, with another win, as it cruised to a 77-49 victory at Denver Wednesday evening inside Magness Arena in Denver, Colo. The triumph is the Lady Raiders' 15th straight, tying for third nationally, and marked the first Sun Belt Conference loss for the host Pioneers this season.

MT also reached the 20-win plateau for an unprecedented sixth-straight campaign, including all four seasons under head coach Rick Insell. The Lady Raiders have now reached the 20-victory mark in one-half, 17-of-34, seasons while playing at the varsity/scholarship level since 1975-76.



The nation's second-leading scorer, Alysha Clark, again paced the Middle Tennessee offensive attack with her 11th double-double of the season, eighth in Sun Belt action and 49th overall of her career after leading all players with 33 points and 12 rebounds. She netted 12-of-19 field goals and 9-of-13 free throws, while grabbing eight boards on the offensive end. MT won the rebounding battle, 37-35, against Denver.

Jackie Pickel had the hot hand early, dropping in three 3-pointers among her five field goals in the opening frame, for 13 points while missing just one shot. When she was not heating it up from the outside, the Lady Raiders turned to their leading scorer, Clark, on the inside for a team-best 14 points at the intermission.

The opening eight-and-a-half minutes remained a close game with Middle Tennessee (20-4, 12-0 Sun Belt) owning just a two-point lead, 16-14, at the 11:28 mark for the under-12 media timeout.

Pickel then hit her second trey of the stanza, starting an 8-0 Blue Raider run over the next two minutes. The Pioneers' woes from the field were not helped by a 0-of-4 effort from the foul line in the first half.

MT continued to blitz the net, opening an 18-point cushion on Pickel's last triple of the half at 3:56 for a 38-20 advantage before Celena Otero answered for Denver on its next possession. Clark added the final two buckets for the Lady Raiders to close the half and help them hold a 17-point, 42-25, lead at the break.

The second half began with the teams trading baskets through the first four possessions, which included a long-range bomb by Brandi Brown at 18:20 to join Pickel and Clark in the double-digit point club. The game was paused for an extended delay at 15:19 when a Denver (12-10, 7-4 Sun Belt) player had to be carried off on a stretcher after over pursuing on defense.

The Lady Raiders came out of the break by scoring on their first two times down the floor, including Brown's fourth shot from behind the 3-point arc at 14:38. Clark then scored the next nine Middle Tennessee points, keeping the margin above 20.

The Pioneers used a corner 3-pointer from Brianna Culberson at 5:18 to trim the gap to 19, 67-48. However, the Blue Raiders outscored Denver down the stretch, 10-1, to seal the final.

In addition to Clark, Brown added 18 points and Pickel poured in 13 to give MT three players in double figures. The Lady Raiders swiped 17 steals and dished 20 assists compared to five and nine, respectively, for the Pioneers.

Culberson topped Denver with 14 points, while Otero contributed 11 markers. Ashly Robinson hauled in a team-best seven caroms.

Middle Tennessee will take a week off before its next game, at 7 p.m. Wednesday February 11 at Troy.

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