

# Middle Tennessee uses defense to create victory over Denver

## Blue Raiders force 34 turnovers

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### MURFREESBORO, Tenn. -

Middle Tennessee forced a season-high tying 34 Denver turnovers, including 23 in the first half, and overcame a slow start en route to a 94-78 victory over the visiting Pioneers Wednesday night in Sun Belt women's basketball action inside the Murphy Center in Murfreesboro, Tenn.

The Blue Raiders caused miscues on the first five Denver (13-11, 8-5 Sun Belt) possessions and seven of its opening eight trips down the floor. The Pioneers either could not hold onto the ball or threw errant passes towards teammates when faced with a full-court press. Brianna Culberson coughed the ball up eight times to lead Denver, while Ashly Robinson had seven ball changes and Britteni Rice collected six turnovers.



Middle Tennessee, meanwhile, came out of the gates slow itself, netting only three points through the opening five minutes before Brandi Brown opened the door with a layup at 14:42 and Alysha Clark added a top-of-the-key 3-pointer 37 seconds later to cap a 6-0 spurt, putting the Blue Raiders ahead, 8-2.

Culberson hit a pair of free throws just after the under-12 media timeout to pull the Pioneers within eight, 16-8, but Middle Tennessee (18-5, 13-1 Sun Belt) rattled off a 15-0 run, keyed by triples from Brown, Chelsia Lymon and Clark, to push the lead to 31-8 with 8:14 remaining.

Rice and Sarah Feeney kept Denver in the scoring column, as the pair combined for the next 11 Pioneer points in a back-and-forth affair over the next six minutes. Tina Stewart then hit her second corner 3-pointer on as many tries with 2:14 left to start an 11-5 spurt down the stretch, with Clark tallying the final six Blue Raider points and giving MT a 30-point, 54-24, advantage at intermission.

Lymon and Culberson traded long-range bombs to start the second stanza and the Pioneers trimmed the margin to 29, 63-34, with three straight charity tosses, including a pair by Kaetlyn Murdoch, with 17:08 to go.

The gap would not shrink any closer over the course of nearly 13 minutes. Middle Tennessee built its edge as high as 38, 82-44, on an old-fashioned three-point play by Clark at 9:26. Free throws then became the primary scoring option for Denver, as it would register 13 points from the line the remainder of the game, outscoring the Blue Raiders 34-12 down the stretch to close the final deficit to 16 on a Feeney layup with four seconds to play.

Clark secured game-high honors in four categories, including points (30), rebounds (eight), steals (six) and assists (five) in 32 minutes. She finished 10-of-19 from the floor, including 2-of-4 from 3-point territory, and added 8-of-9 free throws.

Brown chipped in 22 points on 10-of-14 field goals, while Jackie Pickel contributed 14 and Lymon posted a dozen.

Stewart and Garrett led the Middle Tennessee bench players with six points apiece.

Culberson paced the Pioneers with 21 points on a perfect 6-of-6 from the floor and from the charity stripe. Rice tallied 14 points, while Robinson and Murdoch each collected 13. Feeney came off the bench and recorded 10 to give Denver five players in double figures.

The Blue Raiders will take the next week off before returning to action at 7 p.m. next Wednesday when they travel to Troy, Ala., to face the Troy Trojans.

### **Middle Tennessee Postgame Quotes Head Coach Rick Insell**

#### *On the change in momentum after the first media timeout*

We did not take them serious enough in the beginning. I talked to them about that coming out. They have a very good basketball team and knocked down every open shot they had tonight. We jumped out on them and the 34 turnovers was the difference. You still get to playing the scoreboard despite of what you tell them. We still scored 94 points and probably should have put another 10 or 12 points up. But I would have liked to have seen more assists and we forced the threes tonight.

#### *On consistency*

We were very consistent. Once we got over the first five or six turnovers, we raised the tempo a little bit. We sped them up defensively and offensively and that was the difference. They might have been a little intimidated coming in here, but they got over that and started playing basketball. They have a good basketball team and we might very well see them in the tournament.

#### *On balance*

What is really surprising is that Anne Marie did not score any points tonight. Anne Marie has been

playing as good as anybody we have. She did a good job defensively tonight but did not get as many looks. They got aggressive with her right on the perimeter and that might have prevented that. Right now we are playing at a comfort level that not many of my teams have ever played at. They know that they can score. What is coming up for us is what we need. We have Troy on the road and the two Florida trips. That is what we need right now. We need to go into those places and see where we can take our game before we go to the tournament. We do not need to finish the season at home and we are not getting to. We need to finish it up on the road in Florida because we know we will have to go down there with the focus to beat both of those basketball teams. And we are going to go down there having to beat both of those teams.

### **Alysha Clark**

#### *On defense*

We moved really well as a team. We were communicating, anticipating and reading their numbers as coach always tells us in practice. That just shows how hard we have been working at it in practice. I was actually impressed with how well we played. Everyone was helping in the right position and clicking on defense.

### **Brandi Brown**

#### *On the emotions of the season wrapping up*

Anybody would have to be motivated to know your time is limited with this team and these girls. I really do not want to talk about it. I just do not want to think about it.

### **Denver Postgame Quotes**

#### **Head Coach Erik Johnson**

#### *On tonight's game*

We did not handle their pressure well in the first half. We had a lot of turnovers, but we were able to handle their pressure a lot better in the second half but I also do not think we got their best effort in the second half. I think they lost a little bit of interest in coming after us and when they did, we reacted well. We played a solid second half and I was proud of our kids. We never quit. We never started questioning each other or the game plan. I am just disappointed we could not get their best shot in the second half. In the first half, we did get their best shot. They see Denver at 8-4 and competing with them for the top spots and they came out and hit us pretty hard. We really did not handle pressure well at all in the first half. We have to get better with that. But we never quit. The kids know what we need to work on. And hopefully this second half will give us confidence going into North Texas on Saturday.

#### *On the magnitude of the game*

These are the games you play for. If you are not in it for these games, you are in the wrong business. With that being said, I do not think anyone expected us to be able to come into Murfreesboro and win a game. The game plan was to go win a game and we did not get it done. So we are going to talk about things we could do better and work on them. That is a team we want to see in the conference tournament. We want to be able to see them with a chance to go to the NCAA Tournament. But right now we have to go beat North Texas, a good team who plays well at home. They are going to bring that same pressure so we are going to spend some time in the next couple days because we have to take care of the ball better than that if we are going to win.

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