

Blue Raiders conclude regular season as East Division winner

Sun Belt Tournament opponent to be determined

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BOCA RATON, Fla. - Defense wrecked havoc for home-standing Florida Atlantic, as the Middle Tennessee women's basketball team forced 25 turnovers in an 88-71 victory over the Owls Saturday afternoon inside FAU Arena in Boca Raton, Fla. The Blue Raiders converted the 25 miscues into 27 points, including 19 in the second half, as they clinched the Sun Belt's East Division title and at least the No. 2 seed in the upcoming conference tournament.

All-American Alysha Clark led all players with her 71st career double-double, 16th of the season and 33rd as a Blue Raider with 36 points and 13 rebounds. Brandi Brown and Jackie Pickel each contributed 16 points, while Anne Marie Lanning added 13 on a perfect night (3-of-3 from the field, 4-of-4 at the foul line).



Lanning dished eight assists with Lymon handing out seven on a day on which Middle Tennessee had 23 assists on its 33 field goals. Chelsia Lymon also led all players with eight steals, doubling the team total for Florida Atlantic.

Carla Stubbs pulled the Owls within four, 48-44, with 16:20 to play, but Middle Tennessee turned around the tight game by netting the next 15 points during a near-six minute stretch to clinch the win. Florida Atlantic missed two shots and coughed up five ball-changes during the spurt, allowing the Blue Raiders to pull away with a 63-44 lead on a Pickel layup.

The margin remained in the mid-teens despite MT holding FAU to just four field goals in a three-and-a-half minute period until Brown hit a top-of-the-key 3-pointer at 8:27 for a 70-51 lead. Both teams traded baskets with Brittany Bowe connecting on a pair of layups with just under seven minutes to go to slice the deficit to 10, 76-66.

Middle Tennessee then unleashed a 12-0 spurt, as Lanning posted the first five points, Pickel nailed a trey and Brown finished the run with five points to open an 88-66 advantage with 1:42 remaining.

Teri Stamps put the Owls ahead early, netting eight of the team's opening 10 points, as Florida Atlantic raced out to a 10-4 lead with just over five minutes elapsed. A 3-poiner by Andrea Taylor helped FAU continue its momentum, increasing its advantage to as high as 11, 15-4, on a Breana Turner running layup at 12:56.

The Blue Raiders then kick started their offense on consecutive triples from Clark and Pickel to pull within five, 15-10, in the next minute. Bowe converted an old-fashioned three-point play at 11:38, but Clark answered with one of her own to keep MT down five, 18-13. Pickel chipped in the next five points, featuring her second trey, to trim the deficit to two, 20-18. Clark then spun free for a layup at 8:34 to force the first tie, 20-20.

Bowe countered with a jumper before Pickel gave Middle Tennessee (22-5, 17-1 Sun Belt) its first lead, 23-22, on her third 3-pointer of the half with 7:09 to play. The Blue Raider defense enabled its offense to claim the lead towards the end of the half, forcing 16 first-half turnovers by the Owls, including a pair of backcourt miscues, a shot clock violation and a three-seconds call.

Brown and Clark lit up the scoreboard with 3-pointers, pushing the Middle Tennessee edge to 36-28 with 3:40 remaining. Florida Atlantic (14-14, 10-8 Sun Belt) closed the half on a 4-2 run, including a triple by Andrea Taylor with 1:41 left, to pull within six at the intermission, 38-32.

The Owls were led by 17 points from Stamps, including five 3-pointers. Stubbs added a dozen, Bowe poured in 11 and Lyrell Barfield registered 10 points. Bowe paced all players with nine assists among the 13 FAU handouts.

The Blue Raiders will return to action Sunday March 7 in the quarterfinal round of the Sun Belt Tournament in Hot Springs, Ark. Middle Tennessee's first opponent is yet-to-be-determined, depending on the outcome of the rest of the league games Saturday.

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