

Pickel's 3-pointer lifts Blue Raiders over Wildcats

Sparks a 6-0 run to close the game

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Senior Jackie Pickel hit her biggest shot of the season-to-date, a 3-pointer with 32.3 seconds remaining, to break the game's third tie and give Middle Tennessee a thrilling 57-51 victory over previously unbeaten Kentucky Monday night in non-conference women's basketball action inside the Murphy Center in Murfreesboro, Tenn. The Cleveland, Tenn., native's long-range bomb was part of a 6-0 Blue Raider run to close the game and put a cap on the team's non-conference slate.

The Wildcats, who were one of seven unbeatens across the country entering the contest, trailed for the majority of the game after two-time reigning Sun Belt Player of the Week and All-American Alysha Clark gave Middle Tennessee (6-4) a slim 5-4 advantage with 16:37 to play in the first half. It was the first time UK had trailed in nearly three-and-a-half games.

Clark's bucket was part of a 9-3 spurt and she capped the streak with an old-fashioned three-point play at 12:41. Carly Morrow answered right back with a 3-pointer to pull the Wildcats within two, but a pair of shots from Brandi Brown kept the distance at a half-dozen. The lead grew to 10, 22-12, on a Pickel steal and jumper by



Brown at 8:01 just before the teams entered the under-eight media timeout.

Chelsia Lymon drove through the paint for a layup at 5:45, finishing a 5-0 run, and giving the Blue Raiders their largest advantage, 27-14, and forcing a Kentucky (11-1) timeout. The 'Cats clawed back into the game by netting seven of the next eight points, including six from Victoria Dunlap, to trim the deficit to seven with 3:47 remaining in the half.

Neither team scored over the next two minutes before Brown drained a triple with 1:33 to go. Dunlap and Clark traded a free throw apiece and Middle Tennessee entered the locker room with a 10-point, 32-22, cushion.

The Wildcats rushed out of the intermission with seven-straight points, featuring five by Amani Franklin, to cut into the lead at 32-29. Emily Queen halted the run with a layup at 17:27 and again the teams went cold for over two minutes. Brown then connected on her last 3-pointer with 15:05 remaining to push the lead back to eight.

Over the course of the next two minutes, Pickel swiped a pair of backcourt steals and converted layups to keep the double-digit lead, 43-33, for the Blue Raiders with 13:04 to go.

Dunlap and A'dia Mathies each hit old-fashioned three-point plays and Lydia Watkins registered a pair of charity tosses in just over three minutes to pull Kentucky back within two, 43-41. Watkins' two free throws came after Brown fouled out and she recorded an additional pair three minutes later after Queen fouled out for the game's first tie, 43-43, with 6:31 on the clock.

After two of its post players were disqualified, Middle Tennessee went on a 5-0 run, including another steal by Pickel. But the Wildcats did not quit and answered with their own 6-1 surge to tie the game once again, at 49-49, including three points each from Dunlap and Crystal Riley.

Clark put the Blue Raiders ahead with a steal and layup at 1:25 before Mathies countered with two free throws 23 seconds later. Neither team would score for the next 30 seconds before Pickel's dramatic 3-pointer, which sent the Middle Tennessee crowd into a frenzy.

Brown finished with a team-high 16 points, while Pickel and Clark chipped in 13 apiece. Clark added a team-high nine rebounds and three blocked shots, while Lymon equaled her career-best with eight boards.

Dunlap led all players with a double-double effort of 20 points and 16 rebounds, including 10 on the defensive glass. She was the only Kentucky player to reach double figures, as Mathies was next with eight points.

The Blue Raiders forced 29 turnovers, six fewer than they committed, against a Wildcat squad which ranked No. 1 nationally in turnover margin entering the contest.

The win is Middle Tennessee's fifth against an SEC opponent in the last four years.

The Blue Raiders will return to action at 7 p.m. Wednesday when they travel to New Orleans, La., to face the New Orleans Lady Privateers. UNO brings a 6-7 overall and 0-2 Sun Belt record into the matchup.

Middle Tennessee Postgame Quotes

Head Coach Rick Insell

On Jackie Pickel's field goal

When they know they have to shoot the basketball and that they will not be taken out for it, then you are shooting the ball for free. Jackie has done that for us many times. I can go back to South Alabama and Little Rock because she had made those shots her entire life. When they went out to her, she never hesitated. She just knocked down a great three and that was a big three for us and the layup Chelsia made was a big layup. We missed entirely too many free throws. You have got to give Kentucky credit. They are a great, athletic defensive basketball team that took us out of a lot of things that we wanted to do. Without making any excuses, Alysha Clark had an upset stomach with some type of stomach virus when she rolled in tonight. What a valiant effort from her and Chelsia Lymon. Chelsia is one of the top point guards in the country.

On Chelsia's injuries

She just had cramps. But the kid just keeps coming out there and gutting it up and what can you say about the effort she gave us. Emily and Brandi did well too. There was no anyone who did not do a good job. We missed some box outs with Dymon (Raynor) and Dana (Garrett) that we usually get. But again, you have got to give Kentucky credit and you have got to give Victoria Dunlap credit because she put her team on her shoulders. Jackie got some big steals out there from deflections. Not only was her shot big, but she got some big steals on Carly Morrow once or twice. She had four steals and two or three of them were big. I mean big.

On overcoming the adversity of losing Brandi and Emily in the second half

I asked if we were ready to quit in the huddle and they all looked at me and said no. Then they went back out after my huddle and huddled in the middle of the floor. You very seldom see them do that. But that was your senior leadership from Jackie, Alysha, Chelsia and then Anne Marie (Lanning) with all the experience she has. There was a lot of big plays in the game.

On forcing Kentucky 29 turnovers

The rule of thumb many times is a team that pressures does not like to be pressured. So coming in we felt like putting a little pressure on them. That helped us get a 10-point lead on at least two occasions. Twenty-nine turnovers is probably a high for them this year.

On the challenges of defending Victoria Dunlap

She is a great athlete. We knew that. She is not as big and strong as other kids we have had to defend, but she is more athletic. We knew coming in that she was the most athletic kid we have guarded this year on the floor. She is the state decathlon champion here in Tennessee and that has to tell you a little bit about her. She is just a tremendous athlete. We went up top too much. We played into their strength with Watkins and Dunlap, but I thought we went to the boards hard. Another big play was when Amber Smith fouled out because that took away their point guard they have been relying on this year. I do not think the kid that transferred in is ready at the point. She will be because she is a great player.

On pre-game conversation with Matt Insell

We did not talk. It was all business for Matt and it should have been. If they would have come in here and not played hard, I would not have respected them. But I knew they were going to come in and play hard and that they have a good team. They are going to be a contender in the SEC -- you watch them. Them being 11-0 coming into tonight was not fool's gold. Some people question their

schedule, but let me tell you something. I have seen them on film and they absolutely manhandled Louisville. And Louisville is probably more athletic than them, but they manhandled them. They are maybe not as old and experienced as Louisville, but they just flat beat a team that is going to make a splash in the Big East, you wait and see. They will not win it because of Connecticut, but they will finish third or fourth because Kentucky totally took them out of what they wanted to do.

On keeping composure when Kentucky tied it up

We have been playing this type of competition since these seniors walked in here. The first game they had of their varsity career was against defending National Champion Maryland. With five minutes to go we were up seven. So from day one, they have been in these types of games. They love playing here and they do not lose many times playing here at Middle Tennessee. They love their crowd.

On playing time for Kortni Jones and Dymon Raynor being beneficial

Kortni grew up a little bit. At half-court she wanted to do some Marcus Haynes stuff and found out real quick that she could not. We talked about it in the huddle and she did not make that mistake again. That is big when you take a freshman who does that and comes back out and does not do it again. Dymon is going to be a force. She has just got to have a little bit more playing time and playing in big games like this. I am not disappointed in anybody I put in. We made plays we needed to make.

On the importance of winning a big, last game before starting conference play

We did not really talk about that. We talked about conference play which we play Wednesday. We play at New Orleans and fly out tomorrow so we are not going to get to rest much.

Jackie Pickel

On mindset after watching the field goal sink

Coach Insell is the greatest I have known on encouraging to keep shooting. At halftime, I knew I had not been putting the ball in the hole, and if I kept shooting like that, we were going to lose. Chelsia came up to me and told me if I had an open look at all that I better put it up. So when the shot clock was coming down I saw Chelsia's eyes and knew she was going to pass it to me, so I just got my feet set and did it routine.

On the timing of being poked in the eye before the big three

I guess that happened at 10 minutes left to go and I could not see. It was blurry for a while, but after a few minutes, I could see and I was not about to sit the bench the rest of the half.

On extra motivation with Kentucky coming in undefeated

Every year we have a huge win at home and our fans are the best. I have never heard Murphy Center as loud as it was tonight and that means a lot to us. We wanted to do something for our fans and we knew this was a big game to get our confidence going into conference play.

On quick turn around into conference play

We leave early. We cannot celebrate or anything because we have got to get our minds focused. Our team is really good at doing that and New Orleans has a very athletic team so we are going to have to play just as aggressive as we did tonight.

Brandi Brown

On the feeling from the bench when Jackie took the field goal shot

I am not going to lie, I was nervous for a little while. But I trust my teammates and I would rather Jackie have the ball than anyone else on the team. So I was confident in what she could do.

On the frustration of fouling out early

I cannot even tell you how frustrating it was. To be that far from the basket was just frustrating. I would have felt much better about it had it been an aggressive foul, but I still do not think I even touched her.

On the offense in the first half

Coach Insell says Utah is always our best offense and we have never really shown that it is. But I think that was the best we have ran Utah since we have had it in our offense.

Kentucky Postgame Quotes

Head Coach Matthew Mitchell

Opening Statement

I want to compliment Middle Tennessee. I think they played extremely hard all night. They played with tremendous energy and effort. The game really meant a lot to them. Certainly in the first half, their effort and energy was a lot better than ours. Our team picked it up in the second half and played with some more tenacity and to get back into the game was good for us. It is just so disappointing to turn over the ball that much, which resulted in a loss for us. We are not happy about that and will have to get back to Lexington and figure out how to learn from this loss.

I do not think because we are a good press team that we are a bad press-breaking team. I think that tonight we just made very bad decisions. They had a great game plan and basically it was a game plan of making us get into making good decisions. You have to credit them they were well prepared. Coach (Rick) Insell did a great job getting them prepared. I feel badly that I did not have our team any better equipped to succeed in this game.

Victoria Dunlap

What caused so many bad decisions?

I think we were rushing a lot of things. In the first half, we settled for a lot of open shots, a lot of jump shots instead of taking it to the basket. It was just more of us making bad decisions.

On if the loss will refocus the team

I think it will show the team that we can either win or lose. We lost this game and it is something we will take into practice and just work even harder for the next game.

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