

Blue Raiders run past Bulls in season opener

Rowe, Lanning lead Middle Tennessee

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. -

Middle Tennessee shook off a shaky start to rebound for a 71-59 home victory over the Big East's USF in non-conference women's basketball action Sunday afternoon inside the Murphy Center. The win is the Blue Raiders' second-straight against a Big East foe after knocking off Louisville on the road a year ago.

Freshman Ebony Rowe led all players with 25 points and 16 rebounds in her Middle Tennessee (1-0) debut, becoming the first Blue Raider rookie to start the season opener since Anne Marie Lanning Nov. 10, 2007, at Old Dominion. Rowe converted 9-of-11 field goals, chipped in seven free throws, blocked three shots, handed out three assists and swiped two steals in playing all 40 minutes in her inaugural collegiate action.



Lanning, the lone active senior on this year's squad, added 18 points, grabbed a career-high tying eight rebounds and dished six assists in also playing the full 40 minutes. She hit 3-of-5 from behind the 3-point arc, including the team's first bucket at 14:59 after the Bulls jumped out to a 7-0 lead.

Andrea Smith paced USF (1-1) with 18 points on 7-of-19 field goals and was joined in double figures by Andrell Smith's 10, which included two of the team's three triples. Daleisha Carn topped the Bulls with seven boards.

USF raced out to a 7-0 lead as the young Middle Tennessee team struggled with six turnovers among its first eight possessions. The miscues continued to haunt the Blue Raiders throughout the

game, as they finished with 30, including a pair of shot clock violations and a three-second call.

However, Rowe sparked the comeback and gave MT its second lead, 10-9, on a turnaround jumper in the paint at 11:42. The Bulls then scored the next six points to go back on top, 15-10, before Rowe added another jumper at 8:57 to pull the Blue Raiders within three.

USF continued to keep its distance by stretching the margin to seven, 24-17, over the next three-and-a-half minutes following back-to-back baskets by Aleshia Flowers and Andrea Smith. Smith's field goal at 5:13 would be the last for the Bulls in the half, however, as Middle Tennessee answered with an 11-1 run, capped by a Rowe put-back with four seconds remaining, to lift the Blue Raiders to a 28-25 halftime edge.

The momentum stayed with Middle Tennessee through the break as it netted the first five points, all by Rowe, of the second half, including an old-fashioned three-point play to finish the spurt at 17:25 for a 33-25 advantage.

Sophomore Dymon Raynor hit a pair of free throws to increase the deficit to 10, 37-27, at 16:29, but USF did not quit. The Bulls scored the next eight points during a two-minute period and took advantage of three Blue Raider ball changes to cut the gap to two, 37-35, on a Jasmine Wynne steal and layup with 14:17 to play.

USF kept pushing and would take its first lead since late in the first half on an Andrea Smith jumper for a 40-39 edge at the 13:13 mark. The two teams battled through three ties over the next three minutes, the last at 44-44 on a pair of charity tosses from sophomore Icelyn Elie.

Rowe hit the front-end of a two-shot foul to give MT a 45-44 lead with 9:42 remaining and the Blue Raiders never looked back. Including the free throw, the next nine points fell in Middle Tennessee's favor and sophomore Kortni Jones buried a 3-pointer and added a layup as the margin swelled to nine, 53-44, with 6:32 left.

With an eight-point cushion, 54-46, with 4:59 to go, Lanning calmly sank a pair of free throws after a technical foul was given to the Bull bench, pushing the lead back to double digits.

Andrea Smith countered with a 3-pointer at 4:22 but the Rowe-Lanning combination added the next eight Blue Raider points, helping to build a 15-point, 64-49, advantage with 2:21 remaining.

Andrell Smith poured in eight of USF's final 10 points, including a trey with 36 seconds left to slice the margin to nine, 68-59, but the Bulls could get no closer down the stretch.

Middle Tennessee will travel to Clarksville, Tenn., for its next game, a 7 p.m. Tuesday matchup with Austin Peay, a member of the NCAA Tournament in each of the last two seasons.

Middle Tennessee Postgame Quotes:

Head Coach Rick Insell

USF has a tremendous team. They had a lot of their team back and healthy from last year, and we knew it was going to be tough. Coach (Lynn) Burkey, Alex Fuller and Kim Clark, they stayed up all night two nights in a row, getting our team ready for this game. They are very athletic, they have great players and I am just so proud of our young ladies.

We hung in there. We had 30 turnovers and you do not win games with 30 turnovers. We just gutted it out and made some shots when we had to. We know that we were going to be tight at first with our young team, and we were, but then Anne Marie (Lanning) hit a three, and then we hit another one, and we loosened up. When we had open shots, we knocked most of them down.

At halftime, we went in and talked about things very calmly. We know our post girls were getting open, and we had to get the ball to them, and that is what we did. That was the turning point of the game, when started to get the ball to our post people.

Anne Marie Lanning overachieves every time she hits the floor. She is just absolutely remarkable. She had 18 points, eight rebounds and six assists, and stayed on the floor the entire 40 minutes. She is just a battler. It is amazing what she is able to do.

We need to work on our turnovers, we need to cut them in half, to 12-15 a game, and we will. We will work on that.

Senior Anne Marie Lanning

On her first game as the floor leader and only senior

At the beginning, when we made all those turnovers, I just knew it was my job to get everybody calmed down, and let everybody know that it was important not to turn the ball over. We need to do a better job of executing what we talk about. We do not need to let the other team dictate what we do, and force us into turnovers. We were killing ourselves on the turnovers. It was not like they were stealing the ball, we were just dropping it.

On a complete overall game

I do not know if it was my best game here, but it was a pretty complete game. I felt like I kept my composure, and after we talked to the team, they began to get their composure back. I guess if you put together my points, my rebounds, my assists and my free throws, it was a pretty complete game.

USF Postgame Quotes:

Head Coach Jose Fernandez

When we scheduled this game, we knew it was going to be a tough test, and it was good for us, our strength of schedule and our RPI. They have a very good basketball team and they exposed our weakness. We are very inexperienced at this time. I thought, defensively, that we forced a lot of turnovers, and too many of our turnovers were unforced.

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