Road swing begins with hard-fought victory

Blue Raiders build 27-0 run during first half

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COOKEVILLE, Tenn. – Freshman KeKe Stewart powered her way to a career-high 22 points, leading four Middle Tennessee players in double figures, as the Blue Raiders had a large first-half run and then withstood a strong Tennessee comeback attempt to pull out a 71-58 victory Wednesday evening inside the Eblen Center in Cookeville, Tenn. The game is the first of three straight, and six of eight during the month, on the road for Middle Tennessee.

Stewart became the go-to option in the post and she delivered by knocking down 8-of-13 field goals, including her first career 3-pointer just before the shot clock expired, and all five of her free throw attempts to finish with game-high scoring honors. She added six rebounds, two blocked shots, an assist and steal in 23 minutes off the bench.

Classmate Ebony Rowe nearly had her fourth double-double among the first six games, finishing with 15 points and a game-best nine rebounds. Her points came from five field goals and five free throws.

Junior Tina Stewart drained three triples and sophomore Kortni Jones hit two from behind the arc to register 11 and 10 points, respectively, to make up for a scoreless game from senior Anne Marie Lanning. Stewart and Jones combined for eight steals and six assists as the Blue Raider backcourt leaders.

Tacarra Hayes paced the Golden Eagles with 19 points and eight rebounds, but the Middle

Tennessee (5-1) pressure defense forced her into 10 of the team's 22 turnovers. Tennessee Tech was unsuccessful on its 12 shots from 3-point territory, the first time the Blue Raiders held a team without a trey since Troy Dec. 20, 2008.

Neither team was able to gain much advantage during the early going with four ties occurring during the opening 11 minutes, the last coming at 18-18 on an Icelyn Elie jumper. Her tying bucket erased a five-point deficit Middle Tennessee had faced, 18-13, just over 30 seconds earlier.

The Blue Raiders turned the tide after they trailed by five by scoring the next 27 points over an eight-minute span, using six layups, three triples and four charity tosses to outscore the hosts. Two of the 3-pointers came from Jones, as she stood nearly 25 feet back on both and almost on the midcourt logo. KeKe Stewart tallied nine points during the surge, while Rowe added five, including the layup to cap the streak at 40-18 with 2:21 remaining in the period.

Despite the large margin, Middle Tennessee could not hold off the Golden Eagles down the stretch. Tennessee Tech (4-1) outscored the Blue Raiders 8-2 the rest of the half, including a layup by Tiara Hopper just before the buzzer to send the teams into the locker rooms with MT ahead, 42-26.

The momentum stayed with the Golden Eagles in the early stages of the second stanza, as they cut the gap to single digits, 53-44, with 11:23 to go. Seven different Tennessee Tech players scored in the 18-9 run.

Just as it seemed the Golden Eagles would continue their surge, KeKe Stewart drained her 3-pointer from the top of the key at 10:49 just as the shot clock was set to expire, knocking the wind out of the home team sails. She added a pair of free throws 31 seconds later to push the score back to a 14-point Middle Tennessee edge, 58-44.

Tennessee Tech continued to chip away and use a 9-2 spurt during the next four minutes, capped by three free throws by Rachel Glidden, to slice the margin to seven, 60-53, with 6:29 to play.

Back-to-back layups by Dymon Raynor and Jones inched the lead back to double-digits, but Kylie Cook converted an old-fashioned three-point play to make it an eight-point game, 64-56, at the 4:35 mark. Seven of the final nine points fell into the Blue Raiders' favor, all by Rowe, to decide the final outcome.

Middle Tennessee will continue its road trip with a 6 p.m. Friday contest at ACC foe Georgia Tech in Atlanta. It will mark the first meeting with the Yellow Jackets in program history. Dick Palmer will have all the action on the Blue Raider Network family of stations, WGNS (100.5 FM, 101.9 FM, 1450 AM), WMOT (89.5 FM) and WBRY (96.7 FM, 1540 AM).

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