

Clark's last-second shot clinches Sun Belt Championship

Blue Raiders earn 13th NCAA Tournament berth

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HOT SPRINGS, Ark. - All-American and Sun Belt Player of the Year Alysha Clark turned and hit a bank shot from the left side with 1.8 seconds remaining in overtime to seal a 70-68 victory for No. 25 Middle Tennessee over UALR in the Sun Belt women's basketball championship game Tuesday afternoon inside Summit Arena in Hot Springs, Ark. The crown is the Blue Raiders sixth in eight appearances in the Sun Belt title game and locks up Middle Tennessee's 13th NCAA Tournament berth in school history.

In an epic battle between the top-two seeded teams in the tournament, it went an extra five minutes with the two squads never quitting over the course of the 45 minutes. Clark was the driving force for the Blue Raider offense, tallying a Sun Belt Tournament

single-game record 48 points on 16-of-28 field goals and 16-of-18 free throws while never stepping off the floor. The 48 points for the Mt. Juliet, Tenn., native are two shy of her career high and the Sun Belt's overall mark on her way to earning Sun Belt Tournament Most Outstanding Player accolades for the second-straight year.

She added 16 rebounds for her third-straight double-double, 19th of the season, 36th as a Blue Raider and 74th overall of her career to move within one of fourth place on the NCAA's all-time list. She also increased her career total to 2,835 points to pass Western Kentucky's Crystal Kelly for 12th



place in NCAA history. While Clark was doing the work on the offensive end, it was Sun Belt Defensive Player of the Year Jackie Pickel who turned in a solid performance on the other side guarding the Trojans' top threat, Chastity Reed. Pickel limited Reed to 7-of-23 from the floor for 14 points and caused six turnovers.

Pickel was the second-leading scorer for Middle Tennessee (25-5) with nine points, all on three 3-pointers, while Anne Marie Lanning added a pair for six points to garner All-Sun Belt Tournament Team honors.

Shanika Butler led UALR (26-6) with a double-double of her own, netting 18 points and hauling in 10 rebounds. Asriel Rolfe knocked down five 3-pointers among her 17 points, while Kim Sitzmann also reached double figures with 11.

The Blue Raiders finished with 19 assists on their 23 field goals and connected on 18-of-20 free throws in their first overtime affair of the campaign.

Clark hit a pair of free throws to begin the extra period, after Marian Kursh missed a set for the Trojans. Reed came down on the next possession to knot the score for the seventh time at 61-61 before Clark went back to the line for two more with 2:53 to play. Lanning then buried a triple at 2:31 to put MT ahead five, 66-61. The lead grew to eight following a Butler miss and Rolfe fouling Lymon. The senior point guard sank a couple charity tosses with 1:59 remaining for a seven-point cushion, 68-61.

UALR, however, would answer with seven consecutive points of its own, started by a Rolfe trey and followed by a Butler layup and two free throws from Channon Haywood to force the eighth tie, 68-68, with 29 seconds to go.

Without calling timeout, Middle Tennessee pushed the ball inside to Clark. She did not have the shot she had hoped, prompting her to pass back out to Lymon. The pair then reconnected with three seconds left and Clark turned to hit the game-winning shot. The Trojans launched a three-quarter court shot but it fell well short.

UALR jumped out in front 5-2 to start the game, as Sitzmann buried a corner triple and Reed laid the ball in with just over a minute passed. Lymon then stole an in-bounds pass and converted an ensuing layup to pull the Blue Raiders within one. Clark's backcourt steal and uncontested layup at 14:25 provided the first tie, 9-9.

The Trojans raced out to a four-point edge, 15-11, when Rolfe nailed a 3-pointer at 12:17, but Middle Tennessee used a Clark layup and Pickel trey to take its first lead, 16-15, with 11:09 to play in the stanza. UALR mounted a 13-2 spurt over the next five-and-a-half minutes, to race out to a game-best 10-point cushion, 28-18, with 5:31 on the clock.

The Blue Raiders went to Clark for a pair of layups, trimming the deficit to six preceding a Pickel 3-pointer at 3:06 to pull within five, 30-25. Sitzmann made two free throws before Middle Tennessee closed the period on a 7-0 run, all coming from Clark, to force a 32-32 halftime score.

The close game ensued during the second 20 minutes with Reed knocking down her own miss at 13:28 for a six-point advantage, 41-35. Clark went back to the charity stripe and recorded a layup during the next minute to close the gap to two, 41-39.

Butler registered four of the next six points, giving the Trojans another eight-point margin, 47-39, with exactly 11 minutes remaining. The differential would stretch to nine, 50-41, on another Rolfe trey with 8:57 to play.

Lanning answered with a 3-pointer before the Blue Raiders then would take control during the next four-and-a-half minutes, turning to Clark for a eight consecutive points to force a 52-52 tie with 4:24 to go in regulation.

Brandi Brown drained a 25-foot triple at 3:35 to give Middle Tennessee a three-point advantage for its first lead in 12 minutes. The Blue Raider lead would swell to five a couple times down the stretch, the last on a Clark layup with 2:44 left. UALR battled back with five-straight points via Rolfe, including another 3-pointer, to tie it at the end of regulation, 59-59.

Middle Tennessee entered the ESPN/*USA Today* Coaches' Poll for the first time this season at No. 25, a ranking which was released just before the nationally-broadcast tip-off on ESPNU and ESPN360.com.

The Blue Raiders will await word for their NCAA Tournament fate. The tournament selection show will be at 6 p.m. Monday with details of the team's plans still in the works.

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