# Blue Raiders advance to semifinals after beating Mean Green

## Middle Tennessee hits century mark for seventh time

March 7, 2010 · Athletic Communications

**HOT SPRINGS, Ark. -** Seniors Jackie Pickel and Alysha Clark hit personal milestones Sunday, but it was a collective effort that led the No. 2-seeded Middle Tennessee women's basketball team to a 106-66 victory over No. 10 seed North Texas Sunday afternoon in the Sun Belt Tournament quarterfinals inside Summit Arena in Hot Springs, Ark.

The Blue Raiders topped the century mark for a national-best seventh game this season and third consecutive time against the Mean Green after forcing 23 overall turnovers and causing NT to shoot just 6-of-27 (22.2 percent) in the opening 20 minutes. The Middle Tennessee (23-5) defense, led by Sun Belt Defensive Player of the Year Pickel, clamped down on the lower seeded squad, as the Mean Green only made one of their first 18 attempts through the opening 14 minutes.

Meanwhile, the Blue Raider offense overcame a slow start of its own, building a 32-11 lead before Raquel Cuffie converted the second field goal for North Texas (9-22) at 5:48. Nine of the Mean Green's first 11 points were made from the foul line with the same number of fouls called on Middle Tennessee to that point.

Pickel became the fourth Middle Tennessee player this season and 24th overall in school history to top the 1,000-point plateau. The Blue Raiders become just the sixth known program in NCAA women's basketball history to have four players reach the milestone in the same season, joining Louisiana Tech (1988), Georgia (1996), Saint Joseph's (2004), Connecticut (2005) and Michigan State (2005). The Second Team All-Sun Belt honoree finished with 21 points in 30 minutes, despite playing only 10 in the first stanza.

Clark set a single-game individual scoring record with her game-high 40 points on 16-of-23 from the field and 8-of-10 at the foul line. She added a team-best 13 rebounds for her 72nd career double-double, tying her for fifth all-time in NCAA history. The double-double is the 17th of the season and 34th as a Blue Raider for the Sun Belt Player of the Year.

The All-American gave the Blue Raiders their initial double-digit lead on a jumper with 9:24 remaining in the half for a 17-7 edge. The Mean Green trimmed the margin to nine, 19-10, before Middle Tennessee embarked on a 13-0 spurt over the next three minutes, keyed by a pair of triples from Anne Marie Lanning and another by Chelsia Lymon, to open the sizeable lead.

The teams traded baskets down the stretch of the opening period, as a Tina Stewart layup gave the Blue Raiders their largest edge of the half, 38-16, with 2:58 remaining. Free throws continued to keep North Texas within less than 20, pulling the deficit down to 17, 42-25, with 45 seconds to play in the half on a pair of charity tosses from Brittney James.

Stewart then added another layup with an ensuing free throw to close the first half scoring and send Middle Tennessee into the intermission ahead 20, 45-25.

The Blue Raider momentum carried over to the second session, as a 7-0 spurt opened a 27-point cushion, 52-25, with just over a minute elapsed. Middle Tennessee showed no signs of slowing down offensively, extending its run to an 18-2 surge over the first 3:22, capped by another Lanning trey, for a 63-27 lead with 16:38 left.

The two teams traded baskets over the next four minutes before Denetra Kellum cut the gap to 32, 69-37, at 14:16. The Blue Raiders then used another strong run, a 14-4 streak covering over four minutes, to widen the margin to 42, 83-41. The lead would eventually stretch to a game-high 43, 87-44, on Lanning's second set of free throws.

She hit her first pair at 9:51 when she nailed a corner 3-pointer and a foul was called after the play. The basket was counted and she was awarded two foul shots, essentially setting up a five-point play for the junior.

Clark came out of the under-eight media timeout, with 7:10 to go, and connected on a pair of free throws of her own to break the scoring mark and give Middle Tennessee an 89-46 lead. North Texas then mounted a 9-2 run, pulling within 36, 91-55, over the next 1:22 on the strength of five more charity tosses.

Two free throws by Sun Belt Freshman of the Year Jasmine Godbolt kept the Mean Green within 36, 96-60, coming out of the under-four minute timeout at 3:50. Lanning then missed a 3-pointer, but Pickel grabbed the rebound and hit the put-back for her 1,000th career point at 3:24 to send the Blue Raider faithful into a frenzy.

Before the Middle Tennessee bench began to empty down the stretch, Pickel added an insurance layup with 2:25 to play to give the Blue Raiders the century mark once again, 100-62. It was part of a 10-6 MT run in the final minutes to seal the victory.

Lanning added 18 points, including a team-high tying four triples and six assists. She was matched in both categories by Lymon, who finished with 14 points, as four of the five Middle Tennessee starters posted double-figure outings.

Five North Texas players reached the double-digit plateau, including a team-high 16 by James. Kellum chipped in 12, while Goldbolt and Hudson each tallied 11. Cuffie rounded out the quintet with 10 points. Godbolt hauled in a game-high 14 caroms for a double-double in 34 minutes.

The Blue Raiders will return to action in the semifinals at 2:30 p.m. Monday against No. 3 seed Western Kentucky, which won its quarterfinal 72-67 over South Alabama Sunday. The game will be broadcast on the Comcast/Charter Sports Southeast (CSS) with Lyn Rollins on the play-by-play and Debbie Leonard as the color commentator.

The contest will also be broadcast via radio on the Blue Raider Network. In addition to the normal station lineup, WNSR (560 AM) will also pick up the call of play-by-play man Dick Palmer and analyst Duane Hickey.

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*Printed on July 28, 2014*
*Original URL: http://www.goblueraiders.com/content.cfm/id/44475*