

Cold shooting spells loss to nationally-ranked Xavier

First ranked opponent inside Murphy Center this season

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. – Middle Tennessee entered the contest fresh off shooting a season-best 50.0 percent at UCF Tuesday, but the Blue Raiders did not find the nets as friendly in their own building, as they dropped a 65-52 decision to No. 4/5 Xavier inside the Murphy Center Thursday night.

Middle Tennessee connected on a season-low 29.3 percent from the field, hitting just 17-of-58 shots, including a 6-of-30 (20.0 percent) effort from behind the 3-point arc after missing its first 11 attempts from long range. Junior Tina Stewart finally broke the drought from 3-point territory with a banked in shot at 7:13 of the first half.

Meanwhile, the Blue Raider defense played well enough against the much taller Musketeers and limited the effectiveness of All-Americans Amber Harris and Ta'Shia Phillips. The pair combined for 21 points and 20 rebounds, including 13 by Phillips, but both players were saddled with foul trouble as they entered the half with three apiece.



Harris, a 6-5 forward, and Phillips, a 6-6 center, combined to hit just 8-of-26 field goals. Megan Askew helped make up the difference, leading all players with 17 points, while Special Jennings and Tyeasha Moss added 14 and 10, respectively, to put all five Xavier (9-0) starters in double figures.

Freshman Ebony Rowe paced the Middle Tennessee (6-3) attack with 13 points and eight rebounds. Classmate Jordyn Luffman registered a career-best 10 points, including a team-high two 3-pointers.

Sophomore Kortni Jones handed out a game-best six assists, as the Blue Raiders finished with 13 helpers on their 17 field goals made. Senior Anne Marie Lanning contributed four assists, as the pair

outnumbered the Musketeers' team total by one.

Middle Tennessee forced a stop on Xavier's first possession of the game when Phillips missed a pair of short-range jumpers and Jones fed Rowe at the other end to give the hosts a quick 2-0 advantage. The Musketeers responded by scoring the next nine points, featuring a 3-pointer from Moss and a pair of Askew buckets to cap the run over a four-minute span.

Sophomore Dymon Raynor went to work to stop the surge but twice Xavier pushed the margin to nine, the last coming on an Askew jumper with 10:21 left, to make it a 16-7 edge. Lanning converted an old-fashioned three-point play and Rowe poured in another layup to help the Blue Raiders cut it to four, 16-12, two minutes later.

The Musketeers countered with four-straight points, extending the advantage back to eight, 20-12, with 7:27 remaining. Middle Tennessee answered with seven of the next nine points, all courtesy of junior Tina Stewart on a 3-pointer and two trips to the foul line, slicing the margin to three, 22-19, with 2:39 to go.

Askew and KeKe Stewart traded buckets before Harris tallied the final points of the half at 1:20 to send Xavier into the break ahead, 26-21.

The momentum stayed with the Musketeers over the opening two-and-a-half minutes of the second period before Luffman drained her first triple at 17:38 to cut the gap to eight, 32-24. Moss answered on the other end with a trey of her own and the Blue Raiders were unable to make it a single-digit difference until Rowe's jumper at 14:36 for a 38-29 score.

Xavier then embarked on a 13-3 run during the next six minutes, pushing its lead to a game-high 19, 51-32, when Lynette Holmes scored at 8:33. The 3-pointers finally began to fall for Middle Tennessee, as it knocked down a pair over the next three minutes, one each by Lanning and Jones, and the Blue Raiders again made it a single-digit margin, 53-44, with 5:30 to play.

Askew then tallied five-straight Musketeer points before Luffman knocked down a corner triple at 4:24 to pull Middle Tennessee within 11, 58-47. KeKe Stewart then stepped out from her post position and hit a 3-pointer of her own, cutting the gap to eight, 60-52, with 3:26 remaining.

However, Jennings added another old-fashioned three-point play, wrapped around the under-four media timeout, and Harris finished the scoring with a jumper at 2:37 to decide the final outcome.

The Blue Raiders will look to rebound in their only other home game of the month, facing James Madison at 12:30 p.m. Sunday in the first part of a Middle Tennessee doubleheader. The contest can be seen nationally on ESPN3.com with Chip Walters on play-by-play and Kyle Turnham as the color analyst.

The Blue Raider Network will also have the game live on radio, including stations WGNS (100.5 FM, 101.9 FM, 1450 AM), WMOT (89.5 FM) and WBRY (96.7 FM, 1540 AM). Dick Palmer will handle the play-by-play and he will be joined by color analyst Duane Hickey.

Middle Tennessee Postgame Quotes

Head Coach Rick Insell:

I just wanted to go into the half with five turnovers and we went in with nine. And our two best shooters were 2 for 13, Tina (Stewart) and Anne Marie (Lanning). That did not cost us the game, but it could have kept us in it. We got good looks and did not knock them down, and we took care of the ball relatively well. We had 17 turnovers and I bet seven of them were walks.

They have a good team, and they were playing minus one of their better kids (Katie Rutan). (Amber) Harris got inside and made some shots that nobody can stop, and big (Ta'Shia) Phillips would get down low and plant herself. It is tough on anybody's team to keep her out.

Our kids fought hard, and I was proud of that, and we did not quit. If we could have made a few more shots, and got a few more stops there, at about the eight-minute mark, I think it would have been more interesting, not that we would have won the game, but it would have been more interesting.

I think our team found out more about themselves tonight than we (the coaching staff) found out about them. Jordyn Luffman came in and gave us some good minutes. She was 3-of-8 and rushed some of them because she had to. She went to the boards and got a put-back. Ten points, that is big for her.

Of our nine first half floor mistakes, KeKe has four walks. What we worked on was inside-out because we did not feel like we could challenge Phillips and Harris. They are too experienced and too good.

We gave them our best shot. Maybe later on we will get to face them again. Let us hope so.

Ebony (Rowe) gave us everything she had. She has got a lot of heart and she is a gutty player. When she was going up against their two big girls, it was tough on her, but when they moved somebody her size on her, she handled them.

I thought Dymon Raynor played pretty well, and she gave us a couple of big buckets there.

Senior Anne Marie Lanning:

The game plan was for the guards to come out and knock down shots. Unfortunately, we did not execute the game plan. I guess we need to get back in the gym and work on our shooting. I am going to, and I know the other guards will too.

We learned tonight that we have the toughness and the hard nose to beat a team. They are a great team, but I honestly think we put ourselves out of it by not knocking down shots, and with some of the turnovers we had at the start of the game. We executed our game plan defensively, what we had talked about. I thought we executed it great in the first half. We just did not knock down shots and that was obvious.

Freshman Ebony Rowe:

Their big girls were really good players, All-Americans, but I credit all of our post players. I do not think any of us were scared or intimidated at all. We took it right at them.

(On Harris and Phillips):

They were definitely the toughest matchup we have had this year.

We did not back down, we showed our toughness tonight, and if we could have gotten some shots to fall, we would have been in this game all the way. We are a tough team and we are not going to back down. We do not care where they are ranked.

Coach told us that they were going to go for the block, so me, Keke and Dymon were giving them pump fakes, and it got them in some foul trouble early.

Xavier Postgame Quotes Head Coach Kevin McGuff:

On receiving MT's best shot

Rick is a terrific coach, and he does a great job with this program. His kids always play hard. It is also something that our team has to deal with on a nightly basis. That is part of the responsibility of having the success that we have had, and I think it is a great opportunity for us to continue to grow and learn through some of these moments.

On Askew's play

I am really proud of Megan. She played with great energy and gave us a huge boost at both ends of the floor. She has got a lot of talent, and it is really fun to see her start to realize that talent. She is a big part of what we are trying to do right now.

On differences between first and second half

I think Middle Tennessee was more the aggressor in the first half. We just did not play with the sense of urgency nor the aggression that makes this a special team. Coming out of the half, I think we kind

of took control of the game by playing aggressively.

Our defense was much better in the second half. We really worked hard to keep the ball out of the paint and force them into contested threes, and I think that was probably the difference. We did not particularly have a great night shooting the ball, and I think the difference for us was that we were pretty good defensively and on the glass in the second half.

On being more perimeter-oriented than usual

I think we are at our best when we have balance in our game. I think that can potentially make us special in the long run. We got in some foul trouble in the first half and faced some things we have not faced, and we really showed a lot of resolve in the second half against a really good Middle team.

Senior Ta'Shia Phillips:

On MT's post defense

I do not think that it was anything different from what we have faced before. Sometimes you have to adjust. Instead of getting double-teamed, it was more like a triple team. We just had to adjust, and we started to move the ball a little bit better, and that helped.

Senior Megan Askew

On her career night offensively

I think that pushing the ball, getting in transition and pushing the ball down the court is when I am at my best. My teammates were giving me the ball and they had confidence in me. When I feel that, I hit shots.

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