Blue Raiders win Sun Belt Championship; clinch NCAA automatic bid

Middle Tennessee seals program's 12th overall appearance in the NCAA Tournament

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HOT SPRINGS, Ark. - Middle Tennessee used a 12-2 run early in the second half to break open a close game to capture the Sun Belt Tournament Championship by a 74-54 score against UALR and seal the program's 12th NCAA Tournament appearance. The Blue Raiders' title is their fifth in the last six seasons and third in four years under head coach Rick Insell.

Insell became the fastest head coach in school history to reach 100 victories, doing so in 132 games. The previous best was by Larry Joe Inman, who accomplished the feat in 147 contests.

A balanced scoring attack paced the Lady Raiders, led by 24 points from Third Team All-Sun Belt choice Brandi Brown. Brown knocked down five 3-pointers, four of which came in the first half.

Sun Belt Player of the Year Alysha Clark added 23 points and grabbed 10 rebounds for her second-straight double-double. The double-double is her 16th of the season, 13th against a league opponent and 54th of her career. She also handed out a career-best tying six assists despite not reaching the 30-point plateau for the first time in 11 games.

Clark set tournament records for most free throws (25) and total points (92).

Sun Belt Defensive Player of the Year Chelsia Lymon gave Middle Tennessee (28-5) three starters in double figures with 16 points, knocking down 6-of-7 from the field and 2-of-3 from behind the 3-point arc. Lymon dished seven assists, giving her 16 in the last two games.

Anne Marie Lanning and Jackie Pickel added six and five points, respectively, from their starting positions. Pickel set a tournament record for minutes played with 120.

Emily Queen was the only other Lady Raider to see action, grabbing two rebounds and adding an assist in 10 minutes.

Chastity Reed paced the Lady Trojans with 18 points, while dishing five assists. She also was the team's leading rebounder with four boards. MT owned a 32-19 advantage on the glass against UALR (26-6), including 23-to-11 on the defensive end.

Asriel Rolfe chipped in 13 points for the Lady Trojans.

The game started with neither team claiming more than a two-point cushion until Clark buried a pair of free throws at 11:02 to put the Blue Raiders ahead by three, 14-11. Her charity tosses were part of a larger 14-2 spurt, capped by a Pickel jumper at 7:55, giving MT a 24-13 edge. Brown knocked down consecutive treys during the stretch.

UALR then responded with a 16-7 run over the next seven minutes to slice the deficit to two, 31-29, before Lanning ended the half with a buzzer-beating 3-pointer to help swing the momentum back in Middle Tennessee's favor.

Lymon then opened the second half with another triple, only 15 seconds in, helping to push the lead back to eight. Again, the Lady Trojans would not die, using a pair of treys from Rolfe to cut the margin to two, 41-39 before MT went on its game-deciding run.

The closest the No. 2-seeded Lady Trojans would get the remainder of the game would be eight, 55-47, with 9:12 left on a Reed jumper. Brown then capped another streak by the top-seeded Lady Raiders with her final 3-pointer, increasing their lead to 20, 67-47, at the 4:54 mark.

Clark's layup with 41 seconds to play provided MT with its largest lead at 21, 72-51.

Clark was named the tournament's Most Outstanding Player, while Lymon and Brown were selected to the All-Tournament Team.

Middle Tennessee must now wait until the NCAA Selection Show at 6 p.m. Monday. The Selection Show is broadcast live on ESPN beginning at 6 p.m. followed by an hour-long extended coverage special beginning at 7 on ESPNU.

Details regarding a Lady Raider viewing party will be announced later in the week.

Opening round action of the NCAA Tournament is set to begin March 21 and 22. The Blue Raiders will not learn of their seed or opponent until the selection show.

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