Blue Raiders survive battle test to advance to Sun Belt Championship game

MT in title game for seventh-straight season

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HOT SPRINGS, Ark. - Top seed Middle Tennessee fought tooth-and-nail for 40 minutes but hit its free throws to pull out a 77-71 victory against No. 5 South Alabama Monday afternoon to advance to the title game of the Sun Belt Conference Tournament inside the Summit Arena in Hot Springs, Ark. The appearance in the league championship contest will be the seventh straight for the Lady Raiders, with the program capturing four-consecutive crowns from 2004-07.

The league's player of the year Alysha Clark again paced the Middle Tennessee (27-5) offensive attack with 34 points, while adding 16 rebounds for her 15th double-double of the campaign, 12th against a Sun Belt foe, 53rd of her career and third versus the Lady Jaguars this season. Clark converted 16-of-18 from the charity stripe as part of the team's 25-of-28 effort from the line compared to just 4-of-13 free throws for USA.

The Blue Raiders, ranked No. 26 in this week's Associated Press Poll, also received double-digit scoring efforts from starters Brandi Brown and Jackie Pickel with 15 and 14, respectively. Pickel

finished with four 3-pointers, but perhaps there was not one bigger than her long bomb at 5:42.

The Lady Jags closed within one, 58-57, with 5:54 to play on a trey from Jessica Starling. However, on the ensuing possession, Pickel received the ball from Chelsia Lymon and answered right back putting the Lady Raiders back on top by four. The triple started a 13-5 run which put MT up by nine with 2:40 remaining. Clark would net the final 10 points of the stretch, including six free throws.

Lymon's assist to Pickel would be one of nine for the SBC Defensive Player of the Year, setting a new career high. Lymon also added five steals, leading all players in the category.

Emily Queen also gave Middle Tennessee a solid effort on the glass, hauling in seven boards with six coming on the defensive end. She also had her best play since coming back from injury when she stole the ball at mid-court, raced to the other end for a layup and made the subsequent free throw at 18:48 of the second half to give the Blue Raiders a seven-point lead, 42-35.

South Alabama (21-11) was led by 10-of-12 shooting for 22 points by Ra'Shawna Sippio. She also added a team-best nine caroms. Shakira Nettles (16 points) and Jessica Starling (14) joined her in double figures.

The Blue Raiders would open the game with an 8-2 lead but the Lady Jaguars quickly climbed back, taking a 13-12 advantage on a Sippio layup with 14:01 showing on the clock. MT built its lead back to five on a pair of occasions, the last coming on a Brown jumper at 11:20 for a 20-15 lead.

Again, USA would battle back and it would take its last lead on another Sippio layup with 6:26 left in the half for a 26-24 edge. Middle Tennessee would not take more than a three-point lead until Tina Stewart came off the bench with three minutes to play. Stewart missed a layup, but got her own rebound, put it back in, was fouled and made the free throw for a four-point advantage, 36-32, at the 2:06 mark.

A pair of free throws by Brown set the final margin at three, 38-35, entering the intermission.

The lead swelled to seven on Queen's defensive play, but South Alabama responded by registering the next 10 points to mount a three-point cushion of its own, 45-42, with 15:56 left. Consecutive 3-pointers by Pickel answered the call and put MT ahead to stay.

The win is Middle Tennessee's 21st in the Sun Belt Tournament since joining the league in 2000-01. Head coach Rick Insell is now 10-1 in the event. It also is Insell's 10th win as the Blue Raider mentor at a neutral site location.

The Lady Raiders will play in the championship at 3 p.m. Tuesday against either No. 2 UALR or No. 3 Denver. In addition to the game being heard on the radio on WMOT (89.5 FM), the contest will also be broadcast on WNFN (106.7 FM). The game will also be broadcast on ESPN+ with Comcast/Charter Sports Southeast (CSS) picking up the feed throughout the Southeast.

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