Utes topple Blue Raiders in NCAA First Round

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TUCSON, Ariz. - Middle Tennessee could not pull an NCAA Tournament upset for the third year in a row after squandering a 15-point second half lead to fall to the 18th ranked Utah Utes, 76-71, on Saturday. As a 13 seed in 2004 MT upset North Carolina and equaled that feat last year as a 12 seed by taking down N.C. State in the first round, but could not pull the trifecta in Tucson.

- **Photos:** MT vs. Utah Gallery One, Gallery Two

"I am very proud of my young ladies because they fought all day long," said Head Coach Rick Insell. "We missed some shots down the stretch and maybe we were a little tired because of the pressure we had to put on them. I give Utah credit because they made shots when they had to."

Junior Chrissy Givens nearly picked up her first-ever triple-double as she led Middle Tennessee with 25 points, a career-high 11 assists, and seven rebounds. Johnna Abney poured in 15 points while Krystle Horton and Tia Stovall added 10 each.

"Givens is a great player and there was not a whole lot we could have done different today," said Utah senior Shona Thorburn. "She is only a junior so there is no telling what she will be able to do next year. She could just spin away from us and elevate on her jump shot better than we could."

Leading 68-67 with 3:11 to play, the Blue Raiders (20-11) would not score again until Abney hit a three-pointer with four seconds left in the game. The Blue Raiders had chances, however. Givens missed two free throws at the 2:41 mark, Starr Orr missed a jumper on the right baseline, and then Stovall got called for a questionable charge after she was successful on a short jumper.

"The officials were in position to make the call," said Insell. "I did not have a good look, but if they say it was a charge then it was a charge."

After Middle Tennessee went ahead 57-42 at the 10:11 mark, Utah's (25-6) Thorburn went to work. The Hamilton, Ontario product scored 19 of her team-high 21 points in the final 9:36 of the game, including the last eight in a row, to provide the difference for the Utes.

"Thorburn is a winner who can take games over like she did today," said Insell. "This was her type game and she wanted the ball when it counted. She is just a great player."

In the first half, the Blue Raiders struggled with their shooting in connecting on just 38 percent over the first 20 minutes while the Utes scored 16 of their 31 first half points on layups. It was about a three to five-point game most of the half until Utah jumped ahead 31-21 on a jumper by Thorburn at the 4:33 mark.

At that point, Middle Tennessee extended its defense and finally found a shooting touch that had been missing in action the first 15 minutes. After missing her first three three-pointers, Abney found the bottom of the net on a three with 3:13 to play that pulled the Blue Raiders to within seven points at 31-24. Givens followed with a jumper and then a steal by Givens led to a beautiful pass down low to Tia Stovall to make the score 31-28 with 1:17 to play.

After another defensive stop, Abney connected on her second three-pointer of the half to tie the score with :37 seconds remaining. That score held up as the teams went to the locker room the way they came out, tied.

Middle Tennessee grabbed just its second lead of the game on the opening possession of the second half when Abney nailed her third three-pointer to put the Blue Raiders up, 34-31. It was the first lead by MT since going up 2-1 at the 18:37 mark of the first half.

Abney remained hot from outside with another three-pointer to complete a 19-2 run from the end of the first half and put the Blue Raiders ahead, 40-33, for their largest lead of the contest.

Utah answered back with a three-point play by Heidi Carlsen to cut it to 40-36 but Middle Tennessee came right back. The Blue Raiders went on an 8-0 run to extend to a 12-point margin at 48-36 as Stovall, Givens, Horton, and Orr all hit shots.

Givens scored seven straight points to give Middle Tennessee a 57-42 lead with 10:11 to play but the advantage would be short lived as Utah put together its best run of the day. Behind Thorburn's seven points, the Utes went on an 11-0 run to make it a 57-53 game with 8:04 to go.

"We tried a few things differently during their run but it just did not work," said Insell. "We tried to hedge on Thorburn but it was not as successful as we had hoped and they simply made some shots which sparked them to the comeback."

The Blue Raiders completed their season with a 20-11 record and will welcome back four of five starters in 2006-07.

NOTES: MT dropped to 4-10 all-time in 10 NCAA appearances ... Chrissy Givens recorded her 21st 20-point game of the season and it was the 11th time she has tallied 25 or more points ... Middle Tennessee was outshot at the free throw line, 21-8 ... Johnna Abney's five three-pointers were her most in a game since hitting five at New Orleans back on Jan. 28 ...

MT is now 0-2 all-time against Utah ... The bench players for both teams combined for just 14 points with the Blue Raiders scoring eight ... Givens had a career-best 11 assists in 40 minutes but more impressively was the fact she had no turnovers ... All five starters for MT shot 50 percent or better from the field.

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