Blue Raiders hang tough but stumble down stretch in loss to Wildcats

Rowe finishes with game-high honors of 25 points, 11 rebounds in homecoming

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LEXINGTON, Ky. – Middle Tennessee led No. 11/11 Kentucky by double digits with seven minutes remaining but the lead quickly evaporated as the Wildcats overcame the deficit to rally for an 81-72 victory Wednesday evening live on FSN South inside Memorial Coliseum in Lexington, Ky.

Kentucky used a full-court press to force nine turnovers down the stretch to reverse the tide and pull out the win and spoil freshman Ebony Rowe's homecoming. Rowe finished with her third consecutive double-double of team-leading totals of 25 points and 11 rebounds. She converted 11-of-19 field goals and 3-of-6 free throws to go along with two assists, two steals and a blocked shot in 36 minutes in her first game back in her hometown.

Senior Anne Marie Lanning joined her in double figures with 13 points and added a team-best five assists, while freshman KeKe Stewart poured in 10 points. Freshman Jordyn Luffman continued her solid play of late, tallying eight points and hauling in eight caroms to help the Blue Raiders win the battle on the glass, 35-28.

Keyla Snowdon, the reigning SEC Player of the Week, topped the Cats with 16 points, including a game-high four 3-pointers, while A'dia Mathies chipped in 15, mostly on an 8-of-8 free throw

performance. Last season's SEC Player of the Year Victoria Dunlap added 13, all in the second half, while Carly Morrow registered 10 to give UK four players in double figures.

The Wildcats came out scorching the nets, burying their first five attempts, including three 3-pointers, to take an early 15-6 lead. Snowden buried two quick triples to counter a pair of buckets from sophomore Icelyn Elie and keep UK on top after the first media timeout.

The treys continued to fall for the Cats during the next four minutes when Maegan Conwright and Sarah Beth Barnette each hit one giving UK a 5-of-5 start from long range through the opening eight minutes. The hot start continued as Kentucky drained its first seven 3-pointers and inaugural nine free throw attempts as it built a 33-22 lead with 7:58 remaining.

The Blue Raiders, however, did not quit and used three free throws and a pair of layups to close the margin to five, 36-31, with just under four minutes to play in the half. The lead was then sliced to three when sophomore Kortni Jones knocked down a 3-pointer from the wing. She nearly gave MT its first lead but her second attempt from long range within a minute rimmed out.

Kentucky (10-1) capitalized by warming up from behind the arc again when Barnette drilled her third of the half and Bernisha Pinkett added a pair of free throws to open a 41-34 edge with only 2:04 left. Middle Tennessee, however, netted the final five points of the period as Rowe got loose in the low block and Lanning recorded a triple with 13 seconds left to pull the Blue Raiders within two, 41-39, at the intermission.

Middle Tennessee took its first lead shortly into the second half. After Rowe tied the game with a fast-break layup, the Blue Raiders were on the run again. Elie missed a layup, but the rebound came to Luffman, who found Lanning at the top of the key for a 3-pointer at 17:51 for a 44-41 advantage and forcing a Wildcat timeout.

The nets remained open for Middle Tennessee (9-4) as Luffman banked in a triple and Jones contributed one from deep on the side, while freshman KeKe Stewart powered in a layup to push the Blue Raider edge to 52-41 on an 18-0 spurt, covering both halves.

The Cats' second half drought ended at 15:20 when Snowden hit another 3-pointer. She would trade baskets with last season's SEC Player of the Year Victoria Dunlap to pull Kentucky within three, 54-51, on a 9-2 streak. The two jumpers for Dunlap would be her first of the game after she was held scoreless during the opening 20 minutes.

Carly Morrow then hit a 3-pointer in the corner to make it a one-point difference, 55-54, but Rowe answered right to keep MT on top. Her points ignited a 7-0 Blue Raider spurt during the next three minutes, as the lead swelled to eight, 62-54, as Stewart mixed in a 3-pointer and Lanning hit a runner near the foul line for the cushion with 7:53 to go. Rowe tipped-in a Stewart miss and Middle Tennessee held a 10-point cushion, 64-54, as the clock ticked under seven minutes.

Lanning picked up two quick fouls, including her disqualifying fifth with 5:42 to play. Mathies hit the ensuing free throws to trim the gap to three, 64-61, and following another Blue Raider miscue, Dunlap made a layup for a one-point game at the 5:32 mark.

A backcourt violation returned the ball to UK and the Cats clawed into the lead on Dunlap's second consecutive bucket with just under five minutes left. Turnovers and missed shots continued to haunt Middle Tennessee as the Wildcat advantage swelled to nine, 77-68, on a pair of Morrow charity

tosses.

Rowe's put-back with 25 seconds to play brought the Blue Raiders within six, but time became an enemy and they could not get any closer.

Middle Tennessee will now turn its attention to Sun Belt Conference action as it has concluded the non-conference portion of the slate. The Blue Raiders will begin league play at 2 p.m. Sunday at South Alabama in Mobile, Ala., in the first game of the 2011 calendar.

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