Division clinched as Blue Raiders don pink uniforms

Third-straight outright East Division crown

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee women's basketball locked up the Sun Belt's East Division with a 66-52 victory over FIU Saturday evening while wearing special pink uniforms as part of the WBCA Pink Zone initiative inside the Murphy Center in Murfreesboro, Tenn. The Blue Raiders' win ensures them of at least a top-two seed in the upcoming Sun Belt Tournament, where they will receive a bye into the quarterfinals after sealing the third-straight outright division title.

Middle Tennessee (21-5, 12-1 Sun Belt) made sure the same situation that occurred against the Panthers the first time the two teams met this season did not repeat itself, as it jumped out to an early lead and never looked back in improving to 11-1 at home this season, including a perfect 7-0 in league action. FIU remains the only conference foe to knock off the Blue Raiders this year.

Freshman Ebony Rowe led MT with her 14th double-double of the campaign, and eighth in league play, with game highs of 22 points and 13 rebounds. She added two of the team's blocked shots, a pair of steals and an assist in 34 minutes, while connecting on 4-of-5 free throws and nine field goals. Her five free throw attempts gives her 176 on the year, breaking Priscilla Robinson's 1990-91

freshman single-season school record of 174.

Sophomore Kortni Jones was the only other Blue Raider to reach double figures, tallying 15 points, all from behind the arc as she hit a career-best tying five 3-pointers. Her first trey provided the first Middle Tennessee points of the game and came from nearly 30 feet, while her last triple, at the 8:23 mark of the second half, was a one-handed, shove towards the hoop with her right hand, as the shot clock was set to expire from 35 feet away. She also tied senior Anne Marie Lanning with a game-best equaling seven assists.

Other notable performances came from freshman Jordyn Luffman (eight points, seven rebounds, three steals), sophomore Icelyn Elie (seven points, six rebounds) and freshman KeKe Stewart (six points, six rebounds).

Fanni Hutlassa paced the Panthers with 18 points and 10 rebounds, as she drained five 3-pointers. Michelle Gonzalez joined her in double figures with 11 points, while Jerica Coley added seven points and nine rebounds.

The Blue Raiders quickly jumped out to a 21-8 edge as Luffman scored five-straight points, including a trey in the corner, to force a FIU (12-15, 7-6 Sun Belt) timeout at 13:12. Rowe and Elie combined for 10 points during the stretch.

After Hutlassa kept it a 13-point difference with a triple at 10:19, Jones answered with her second in as many Middle Tennessee possessions to ignite a 9-2 run during the next two minutes, capped by four-straight Rowe points, to push the margin to 20, 35-15, with 8:29 remaining in the period.

The Panthers clawed their way back to trim the gap to 14, as Hutlassa buried back-to-back 3-pointers, sandwiched around a pair of Rowe free throws, for a 37-23 MT edge with 4:49 left. Stewart knocked down one free throw each on a pair of trips to the line before Luffman recorded a trey and Lanning added one just before the halftime buzzer to build a 22-point, 45-23, cushion at the break on an 8-0 run.

Hutlassa opened the second stanza with another triple but then Rowe tallied six of the next eight Blue Raider points, while holding FIU without a point over a near-three minute stretch, to increase the deficit to a game-high 27, 53-26, with 17:31 left.

Again, the Panthers worked their way back on the strength of a 12-0 spurt, covering the next three minutes, as four different players contributed points to pull within 15, 53-38. Finally, at 14:14, Middle Tennessee broke the drought with an Elie free throw and would push the advantage back to 23, 63-40, on Jones' miracle 3-pointer with 8:23 to go.

FIU mounted an offensive surge down the stretch, outscoring the Blue Raiders 12-3, and holding Middle Tennessee to only six points the final 12:18, to decide the final margin.

The Blue Raiders return to the road for a two-game set and their final away contests of the season. Middle Tennessee will open the pair of games at 5:15 p.m. Thursday in Troy, Ala., against Troy, before traveling to Little Rock, Ark., for a 1 p.m. tip with West Division leader UALR as part of the Sun Belt Network TV package.

Fans are also reminded of the next-to-last installment of Rick Insell Live! from 6-7 p.m. Monday at

Coach's Grill. The weekly radio show features the Blue Raider head coach with Dick Palmer and special guests.

Middle Tennessee Postgame Quotes
Head Coach Rick Insell

We scored, what, six points in the last six, eight, 11 minutes, something like that. That is pitiful, pitiful. They outscored us and out-rebounded us in the second half. We missed 19 shots in the paint, inside of four feet, in the second half. Ebony missed 10 and Ice missed nine, and none of them were outside of four foot. We have got to do better than that, and our posts have been playing better than that. We have got to finish. Ebony got a double-double, but if she hits her shots, she gets 30-something points tonight. They were a little taller, but we were shying away. We did not do as good a job as we should have.

On the start of the game
Really and truly, our defense the first half did a good job. We let Hutlassa get outside for three threes in the first half, and she is the best 3-point shooter in the conference, percentage wise. We lost her and she buried them. You take those three shots, nine points, so they end up with 14 points in the first half, so our defense did a good job. I thought we executed good. Kortni came out and hit those threes, that opened up and gave Ebony some room inside.

We needed a start like that. We have got a good basketball team, but a game is played in two halves. We did not play a good second half.

I know we have won 21 games with this bunch, and I need to be satisfied, and I am satisfied, and very happy to have them and happy to coach them. But if we are planning on taking this thing to the next level, we cannot have lapses like that. We have to do a better job of playing an overall game. You have to give them credit, they did not quit. They have got a pretty good basketball team. I have tried to tell people that. That is the first game they have lost in six games.

The Sun Belt Conference is going to be interesting. You do not know how anybody is going to end up right now. You could not guess who is going to be second, third, fourth, fifth. There is not going to be an easy bracket. The first game that we have to play down there, we are going to have to play. The second game we are going to play again, and the next game is the championship game. It is going to be an interesting tournament.

On less turnovers
Kortni had three turnovers in the second half, and all three of them came from her trying to do something she should not have tried to do. Same with Ebony passing the ball. All her turnovers came when she tried to pass the ball out, when she should have gone on and finished. We should have finished the game with nine turnovers. But 13 is not bad, I will take that.

Troy has gotten better. They almost beat this bunch (FIU). They had them down by four with two minutes to go. It will not be an easy game going into Troy Thursday night. We are going to have to play well to beat them down there.

On recent play of Jordyn Luffman
Jordyn Luffman is getting better every day. She had seven rebounds, eight points and three steals. What can you say. She can shoot the ball as good as anybody we have got. We do not get near as many shots as we need to. I would like to get eight or nine more shots a game out of her.

Sophomore Kortni Jones
I was extremely hyped for this game, especially with it being Pink Zone, with it being our home floor and the fact they beat us down at FIU. As the point guard, I had to step it up a little bit so my team could get into it, and try to get up on them like they did on us.

On the last 3-pointer
To be honest, all I told myself was at least hit the rim so the shot clock does not go off. Then when I realized I could not even shoot it, and I had to throw it one-armed, I knew it was going to go out of bounds. Then, I got to looking, and I was like 'hold on, hold on', and then it went in. I had no idea it was even going to come close.

When we went down there (FIU), we were a very unfocused team, especially at the start of the game. They made a lot of shots, we missed a lot of quick shots and I think we kind of got down on ourselves when we looked up at the scoreboard and it was 19-1. So we just wanted to show ourselves and our fans that we were a better team than what we put on down at FIU.

Freshman Ebony Rowe
Before the game, Coach said he wanted everybody to play with emotion tonight. I was so proud of all of us. I think we all showed a lot of pride in Middle Tennessee, and that is why we can out so strong offensively. We were running our plays, defensively, we were not even letting them get into their play sets. I give credit to all my teammates because we came out and really executed well in the beginning.

On the second half
I am not going to rely on the young team thing because we are not a young team anymore. I gave that up. That was just our focus, and that is something we have been working on is staying focused in the second half. And I think we have gotten better and we have been able to get back in it. We have just got to keep working on getting focused that second half, even if we have a lead at halftime and act like it is 0-0.

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