First half run sparks Blue Raiders to over century mark again

All five starters reach double figures

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MIAMI - Middle Tennessee netted 100 points for the fifth time in the last seven games, and the sixth instance overall this season, and used a 28-0 first half run to pull away and never look back in defeating FIU 101-58 Wednesday night inside U.S. Century Bank Arena in Miami.

The Blue Raiders shot 60.6 percent from the floor in the opening 20 minutes, knocking down 20-of-33 field goals and 10-of-16 from behind the 3-point arc. Middle Tennessee then continued torching the nets during the second period, draining 18-of-28, including 7-of-10 from long range, for 64.3 percent. MT connected on 38-of-61 (62.3 percent) for the game, 17-of-26 (65.4 percent) from 3-point territory and all eight free throws.

Three 3-pointers, one each by Chelsia Lymon, Jackie Pickel and Brandi Brown, erased an early 3-2 deficit and gave the Blue Raiders an 11-3 edge at 16:22. Brown's triple came on a fast break, as she used a side step to get away from her defender, before draining the shot from the wing.

The lead was extended over the next four minutes, as Middle Tennessee padded its advantage with 12 more unanswered points, started by back-to-back layups from Alysha Clark. Clark then capped the surge with a top-of-the-key trey which bounced high off the back iron before dropping through the rim, only touching net on the way down.

It would turn into 28 consecutive points for the Blue Raiders, covering nearly nine-and-a-half minutes, before Rakia Rodgers halted the spurt with a 3-pointer at 9:51. Middle Tennessee (21-5, 16-1 Sun Belt) would miss only five field goals on its first 17 attempts in claiming the 30-3 lead before Rodgers' trey.

The Blue Raiders continued to pour in the points offensively, outscoring the Golden Panthers 16-6 during the next six minutes with Clark capping the streak with an old-fashioned three-point play, covering both sides of the under-four minute timeout to jump out to a 46-12 edge with 3:57 left.

Both teams tallied five points over the final four minutes with Michelle Gonzalez providing the last bucket, off a backcourt steal, to pull FIU (14-14, 9-8 Sun Belt) within 34, 51-17, with 1:23 remaining. Neither team added points before the frame was over.

Elisa Carey and Monika Bosilj attempted to mount an early second-half comeback for the Golden Panthers; however, Tina Stewart hit a pair of free throws before Pickel drained the next eight points within a minute, including a pair of triples, to push the MT advantage to 61-23.

Lymon and Anne Marie Lanning sandwiched a Dana Garrett jumper during an 8-0 stretch, covering nearly three minutes, extending the margin to 48, 77-29. FIU then mounted a 10-3 run to trim the deficit to 41, 80-39, on a Marquita Adley charity toss following the under-eight minute timeout at 7:37.

As the Blue Raider bench began to empty, the lead grew once more with the freshmen taking control. Rookie Kortni Jones' two free throws with 2:12 remaining crossed the 100-point threshold for Middle Tennessee. Rodgers knocked down a pair of 3-pointers over the final two minutes, including one with 12 seconds to play, to decide the final score.

Clark led all players with 25 points on 11-of-12 field goals, 1-of-1 from 3-point position and 2-of-2 from the foul line. She also hauled in a game-high tying eight rebounds, helping the Blue Raiders to a slim, 33-to-32 edge on the boards.

Pickel added 22 points, featuring four 3-pointers, to pull within 35 points of the 1,000-point plateau. Brown added three triples as part of her 17-point effort and a career-best nine assists. Lymon chipped in 15 points, while Lanning contributed a dozen as the Middle Tennessee starters registered 91 of the team's points.

The Blue Raiders finished with a season-high 30 assists on 38 field goals. They finished with 16 steals and forced 23 Golden Panther turnovers.

Rodgers paced FIU with 17 points, while Fanni Hutlassa added 10. Carey hauled in a team-best eight caroms to go along with her eight points.

The Golden Panthers struggled from the floor, converting just 5-of-28 (17.9 percent) field goals in the first half on their way to connecting on just 17-of-58 (29.3 percent) for the game.

Middle Tennessee will close the regular season at 11 a.m. (Central) Saturday when it stays in south Florida to face Florida Atlantic in Boca Raton. The contest will be televised live on the Sun Belt Network, shown locally on Comcast/Charter Sports Southeast (CSS), with Lyn Rollins handling the

play-by-play and Debbie Leonard serving as the color analyst.

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