Strong first half lifts Blue Raiders over Lady Privateers

Eleven of 12 active players scored

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee shot 51.4 percent during the opening 20 minutes to take a 24-point halftime lead and knocked off visiting New Orleans, 78-60, Wednesday night in Sun Belt women's basketball action inside the Murphy Center in Murfreesboro, Tenn.

The Blue Raiders connected on 18-of-35 field goals, including 6-of-13 from behind the arc, to go with 6-of-7 free throws, en route to doubling up the Lady Privateers, 48-24, in the first stanza. The effort may not have been as strong in the second period, shooting just 37.9 percent compared to a 50.0 percent outing from UNO, but Middle Tennessee (14-5, 9-1 Sun Belt) also utilized its entire bench with 11 of the 12 active players scoring at least two points.

Senior Jackie Pickel missed the contest due to injury. It marks the first career game she has not played in since joining the Blue Raiders and snaps a consecutive game streak of 120. She was dressed and able to play if needed.

All-American Alysha Clark led all players with another double-double of 22 points and 10 rebounds, her 11th of the season, 29th at Middle Tennessee and 67th overall in her career. The 67 career double-doubles moves her in to a three-way tie for eighth on the NCAA's all-time list with Louisiana

Tech's Venus Lacy (1988-90) and Wichita State's Angela Buckner (2001-04). Clark hit one-half of her 14 field goal attempts, while draining 8-of-9 free throws, swiping two steals, handing out two assists and blocking one shot in 29 minutes. Clark also has now scored in double figures in 43 consecutive games.

Fellow senior Brandi Brown, a member of the Preseason All-Sun Belt First Team, was the only other Blue Raider in double figures with 18 points behind a team-best 4-of-9 from 3-point territory. The four triples increase her career tally to 223, one shy of the school-record 224 set by Heather Prater from 1993-96.

Sophomore Tina Stewart swiped a career-best five steals and added seven points to lead the bench players in just 19 minutes. Freshman Jamila Ajanaku netted a career-high four points in six minutes of action, while fellow rookie Kortni Jones matched Ajanaku with a career-best four points. Sophomore Molly McFadden tied her career high with three rebounds, tops among the bench players, and contributed a career-best two steals in a career-high nine minutes.

Senior Dana Garrett, who garnered her second career start in place of Pickel, filled the stat sheet with four points, four rebounds, three assists and three steals in 21 minutes.

New Orleans (7-14, 1-9 Sun Belt) was led by 14 points from Nicole Holmes and 12 by Amanda McCarthy. The pair combined for six of the team's eight 3-pointers, including a 4-of-4 performance by McCarthy off the bench.

Juanita Cochran hauled in a team-high eight rebounds, helping the Lady Privateers to a 35-30 edge on the glass. UNO, however, could not control the ball offensively as Middle Tennessee forced 32 turnovers on 21 steals.

The Blue Raiders jumped in front early, taking a 4-3 lead on a pair of Clark free throws at 18:25 and never looking back. Junior Anne Marie Lanning then registered the first of her three triples over the next five minutes, with the last coming at 12:52, providing MT with a 10-point, 21-11, cushion.

D'Mesha Hewett trimmed the margin to 10, 26-16, with 9:11 remaining after Brown pushed the lead to 13, but the Lady Privateers would get no closer. Middle Tennessee rattled home 11 of the next 13 points, capped by a Brown triple at 5:09 for a 37-18 advantage.

A 6-0 run again closed the gap to a baker's dozen, 37-24, on an old-fashioned three-point play from Brittney Helm, but the final 11 points of the opening period went to the Blue Raiders.

Senior Chelsia Lymon then began the second session with back-to-back 3-pointers, followed by a pair of free throws from Clark and another Brown trey as Middle Tennessee built a 35-point edge, 59-24, with 17:48 left.

The lead grew to 40, 67-27, after a layup by Icelyn Elie and a jumper via Jones capped another 8-0 Blue Raider spurt with 14:27 to play.

New Orleans then used a 23-2 run over the next nine minutes, which featured the four McCarthy 3-pointers, to cut the deficit to less than half, 69-50, on her fourth triple with 5:24 remaining. The streak came during a time in which Middle Tennessee was using various combinations of younger players on the floor.

The Blue Raider lead was sliced to 18 three times before the end of the game, the last coming on a pair of Holmes free throws with 26 seconds left to decide the final score.

Middle Tennessee will return to action at 2 p.m. Saturday when it plays host to North Texas for the second contest of a three-game homestand. The game has been designated as Hoop and Hollar for a Dollar Day with all tickets available for $1.

Middle Tennessee Postgame Quotes
Head Coach Rick Insell

On staying focused after an emotional win
They knew how we handled New Orleans there and also knew all of the challenges. The thing about our basketball team is that they are very intelligent and know what is happened down in that area. They have been here for four years and been through it with them in the conference. If you ask our players, they will tell you they have some feelings about the fact that this is it for New Orleans as far as our conference is concerned. It is hard to really go into a game like this when you know this is one of the factors. Amy (Champion) is a good coach, good person and has good assistants. We are going to miss her in the conference, I can tell you that.

On the early lead
Chelsia came out and put the ball in the hole. I let the young ones play a little bit with Alysha and Brandi so they could get an idea of what was going on. It is tough to play with each other, but if they play with one of the seniors, that helps them a little bit.

Alysha Clark

On setting the tone from the beginning of the game
We wanted to come out and make sure we executed with focus and intensity. Coach tells us that we do not need to drop levels of competition depending on the opponent. So we had to come out like we were playing Tennessee. We did a good job with that.

On the difficulty of coming off Sunday's big win
It is not difficult at all because you do not ever want to get content and complacent with where you are. It was a big win on Sunday, but tonight was also a big win for us. Once we are done with one game, we have to move on and focus on the next.

Brandi Brown

On being two away from the all-time 3-point record
I was not aware of it until Heather Prater, who currently holds the record, sent me a Facebook message about it. I did not know about it. (Assistant) Coach (Allison) Clark had to inform me.