Holmes sends Lady Raiders into finals with win over WKU

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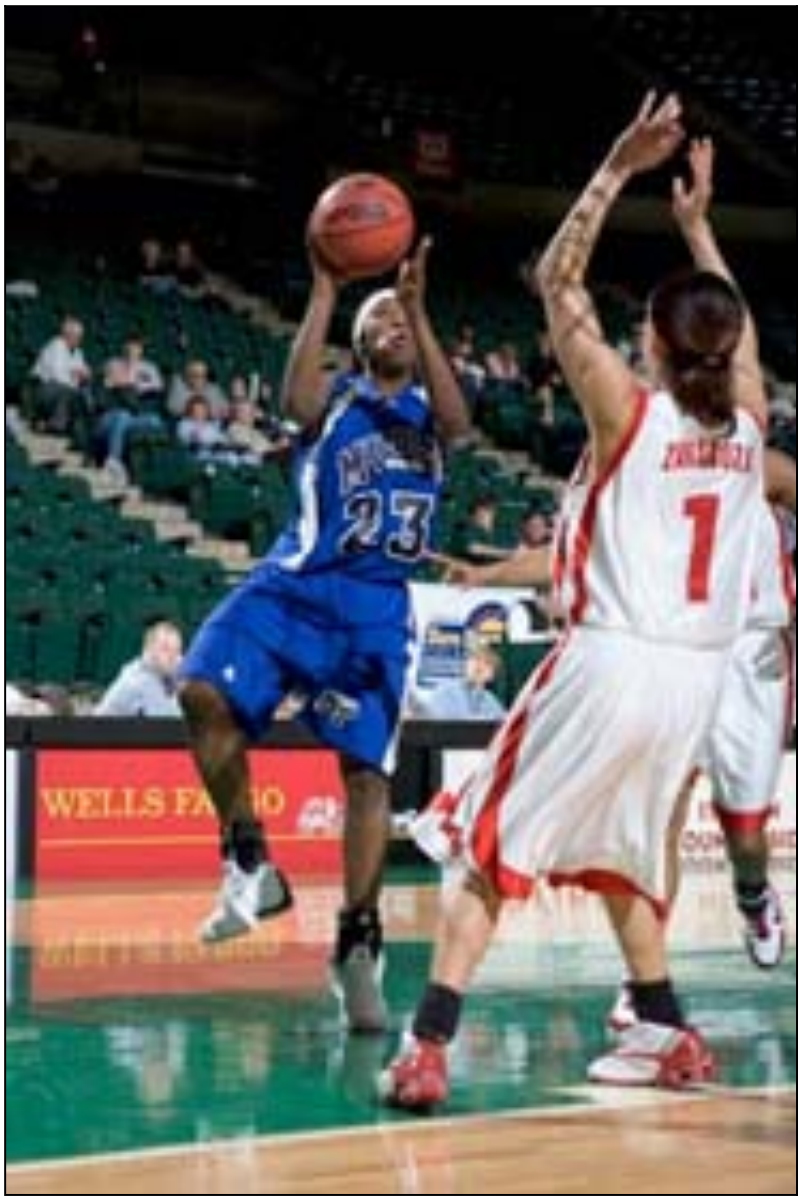

DENTON, Texas - Miss March came through again.

For the second straight day, Middle Tennessee's Patrice Holmes hit the game-winning shot to keep the Lady Raiders' goal of a second straight Sun Belt Conference title alive with a 65-61 come-from-behind victory over rival Western Kentucky at the Super Pit.

The Lady Raiders (22-8) will face Louisiana-Lafayette for the title and an automatic trip to the NCAA Tournament on Tuesday at 3 PM. The game will be televised by ESPNU and can be seen locally on Comcast Channel 27.

In a game that seemed to never go the Lady Raiders' way, Holmes and Company fought back from adversity to set themselves up for a chance at the win. When given the chance, the Lady Raiders made the most of it.

With 45 seconds left on the clock and the Lady Raiders trailing by one at 60-59, Holmes got the ball on the right wing and nailed a three-pointer to put Middle Tennessee ahead for good at 62-60. A day earlier, Holmes hit the game-winner with 12 seconds left to take down host North Texas.

"Patrice is the difference in the game," said Head Coach Stephany Smith. "When we had to have a basket or a big play she was there. She's a special player and one of the very best I have ever been around. A big time player wants the ball in that situation and you could tell the confidence she had in her motion and release. Wow."

Chrissy Givens accounted for the rest of the scoring with three free throws in the final 17 seconds to seal the victory.

Holmes finished with 21 points and seven rebounds while never leaving the floor. It marked the sixth time in 11 SBC Tournament games she has topped the 20-point mark.

Holmes' trio of helpers, Tia Stovall, Krystle Horton, and Givens, were saddled the entire game with foul trouble. Horton and Stovall both picked up their fourth foul within a minute of each other around the first media timeout of the second half. Horton later sat down with five fouls at the 6:04 mark of the game. Meanwhile, Givens picked up her fourth foul with 6:25 to play as both Horton and Givens played just 24 minutes each.

Stovall had 13 points and six boards, while Horton added 12 points on 6-for-11 shooting. Givens ended the game with nine points.

After a solid start in the first half, Middle Tennessee took an 18-12 lead before foul trouble started to mount and a number of starters found themselves on the bench. The Lady Toppers went on an 11-0 run to take a 27-20 lead and went into intermission with a 32-25 advantage. It marked the second straight day the Lady Raiders were on the short end of the halftime score.

In the first half, WKU was whistled for only four fouls while Middle Tennessee was targeted with 12 and the story at the foul line was the same as the Lady Raiders attempted just two freebies compared to 17 by the Lady Toppers. Middle Tennessee never entered the one-and-one situation.

The Lady Raiders came out of halftime and got behind by 10 points at 39-29 with 17:49 to play before mounting a 9-0 run to get within one at 39-38. From that point it was a nip and tuck battle to the final seconds.

Freshman Starr Orr, who came up big off the bench, hit a shot in the paint with 3:47 to play to give the Lady Raiders a 59-56 advantage. Following a WKU timeout, Tiffany Porter-Talbert hit back-to-back shots to give the Lady Toppers a 60-59 lead.

From that point it was all Holmes as the senior displayed why she has won the Most Outstanding Tournament Player award the last two years.

MIDDLE TENNESSEE VS WESTERN KENTUCKY SEMIFINAL ROUND, SUN BELT CONFERENCE TOURNAMENT DENTON, TX; MARCH 7, 2005

THREE IN A ROW: With the win over Western Kentucky on Monday afternoon, Middle Tennessee assured itself of a spot in the Sun Belt Conference Tournament Championship game for the third year in a row. The Lady Raiders lost to WKU in the finals in 2003, and then defeated the Lady Toppers last year in Bowling Green to advance to the NCAA Tournament. The three straight appearances are the longest by an SBC team since Louisiana Tech made nine straight title games from 1993 to 2000.

BLUE RAIDERS IN THE SBC TOURNEY: Middle Tennessee sports a 10-3 mark in five Sun Belt Tournaments, including a 8-1 mark over the past three seasons. The Lady Raiders have reached the tournament championship game the past three years, claiming the automatic berth into the NCAA Tournament last season. Middle Tennessee has won at least one game in all five SBC Tournament

appearances, and sports a 40-27 all-time conference tournament record.

TITLE GAMES: Tuesday's game against Louisiana-Lafayette will mark the 13th appearance for Middle Tennessee in a conference championship game. The Lady Raiders have an all-time mark of 7-5, including a 1-1 record in the SBC championship. Here is a look at Middle Tennessee's championship game appearances:

3/10/83 vs. Morehead State, W, 74-61 (OVC)
3/07/84 Tennessee Tech, W, 71-64 (OVC)
3/05/85 Tennessee Tech, W, 67-61 (OVC)
3/06/86 Tennessee Tech, W, 66-63 (OVC)
3/05/87 at Tennessee Tech, L, 71-67 (OVC)
3/10/88 Tennessee Tech, W, 79-62 (OVC)
3/05/91 at Tennessee Tech, L, 84-59 (OVC)
3/09/93 at Tennessee Tech, L, 80-70(OVC)
3/04/96 vs. Austin Peay, L, 69-60 (OVC)
3/01/98 UT Martin, W, 59-58 (OVC)
3/11/03 at Western Kentucky, L, 86-83 (SBC)
3/09/04 at Western Kentucky, W, 79-57 (SBC)

HOLMES IN SBC PLAY: Senior Patrice Holmes, a two-time winner of the league's Most Outstanding Tournament Player award, has scored 20 or more points in SBC tournament action six times in 11 games. Overall, Holmes is averaging 19.5 points and 8.0 rebounds all-time in the SBC Tournament. The Bishopville, S.C., native has topped the 20-point mark twice in this year's tourney.

HOLMES PASSES BROWN: With five three-pointers in the win over Western Kentucky Monday, Patrice Holmes surpassed Sandy Brown for fourth place on the all-time list. Holmes now has 167 career trifectas and is now 15 back of Sherry Tucker for third place.

GRAY IS OUT: With 16:22 to play in the game, senior Ciara Gray re-injured her right knee and is likely out for the season. In the summer, Gray made a decision to sit out the 2004-05 season due to reoccurring injuries but changed her mind one month into the season and rejoined the team in Dec. 2. Since her return, the Lady Raiders have won 19 of 24 games.

IN THE PAINT: Starr Orr's six points off the bench went down as her biggest point total since registering 11 in a home win against Denver on Feb. 10 ... The Lady Raiders won their second straight game when trailing at the half, but just their fourth of the year ... The lineup of Horton, Stovall, Givens, Holmes, and Gray is 6-1 on the season ... Today's 11 turnovers were the fewest in a game by the Lady Raiders since having 11 at UALR on Feb. 17.

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