Middle Tennessee falls to Tennessee in front of record crowd

Blue Raiders play host to Lady Vols for first time in 30 years

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - A Murphy Center women's record 11,802 witnessed Middle Tennessee dropping a 69-52 decision to No. 6 Tennessee Wednesday night in Murfreesboro, Tenn. The crowd ties for the second-largest attendance in school history and is the most by the Blue Raider women's program in its 35 years, surpassing the previous standard of 10,010 against Maryland November 10, 2006.

Redshirt senior All-American Alysha Clark paced Middle Tennessee (2-2) with her fourth double-double to start the season, as she netted a game-high 23 points and added 10 rebounds in playing all 40 minutes. She raises her MT double-double total to 21 and her career mark to 59.

Joining her in double figures was fellow senior Jackie Pickel with 16 points, keyed by four 3-pointers. She contributed one-half of the team's long-range shots and made three straight triples during the opening 10 minutes, the last pulling the Blue Raiders within one, 18-17, at 11:13.

Seniors Chelsia Lymon added eight points and Brandi Brown connected for five, as the quartet was the only Middle Tennessee players to score against the much taller Lady Vols.

Glory Johnson paced Tennessee (4-0) with a double-double of her own, netting 21 points and grabbing a game-best 12 boards. She hit 10-of-15 field goals, leading a Lady Vol attack that piled in 30-of-55 (54.5 percent) from the floor for the game. UT knocked down 16-of-26 (61.5 percent) during the opening 20 minutes.

Angie Bjorklund poured in 16 points, while Shekinna Stricklen chipped in 12 to give Tennessee a trio in double figures. Kelley Cain hauled in a game-best 11 caroms.

The score only changed hands once, on a Lymon 3-pointer at 19:28 for a 3-2 MT edge. Taber Spani responded with a layup to put the Lady Vols back on top. After Johnson added a jumper for a three-point cushion, Pickel answered with her first of the three-straight triples for the game's only tie.

Following Pickel's third trey, Cain recorded a pair of back-to-back jumpers to build a five-point margin, 22-17, with 8:41 remaining in the first half. Brown drilled a 3-pointer to pull the deficit back to two, but an 8-0 UT spurt pushed the lead to 10, 30-20, on a Johnson tip-in with 3:58 to play.

The first half advantage grew to 13, but Brown added a layup with 32 seconds left to take the teams into the intermission, 35-24.

Cold shooting tripped the Blue Raiders early in the second stanza. Tennessee increased its edge to 16, 47-31, on an old-fashioned three-point play by Johnson at 14:49. Clark then countered with one of her own and the margin stayed at least 13 for the next six minutes until the All-American hit consecutive shots to trim it to 12, 54-42, with 8:31 to play.

Bjorklund scored seven of the Lady Vols' next 13 points, expanding the lead to a game-high 20, 67-47, with 3:30 on the clock. Clark would outscore the visitors 5-2 the remainder of the contest, including her only 3-pointer, to decide the final score.

Middle Tennessee will return to action at 7:30 p.m. Saturday when it plays host to another in-state foe, its third in a row, when it welcomes Tennessee Tech to the Murphy Center.

Middle Tennessee Postgame Quotes
Head Coach Rick Insell:

Opening statement:
I was real proud of our kids. They gave great effort. We had some possessions that we wasted. Against a team like that, with the length that they have got, and as good as they are, we cannot have wasted possessions. I felt like we missed a layup and missed a foul shot and then they hit a three, and they were able to stretch the lead out a little bit.

We were playing one of the best fundamentally coached teams in the county, they are ranked 7th (AP-6th) in the country, they have size and length. They do not have the senior leadership like we have got, but they have got a lot of great athletes and they took advantage of that.

We had Brandi Brown and AC (Alysha Clark) inside battling the (Kelley) Cain kid, and we let (Glory) Johnson in for a couple of easy rebound shots. And we were having to shut down their threes with (Angie) Bjorklund and (Alicia) Manning, and we were not able to get to Johnson on the backside.

On the crowd:
We need to do this more often. I was proud of our fans. We are building. We are getting there. We have come from five years ago when we had 300 a night to having people begging to get in tonight. It is these kids right here (Jackie Pickel and Alysha Clark) and the rest of them that the fans come to see.

On rebounds being only seven behind Tennessee:
That is because of heart; that is because we were battling. Everybody we had was battling. We had to. We knew that. And Tennessee made the plays. Bjorklund was making some shots on Jackie, you have a kid out there that is having to battle thru a screen against a girl that outweighs her by probably 100 lbs. And it is tough to ask a young lady like her to get thru. And Chelsia (Lymon) was playing with a hurt shoulder and she was giving it everything she had.

I am really proud of our team. We have a 2-2 record, but we have lost to LSU, who is No. 6 and to Tennessee, who I think is No. 7. You have to play those type games to get your program where you want it to be. We could have picked some teams that we could have manhandled, but we did not do that. We need to play the Xavier's, the Louisville's, the Kentucky's, in order to get better.

On MT's 3-point shooting:
No I was not worried about shooting so far out. They have the freedom to shoot any time and they know that. I was not disappointed about how we shot the ball.

Alysha Clark:
Opening statement:
In the first half, our shooters were hitting, so I was not going to try to battle inside for shots. Coach always says, if something is working, keep going to it, and that is what we were doing. I was playing defense and finding our shooters. In the second half, they started closing out on the threes, so I had to start working inside to open that up more. I was trying to read her (Cain) inside and see what she was doing, and adjust to that.

On the crowd:
I thought it was great. I was really excited to see all of that blue in the stands. Our fans are great anyway, but all the students we had in the student section, they could have easily gone home today, but they stayed to support us, and that means a lot to us.

On the overall atmosphere of the game:
I think it helped us. I think it helped our young girls the most, to see us in the game, and that we never quit. Even getting down 16, then 20, we never stopped playing. Even with 30 seconds left in the game, Jackie is diving out of bounds to get a ball.

On playing against Tennessee's much taller inside girls:
Like I say all the time, I am undersized at 5-10, and I am always playing against girls bigger than I am. I have to use the talents that I have. A lot of girls are bigger than me, but they are not as mobile.

Jackie Pickel:
On early game shooting:
We talked about bringing Alysha out and doing the pick and roll with big Cain. Most teams try to trap, or at least hedge, where I cannot get that shot. We talked about zippering it and it worked. I was open on it and they had to adjust their defense. When Alysha would come out, they had to choose

between me and an All-American.

Tennessee Postgame Quotes
Head Coach Pat Summit

Opening comments:
I thought our basketball team did a good job coming in and embracing our defensive schemes with what we wanted to do and how we wanted to defend certain people. We shot the ball pretty well, and that always helps. Our defense was much stronger in the first half. We had some lapses in the second half. I am overall really pleased. Glory Johnson is playing extremely well for us. Her efficiency in getting paint points and now she is shooting from the free throw line out and rebounding. She and Kelley Cain have a great presence for us inside which opens up a lot of things on the outside. I wish our bench play had been better and I would have liked to have gotten more minutes off of the bench. They made some runs at us and we never felt safe so we stayed with who was playing the best.

On Glory Johnson:
She has just matured so much on and off of the court and she has tremendous confidence now because she has been working on her offensive game a lot. She is a quick jumper, can get inside people and get the ball up on the glass. She has been terrific for us and I like her competitiveness and composure. Dean Lockwood deserves a lot of credit for the composure she is bringing.

On the importance of this game to the state of Tennessee:
You can look at the crowd that was here and know that the people in this area embrace and support women's basketball. Rick has done a great job of getting out in the community which a lot of coaches in our game are not passionate about. He has people here because they love basketball, but they also like the style of play and they know Coach Insell is going to continue to win. It is great to have that fan support and it continues grow year in and year out.

On having a higher scoring percentage than last year:
This group has invested in getting into the gym. It is no secret, if you are not going to work on your skills, then do not expect them to improve. Get in the gym and get extra reps in and come in and shoot the ball. Taber (Spani) is in there all of the time. Angie (Bjorklund) is in there all of the time. And (Shekinna) Strickland is in there all of the time. Glory is working out with Dean all of the time and this is outside of practice on their own. They are much more invested and last year was a tough lesson for us to live through, but it is the best thing that happened to us because they took ownership. It was not about the coaches; it was about the players taking ownership.

On defending Alysha Clark:
Limit her touches, deny her the ball and double team when she got the ball. We did a great job with our defense in the first half and she did a better job of getting open in the second half. We mixed up our man and zone defenses and she got more looks out of our zone.

Glory Johnson
On her performance:
I got to show off a lot of what I worked on over the summer. Taking the ball down the floor and shooting jump shots early in the game. I surprised myself with how consistent my shots were from the free throw line.

On playing in hostile environments:
We had a lot of energy. Before the game we were pumping ourselves up a little bit. We got really hyped before the game. We started off slow, but we knew what we had to do to win. So we started picking up our game.

Taber Spani
On road games:
The biggest thing that is preached to us is sticking together and being our own support system. Like coach says, everyone but Tennessee fans hates Tennessee and is going to root against us. It has helped our team and we realize that we have to be our energy and that we cannot rely on our fans for our energy. That and the work ethic and compassion we put in every play has helped us and we have gotten better at that.

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