

Balanced youthful attack keeps Blue Raiders perfect in league action

Middle Tennessee puts five players in double figures

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LAFAYETTE, La. - Five players reached double-figure scoring, all sophomores or freshmen, as the Middle Tennessee women's basketball team won its third straight, all in Sun Belt action, by defeating Louisiana 84-62 Saturday afternoon inside Earl K. Long Gym in Lafayette, La.

Sophomore Kortni Jones' 20 points, keyed by a career-high tying five 3-pointers, led the Blue Raiders. The point guard also added a team-best tying six assists in 33 minutes for her second-straight contest with at least 20 points.

Freshman Ebony Rowe had her streak of five consecutive double-doubles snapped but she still finished with 18 points and seven rebounds, while handing out a career-high five assists as MT dished 22 to just five by the Ragin' Cajuns. Classmate Jordyn Luffman poured in a career-best 15 points, all on 3-pointers, while sophomore Icelyn Elie added 11 and freshman KeKe Stewart contributed 10.

Elie hauled in a game-high nine rebounds to finish one board shy of her second career conference double-double. Her only other double-double in Sun Belt action came against Louisiana last season in Murfreesboro.

Mercedes Johnson paced the Ragin' Cajuns with 15 points. She was followed by Kemi Rotibi's 12



and Danyell Oliver's 11. Rotibi grabbed a team-high six caroms.

Middle Tennessee came out firing and used a small, 5-0 run to create some distance between itself and Louisiana. Luffman capped the streak with a 3-pointer from the wing before Rotibi ended the drought, but Anne Marie Lanning then added a pair from behind the arc herself to give the Blue Raiders a 15-6 edge at 15:23.

The fourth consecutive triple fell through the net for MT under a minute later when Jones added to the lead. Rowe then continued her strong start with a pair of free throws and a layup before Lyndra Bell kept the Ragin' Cajuns within a dozen, 22-10, at the under-12 media timeout.

Johnson attempted to bring Louisiana (9-8, 2-2 Sun Belt) back by hitting the next two field goals for the home team, but Middle Tennessee continued to find open looks down low and use the layups to their advantage.

When it appeared the Ragin' Cajuns would be shutting down the inside game, Jones began to warm up again from the outside as she hit two consecutive treys to counter a pair of jumpers from Oliver and the Blue Raiders held a 20-point, 39-19, margin at the under-four media timeout. Bianca Davis cut it to 18 with a set of free throws coming out of the timeout, however, Jones answered with her third straight 3-pointer, the last MT field goal of the period, at 2:53.

Baskets by Jasmine Barnes and Rotibi helped trim the Cajun halftime deficit to 17, 43-26, despite the Blue Raiders assisting on 13 of their 16 field goals, including four helpers apiece from Lanning and Jones.

The second half opened with a 12-3 Middle Tennessee (12-4, 3-0 Sun Belt) spurt, including a pair of old fashioned three-point plays, one each from Rowe and Jones, to lift the Blue Raiders to a 55-29 lead just over four minutes into the period.

Barnes, Johnson and Rotibi each tallied points for Louisiana during the next four minutes, but Jones buried her fifth 3-pointer of the game at 14:05 and Dymon Raynor grabbed a rebound off a missed triple from Tina Stewart to put Middle Tennessee ahead, 60-35.

Luffman drained a couple triples from the left side to keep the advantage at 26, 68-42, despite Johnson pouring in a three-point play and adding a layup during a mid-second half run. Before the Ragin' Cajuns could score again, Luffman returned to her favorite spot and hit her third straight from behind the arc, expanding the lead to 29, 71-42, with 7:44 left.

The margin rose above 30 for the first time, 75-44, on a Tina Stewart backcourt steal and uncontested layup at the other end at 7:12 but Oliver answered right back for Louisiana with five-straight points to trim it back to 26. The Ragin' Cajuns were limited to just seven free throws over nearly the next three minutes, but the points helped UL cut the gap to 21, 79-58, on a Johnson layup at the 2:21 mark.

Luffman lined up for her final triple on the next Blue Raider possession and the edge never dipped below 20 the remainder of the game.

Middle Tennessee will return to action at 7 p.m. Wednesday when it plays host to Florida Atlantic inside the Murphy Center. Prior to the game, from 6-7 p.m. Monday, fans are invited to join Dick

Palmer and head coach Rick Insell at Coach's Grill for second installment of the weekly Rick Insell Live!

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