Clark caps memorable weekend by lifting Blue Raiders past Lady Toppers

All-American graduates; posts double-double

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee redshirt senior forward Alysha Clark completed one of her most memorable weekends, graduating Saturday and then leading the Blue Raiders on the court Sunday to a 68-54 victory over rival Western Kentucky in the Sun Belt opener for both schools inside the Murphy Center.

Clark, who earned her degree on the Murphy Center floor in electronic media journalism Saturday, returned to the same location 24 hours later and poured in 37 points and grabbed 16 rebounds in putting Middle Tennessee (5-4, 1-0 Sun Belt) on her back in the win. She finished 12-of-14 from the floor and 13-of-18 from the foul line, while hauling in 10 defensive boards in a dominate performance in her first game since collecting her eighth career, and second of the season, Sun Belt Player of the Week honor earlier in the week.

She again was the focal point of the Blue Raider attack and returned the favor by playing a solid defensive game, tying for the team lead with two blocks, while also swiping two steals. Despite picking up her fourth personal foul with nine minutes to play, the Mt. Juliet, Tenn., native stayed composed on the defensive end and did not foul out. Instead, she forced two of her opponents, Arnika Brown and Keisha Mosley, to pick up their fifth infractions to help Middle Tennessee keep the

Lady Toppers at bay down the stretch.

Clark, however, did not do it alone as junior Emily Queen turned in her best performance of the campaign with a near double-double of nine points and a season-high 13 rebounds. Seven of her 13 caroms came on the offensive glass, keeping Blue Raider possessions alive for second and third chances.

Queen was matched in the scoring column by Brandi Brown, who also registered nine points and contributed a season-best six boards. Chelsia Lymon chipped in eight points and Jackie Pickel knocked down five as the only other Middle Tennessee players to score.

Pickel's first points did not come until she followed a missed layup by Lymon with a put back at 6:27 to give the Blue Raiders a 51-48 edge. Just over two minutes later, following a Brown jumper to bring Western Kentucky (5-5, 0-1 Sun Belt) within two, 52-50, Pickel hit a 3-pointer from the corner, launching MT to a 16-4 run over the final four minutes to help decide the final margin.

The Lady Toppers started the game with a 9-0 run, including five points from Dominique Duck, before Clark halted the scoreless streak with a free throw at 16:25. Mosley gave WKU its largest advantage, 13-3, on a layup with 14:46 to play in the first half.

The Blue Raiders then responded with an 8-0 spurt, trimming the gap to two, 13-11, on a Queen layup on the team's third shot of the possession with 12:15 left. Amy McNear helped push the margin back to six, 17-11, a minute later; however, Clark would score the next seven points and Brown drained a triple at 8:27 to give Middle Tennessee its first lead, 21-17.

The score would be tied two more times before the intermission. Queen hit the front end of a two-shot foul with a minute to play for a six-point cushion, the Blue Raiders' largest of the half, before Duck added a pair of jumpers, including one at the buzzer, to send the teams into the locker rooms with MT ahead, 30-28.

Middle Tennessee roared out of the break by scoring eight of the first 10 points to take a 38-30 advantage on six-straight points from Clark at 15:12. Western Kentucky did not quit and cut the deficit to three twice over the next two-and-a-half minutes, first on a Lashay Davis 3-pointer then a pair of free throws from LaTeira Owens.

Queen hit a jumper at 9:20 for a 49-41 Blue Raider lead, but Kenzie Rich drained five of the next seven Lady Topper points to pull the visitors within one, 49-48. It was at this point Pickel hit her 3-pointer to turn the momentum back to Middle Tennessee's favor and ice the third-straight victory in the series for the Blue Raiders.

Duck paced Western Kentucky with 16 points and 11 rebounds, while Brown added 10 points and 10 boards.

Middle Tennessee hit 52.0 percent of their field goals in the second half, while limiting the Lady Toppers to just 28.1 percent in the same 20 minutes.

Clark's double-double is her seventh of the season, 62nd of her career and 24th as a Blue Raider. MT also took advantage of 31 trips to the foul line as compared to just 14 for WKU.

The Blue Raiders will take a week off for the holidays and return to action at 7 p.m. Monday, December 28, when they play host to SEC foe Kentucky inside the Murphy Center. UK will be the second Southeastern Conference opponent to come to Murfreesboro this season and the third overall on this year's slate.

Middle Tennessee Postgame Quotes

Head Coach Rick Insell:

Opening statement:
The difference today was rebounding. Alysha (Clark) has been the only one to get rebounds for us most of the time, but Emily (Queen) had 13 and Brandi (Brown) had six. Forty-three rebounds is a lot for us. We did not shoot extremely well, but we went to the glass well, and that is big for us.

On rebounding from South Dakota State loss:
I was proud of our team. They came back and gutted it up, but Western is a very tough team, too. Both of us have played very tough schedules. I knew it was going to be a tough game, and so did our players.

On Western jumping out to an early lead:
We did not panic. We have had that happen before. The main thing was that AC (Alysha Clark) did not touch the ball, and AC has to touch the ball for us to win. So we started getting the ball to our All-American and she took control.

On gaining the momentum:
We felt like we had to go into Brandi Brown. She had a guard guarding her, and that is one of the things we like to take advantage of. We have a good basketball team. There are some people that are concerned about how we have played at times, but I am not concerned.

On the next game:
We have an undefeated team coming in here on the 28th who beat the heck out of Louisville today, so it does not get any easier.

On shooting threes:
All three of them were big. Jackie (Pickel) hit one from the dead corner late that was really big, and Chelsia (Lymon) is shooting the ball better.

Alysha Clark:

On attendance of 3419:
That says a lot about our fans, especially since the football team is playing in a bowl in New Orleans tonight. Some of our fans were really torn about which game to go to. We even have some that have left right after the game to fly to New Orleans.

On playing well against Western:
You always want to play well against your biggest rivals, and that is what we try to do.

On Emily Queen's contributions:
When she is playing well, like she did today, she is really a beast. We sure are glad to have her back

in the lineup. She got seven offensive rebounds and either got a put back or a foul on every one of them.

On playing with four fouls for the last eight minutes:
It comes from experience, knowing not to do anything stupid to foul out. I gave up some cheap baskets at the end, but me staying in the game is more important to our team than two points.

Emily Queen:

On her best performance of the year:
I was rested. I took the last three days off and I felt rested today. My leg hurt pretty bad after the South Dakota State game, but I was ready to go today. It feels good to be back and playing. I did not start, but was able to come in make some plays.

Western Kentucky Postgame Quotes

Head Coach Mary Taylor Cowles:

On today's game:
It is a tough way to open up your conference schedule, but I am confident with this crew, we can take things away from this game that will help us in the long run. What we do take away from this, we should be able to take away and use in a positive way. It is a long season. We still have 19 games left. I think this team can be really good.

On Middle Tennessee stopping Western Kentucky's comeback in the second half:
I felt like there was a lid on the basket. The first effort was there, when we would shoot from the 3-point line. I thought we had some great looks in the first half with 11 threes. But they would not go in in the second half. We cut it to one and Amy (McNear) missed that open layup and the ball would not go in. I thought our guards were good with our perimeter defense with the way we defended the three. Middle is a very good 3-point shooting team. Unfortunately, we did not have as many as Alysha had, but letting her go to the free throw line as many times as she did.

On getting Alysha Clark into foul trouble:
We have got to get smart in that situation. There were situations when we would try to go for steals and she is simply too good of a post player. She will make you pay, which she did. We have to be smarter than that when we play post defense. We have to evaluate those mistakes and get ready for Pittsburgh.

On Jackie Pickel's late 3-pointer:
I compliment her because she had been struggling throughout game not getting great looks. I think that is one of those you have to tell her good shot. She is experienced and has the confidence to take the shot and make big shots like that. Unfortunately, kids like her and (Anne Marie) Lanning and (Brandi) Brown are going to make shots like that. In the first half, Brown came down in transition and they are going to find her every time if you do not pick her up. Those are the things that are going to happen if you do not defend against them. Those are more or less easy situations to score.

Arnika Brown:

On defending Alysha Clark:
It is a tough match-up and I give all the credit to her. You would rather give up a two than a three.

They go inside outside so we wanted to take away one thing, which was the three, and Alysha played a great game.

On the pace of today's game:
It was a game of runs. They would go on a run and then we would go on a run and then they got us at the end. It was just a good game overall.

Dominique Duck:

On defending Alysha Clark:
She is a physical, smart player who is tough to guard. The effort for us was there and we had her in foul trouble towards the middle of the second half, but we could not get her out of the game.

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