

Middle Tennessee survives road test at Arkansas State

Blue Raiders extend winning streak to five

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JONESBORO, Ark. - Middle Tennessee held a double-digit lead as the game approached nine minutes remaining but had to stave off a late Arkansas State rally, as the Red Wolves cut the deficit to two before the Blue Raiders iced it late for a 57-52 Sunday afternoon victory inside the ASU Convocation Center in Jonesboro, Ark. The contest was broadcast regionally as part of the Sun Belt Network game of the week and shown locally on Comcast/Charter Sports Southeast (CSS).

Arkansas State used a pair of Quinishia McDowell free throws to pull within a deuce, 51-49, for its closest margin since 16-15. Icelyn Elie made it a four-point cushion on the next Middle Tennessee possession and neither team scored for the ensuing three minutes.

When neither team was able to find the bottom of the net, Kortni Jones capitalized on a Shay Scott turnover to bury an eight-foot floater along the baseline to increase the lead to a half-dozen, 55-49, with 1:27 left on the clock.

Again, both teams struggled to score, but Jane Morrill spotted up from behind the 3-point arc and drained her second triple, and only the Red Wolves' second, to cut the deficit in half, 55-52, with 38 seconds to play. When Jordyn Luffman's 3-point attempt rimmed out, Arkansas State had one final chance. However, Morrill's pass, instead of another long-range shot, was stolen by Anne Marie Lanning and the Sun Belt's top foul shooter sealed the win with two free throws and just 2.4 seconds



remaining.

Jones paced the Blue Raiders with 13 points, including a team-high equaling three 3-pointers. Luffman and Lanning finished with 11 and 10, respectively, while freshman Ebony Rowe tallied her ninth career double-double with 11 points and a team-best 10 rebounds.

Lanning handed out seven assists and swiped five steals to go along with her points, which moves her within 20 of the 1,000-point plateau.

Scott topped the Red Wolves with a double-double of her own, tallying 10 points and a game-best 12 rebounds. Morrill captured game-high scoring honors with 15 points, while McDowell and Jazmine Taylor added 11 and 10, respectively, as both teams had four players reach double figures.

Middle Tennessee used an 8-0 run, started by a pair of KeKe Stewart layups, to take the lead at 14-9 and never looking back before Shay Scott went to the hoop for the Red Wolves' first basket in over three minutes at 11:40. Arkansas State had taken an early edge behind a pair of Scott short jumpers despite 3-pointers to start the Blue Raider scoring by Jones and Luffman.

After Scott's third bucket, Breanna Ellison pulled the Red Wolves within one, 14-13, but Elie netted her second-straight layup to push the margin back to three. Again Scott cut the deficit to one, but back-to-back triples by Lanning helped Middle Tennessee (14-4, 5-0 Sun Belt) regain a seven-point advantage, 22-15, with 7:48 left in the opening 20 minutes.

During the next five minutes, Rowe added a free throw and layup, Luffman buried a jumper just inside the 3-point arc and Jones drained a trey to push the Blue Raider edge to 30-18, as McDowell tallied the first Arkansas State (10-9, 3-3 Sun Belt) field goal in nearly seven minutes at 3:25.

Morrill scored to cut the margin back to 10, but as the Red Wolves attempted to slice it to eight in the waning seconds, Middle Tennessee came away with a steal and Lanning pushed the ball ahead to Jones underneath the far basket for a layup. She hit her shot just before the halftime horn and send the Blue Raiders into the break on top by a dozen, 32-20.

Arkansas State came out of intermission missing its first eight shots, including five straight during the first possession, but the only MT points during the first four minutes came on an old-fashioned three-point play by Rowe at 18:57. NeNe Hurst, Taylor and McDowell each posted buckets for the Red Wolves during the early stretch, trimming the difference to eight, 35-27, at the 15:36 mark.

The lead continued to dwindle as Scott, Jazmine Taylor and Morrill made it a three-point contest, 36-33, as the 14-minute mark was elapsed. Middle Tennessee's outside shooters regained their touch and three straight 3-pointers, a pair from Luffman bookending one by Jones, helped the Blue Raiders increase the edge back to 10, 45-35, with 11:44 to go.

Again, however, Arkansas State made a run, notching 10 of the next 14 points, including its first 3-pointer at the top of the key by Morrill, to pull itself within four, 49-45, with just 7:48 left. The lone MT points during the four minutes came on a pair of Rowe layups before the final stretch.

Middle Tennessee's week will begin from 6-7 p.m. Monday when the third installment of Rick Insell Live! is held at Coach's Grill in Murfreesboro. The Blue Raiders will also play two games during the next seven days, starting at 7 p.m. Wednesday when they play host to Troy inside the Murphy

Center before welcoming Denver to town at Noon Sunday for another Sun Belt Network game of the week.

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