Second half spurt ignites Middle Tennessee victory

Blue Raiders led by trio of stars

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - In a closer game than anticipated, the Middle Tennessee women's basketball team used a 15-4 run midway through the second half to open things up and pull away for an 83-63 victory over North Texas Wednesday evening inside the Murphy Center in Murfreesboro, Tenn. The Blue Raiders, who had defeated the Mean Green by at least 40 points in the last three meeting when they topped the century mark, held only a one-point edge with 12:45 to play before the game-changing streak. A trio of Middle Tennessee (11-4, 2-0 Sun Belt) led the charge, including freshman Ebony Rowe, who had her fifth consecutive double-double and eighth overall of her young career with 15 points and a career-best 21 boards. The 21 boards are the most by any player under head coach Rick Insell and tie the reigning Sun Belt Player of the Week for fourth in school history with four other players, the last coming Dec. 1, 1990, by Priscilla Robinson at Arkansas State. Sophomore Kortni Jones led the Blue Raiders offensively with a career-high 24 points, besting the 19 she had earlier this season against ETSU Nov. 26. Jones nailed 7-of-10 field goals, including 4-of-6 from long range, and added six free throws off the bench. Senior Anne Marie Lanning continued her solid play as of late with 21 points, her second-straight contest with at least 20. She buried a pair of 3-pointers among her five field goals and was 9-of-10 at the foul line, snapping a streak of 29 consecutive, including a set with 9:50 remaining after a technical foul

was assessed to the North Texas (3-13, 0-3 Sun Belt) bench. Lanning's 21 points raised her career total to 945, leaving her just five shy of 28th place in school history and 55 short of the 1,000-point plateau. Two Mean Green players also surpassed the 20-point barrier, led by Brittany Hudson's 21. She was joined by Denetra Kellum with 20, who shared team-high rebounding honors with Ash'Lynne Evans with seven apiece. Middle Tennessee, who trailed on the glass 19-to-12 at the break, more than doubled North Texas in the second 20 minutes to win the battle, 40-to-31. The Blue Raiders turned the tide when Lanning began the run with a pair of charity tosses at 12:18 followed by Jones hauling in a defensive rebound and racing end-to-end for a layup a minute later and Rowe adding a jumper after a steal. Hudson briefly stopped the streak but after the technical, three free throws helped expand the margin to eight, 57-49. Lanning and Rowe continued to work as the advantage swelled to double-digits, 60-49, for the first time with 9:13 to go. Hudson hit a pair of free throws to bring it back to nine but Jones drained a long bomb to give MT a 63-51 edge at the under-eight media timeout. Again the Mean Green halted the surge momentarily, but Jones connected on four free throws as part of six-straight Blue Raider points at the line and then she contributed a layup with 5:20 left to push the advantage to 17, 71-54. Tamara Torru tallied three of the next four North Texas points to trim the margin to 13, 71-58, but Rowe countered with six of the next eight for Middle Tennessee to make it a 21-point lead, 79-58, with only 1:41 to play. The Blue Raiders never let the lead slip below 19 the rest of the game, even pushing it to a game-high 22 on a pair of occasions, including when freshman Janay Brinkley made 1-of-2 free throws with 14 seconds on the clock. The Mean Green began the game by taking an early 9-2 edge, including a 5-0 start, capped by a jumper from last season's Sun Belt Freshman of the Year Jasmine Godbolt. The bucket would be her only points of the game as she fouled out after playing just 14 minutes. A triple each by Lanning and freshman Jordyn Luffman enabled MT to rally and force the game's first tie at 10-10 at the 13:40 mark. Lanning then gave the Blue Raiders their first lead nearly a minute later but the margin never reached higher than five, on a Rowe jumper, at 9:38. Hudson and Raquel Cuffie helped begin an 8-0 Mean Green spurt during the next three minutes as North Texas rallied for a three-point edge on a set of Evans free throws with 6:59 left. Jones knocked down her first 3-pointer 30 seconds later and the two teams traded baskets over the course of the next two minutes with NT holding a slim, 26-24, advantage. Cuffie and Evans dropped in shots to push the visitor edge to a half-dozen, 30-24, with 3:54 remaining before Luffman answered with a 3-pointer at 3:07 to cut it half. Caitlin Hawkins and Hudson netted the next four points to make a seven-point difference with two minutes to play but Jones nailed her second trey of the half and added an old fashioned three-point play just under a minute left to cut it to one, 34-33. Torru and Lanning altered baskets as the teams went into the locker rooms with North Texas on top by one, 36-35. Middle Tennessee will return to action when they travel to Lafayette, La., to battle the Louisiana Ragin' Cajuns in a 2 p.m. Saturday tipoff. Dick Palmer will call all the action on the Blue Raider Network of stations, WGNS (100.5 FM, 101.9 FM, 1450 AM), WMOT (89.5 FM) and WBRY (96.7 FM, 1540 AM). **Middle Tennessee Postgame Quotes Head Coach Rick Insell**

I knew that North Texas was a team that was very, very dangerous. They are very athletic, they all can go off the dribble, they all can shoot jump shots. (Jasmine) Godbolt was Freshman of the Year last year. She got into foul trouble trying to guard Ebony (Rowe), and that was a big key to the game. When she went out, that took away a big part of their game. We had a lot of defensive breakdowns, but one thing that I am proud about of our kids is that they showed a lot of heart. We have been down several times over the year, but they keep going back in there and doing the best that they can do. That is just showing a lot of grit and a lot of desire. *On maintaining composure in physical game*

It was an eight point game with eight minutes to go, and I knew that North Texas had to foul us. I told them that we had to make free throws and take care of the basketball and we did. *On Kortni Jones*

She was questionable to play tonight. She was sick and she had her best game of the year. We could not have won that ball game without Kortni Jones. *On the first half*

North Texas was just physical. They took us out of our offense on the perimeter, and then they got physical with our post players in Ebony and KeKe (Stewart). At halftime, we had five missed two-footers, missed five free throws and we were down by one. We could have been up by 14 just off of that. We could not cry about that. We had to go back out there and take care of things. We came out and took a lead and were able to pad the lead, and that was the difference. Anne Marie Lanning

I think they got out on us with their pressure. We have seen some pressure like that this year, but they had really good pressure and they came out and got out on us. We had to do a better job of taking care of the ball and making moves to get around them. *On getting the ball inside* We made a more concentrated effort in the second half. At halftime, coach told us that the guards had to get it inside, but the posts had to work for it. They told us that our post presence in the first half was absent, and that they needed to see it in the second. I think they did a great job. **Kortni Jones** It may say it was a 20-point game, but that was a really good team that we played. Coach (Alex) Fuller told us that they were the type of team that would not go away. *On maintaining composure in a physical game*

Coach (Insell) always tells us that games are won with free throws and rebounding. To be honest, I like it when teams get to battling, and I think that we did a really good job with that. We know that teams are going to come out and pressure us and get up in us, and we cannot let them get away with it. **North Texas Postgame Quotes Head Coach Shanice Stephens** *On holding a lead at the break*

I love the way that we executed in that first half. I was really proud of how we defended and we set a really good tone on both offense and defense. I thought that the first half was really strong. *On what turned the game*

Some of our shots were not dropping and they began to hit some shots. There were some things that we could not control, and that kind of let the game get away from us. *On rebounding*

Their rebounding was big. I think we lost a little bit of our focus in the second half. We did our job in the first half, but we might have gotten fatigued and battle-weary towards the end. To come out a winner, you have to continue doing what got you to the party. You have to keep doing the little things, shoot the ball well, box out and defend. When we can put a 40 minute game together, you will see a much more dominant team.

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