

Blue Raiders close out regular season with win

Sun Belt Tournament field unveiled

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[2011 Sun Belt Tournament Bracket](#)

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee rebounded from a tough setback a week ago to claim a 64-56 victory Sunday afternoon over rival Western Kentucky inside the Murphy Center in Murfreesboro, Tenn. The Blue Raider win on Senior Day ensures them of at least a share of the Sun Belt's top record, a bye in the upcoming conference tournament and provides the seventh-straight win in the series.

Middle Tennessee (23-6, 14-2 Sun Belt) extended its home league regular-season winning streak to 31, having only lost once on its own floor in head coach Rick Insell's six years. Sunday's triumph was celebrated with seniors Anne Marie Lanning and Emily Queen making their final appearances inside the building, with Lanning raising her record to 53-5 inside the Murphy Center throughout her career, including high school.

Lanning closed her home career in style, leading all players with 23 points, including a game-high two 3-pointers and a career-best 11-of-13 at the foul line. She added three assists and three steals in playing all 40 minutes for the 17th time this season. Unfortunately for Queen, an injury ended her career prematurely, but the pair, along with manager Jacob Baum, was honored in a postgame ceremony.



Joining Lanning in double figures were freshman Ebony Rowe and sophomore Icelyn Elie with 16 and 14 points, respectively. Rowe hauled in a team-high 13 rebounds for her 15th double-double of the campaign and ninth against conference competition. Elie nearly posted a double-double of her own with nine boards, as the tandem helped the Blue Raiders win the battle on the glass, 40-to-35.

Arnika Brown led the Lady Toppers with 21 points and a game-best 14 caroms. Amy McNear was the only other Western Kentucky (12-16, 9-7 Sun Belt) player to reach double-digit scoring with 11, while handing out five assists.

The two teams traded buckets throughout the first three minutes with a pair of Brown layups giving WKU a slim, 4-2 edge, before Lanning went to the foul line for the first time where she hit both to force the second tie at 16:56. A missed opportunity for the Lady Toppers resulted in Rowe grabbing a Kortni Jones miss and sticking the put-back to give MT the lead and it would never look back.

LaTeira Owens kept it a two-point difference, 10-8, two minutes later but the back-end make of a two-shot free throw situation by Lanning ignited a 7-0 spurt during the next two minutes, as the Blue Raiders built a 17-8 cushion at the 12:24 mark. An old-fashioned three-point play from Lanning and another layup by Rowe saw the lead swell to 10, 22-12, with 9:18 to go.

Vanessa Obafemi ended a three-minute slump for Western Kentucky and a pair of Brown jumpers trimmed the margin to four, 22-18, at 6:25. However, Rowe, Lanning and freshman KeKe Stewart each answered to again made it a 10-point advantage, 28-18, with just 3:51 left. The Lady Toppers kept fighting and would pull within six down the stretch, including the final time on a Hope Brown 3-pointer with 13 seconds remaining to decide the halftime score, 33-27, in favor of Middle Tennessee.

Elie then stepped behind the arc and drained her first triple since a pair against James Madison Dec. 12 to open the second half. Four-straight Western Kentucky points sliced the gap to three, 36-33, but the Blue Raiders would counter with an 8-2 run to widen it to nine, 44-35, with 11:20 to play.

The Lady Toppers continued to battle and pulled within six two times over the course of the next three minutes before Middle Tennessee was able to stretch its lead to a game-high 11, 54-43, on an Elie jumper at the 4:50 mark. Western Kentucky answered with a 7-0 spurt, five of which were scored by Arnika Brown, to make it a four-point difference, 54-50, just over a minute later. It would be as close as the Lady Toppers would get the rest of the game, as Tina Stewart hit a momentum-changing 3-pointer on the next possession. The Blue Raiders pushed their lead to as high as eight four more times, including the final score on a pair of Tina Stewart charity tosses.

Rowe broke a pair of single-season school freshman class records on the afternoon, giving her four this year. She became the new standard holder for points with 502, eclipsing the 488 by Priscilla Robinson in 1990-91. Rowe also surpassed Jonelda Buck's 1995-96 mark of 192 field goals made, raising the record to 196.

Jones moved within one of the sophomore single-season class standard for assists with 152, just shy of the 153 set by Jessica McClure in 1999-2000.

Middle Tennessee will aim for its third-straight Sun Belt Tournament crown when it begins play as the top seed out of the East Division at Noon Sunday at Summit Arena in Hot Springs, Ark. The Blue Raiders will face either the No. 4 seed from the West Division, Arkansas State, or the No. 5 seed out of the East Division, Florida Atlantic in their first game. Those two teams are set to matchup at 12:15

p.m. Saturday.

Middle Tennessee Postgame Quotes **Head Coach Rick Insell**

Western played hard, they just would not quit and they played harder than they have played the last couple of years. I do not know if they are better, but they played harder. Our kids hit a shot or two down the stretch that we needed to, and then Anne Marie and Tina finished it up on some free throws. Ebony and Icelyn missing those free throws did not help us with the momentum.

On not being able to get the ball to Rowe as easily in the second half

They made some adjustments. They did a good job, and we did not make any adjustments. We felt like we had to get the ball to Ebony, but a couple of times we did not make good passes, or we did not meet the ball. I will have to look at the ball and see.

They (the Lady Toppers) got the ball inside, they are very aggressive, they are very athletic and they gave us a lot of problems. They go to the boards hard, and when you have got that combination, it is tough inside, particularly on freshmen and sophomores. We played a good game, we shot 42 percent, we got 40 rebounds, but we missed 10 free throws and that is not like us.

Game plan down the stretch

I wanted the ball in Anne Marie's hands at the end, she hit 11-of-13 free throws. She is a winner, and so is Emily Queen. I wish we could have had her. I felt like her coming in with these young people, with her toughness and basketball IQ, it would have made us that much better as a team. She is able to defend from the perimeter and then go to the boards hard, which is what we have missed this year.

On Icelyn Elie

When Ice comes to play, we usually win. When she does not come to play, like last Sunday, we usually lose. Today she got 14 points and nine rebounds, and we will take that. But she also made a big turnover when she did not get the ball back to Kortni, and Kortni fouled out. Part of that was Kortni's fault for not coming to get the ball, and Ice's fault for throwing it up like she did. We will have to work on those things.

Senior Anne Marie Lanning

On her last game in Murphy Center

It was a memorable one, one that I will never forget. Coach said before the game that we needed to make this game a memorable game, and not just for me, but for all of us, and we knew we had something on the line, and we went out and fought and battled all the way to the end. We will make some mistakes, but we never give up, and I think that is great, and a good characteristic of our team. We will critique those mistakes this week in practice and get ready for the tournament.

On Tina Stewart's 3-pointer

That was huge. She came out and just knocked it down and put us up seven. That was one of the biggest momentum changers that we had. They she came down and hit her free throws. She just played a big role in the game and I was very proud of her.

We are off for two days, and we get to rest our bodies, which is very important, then come in on Wednesday and go at it. It is anybody's game now. Our conference is one of the tops in the nation,

so it is going to come down to a battle at the end. I have been there before, but they have not, so it is important that we all believe that we are a great team, and that we can go out there, and come home with the championship.

On moving to point guard when Kortni fouled out

At first, I did not realize that Kortni had fouled out, then I realized that I had to be point guard. I knew that it was really important to get down the floor, and into our offense, and just rotate the ball because we were up, and we wanted to pass the ball around, and just use the clock as much as we could.

Freshman Ebony Rowe

On Western taking MT out of its game

I am not sure it was what they were doing, so much as what we did not do. Part of that is my fault for not working as hard as I should have. They took us a little out of our game the second half, but I was proud of our team for re-evaluating the situation and holding on to our lead.

Western Kentucky Postgame Quotes

Head Coach Mary Taylor Cowles

Opening Statement

Give credit where credit is due, obviously to Middle, but I think we can go back to this tape and really learn. There were some critical things that I think we made mistakes on that with Middle you just simply cannot. Early on in the first half, we let their posts get second and third chances and throughout the game, we did not necessarily defend the 3-point line great. We did ok but just like the three that (Tina) Stewart hit there when we cut it to four and had made a really, really good effort, we just cannot have those kind of letdowns. Pretty critical mistakes that obviously a team like them, they are going to capitalize on.

Sun Belt Conference Women's Championship Seeds

East Division

1. Middle Tennessee (14-2, .875)
2. FIU (10-6, .625)
3. Western Kentucky (9-7, .562)
4. South Alabama (8-8, .500)
5. Florida Atlantic (4-12, .250)
6. Troy (2-14, .125)

West Division

1. UALR (13-2, .867)*
2. Denver (11-5, .688)
3. ULM (9-7, .562)^
4. Arkansas State (9-7, .562)^
5. Louisiana (4-12, .250)
6. North Texas (2-13, .133)*

*UALR and North Texas will play Tuesday, March 1 in the final Sun Belt regular season game. That game will not change the tournament seeding.

^ULM and Arkansas State both have 9-7 records. However, ULM owns the head-to-head tiebreaker having defeated Arkansas State twice during the regular season.

Sun Belt Conference Women's Championship Schedule

First Round

- Game 1: (E3) Western Kentucky vs. (W6) North Texas - 12:00 p.m. - Summit Arena
- Game 2: (E5) Florida Atlantic vs. (W4) Arkansas State - 12:15 p.m. - Convention Center Court
- Game 3: (E6) Troy vs. (W3) ULM - 2:15 p.m. - Summit Arena
- Game 4: (E4) South Alabama vs. (W5) Louisiana - 2:30 p.m. - Convention Center Court

Quarterfinals

- Game 5: (E1) Middle Tennessee vs. Winner Game 2 - 12:00 p.m. - Summit Arena
- Game 6: (W2) Denver vs. Winner Game 1 - 12:15 p.m. - Convention Center Court
- Game 7: (W1) UALR vs. Winner Game 4 - 2:15 p.m. - Summit Arena
- Game 8: (E2) FIU vs. Winner Game 3 - 2:30 p.m. - Convention Center Court

Semifinals

- Game 9: Winner Game 5 vs. Winner Game 6 - 12:00 p.m. (Sun Belt Network) - Summit Arena
- Game 10: Winner Game 7 vs. Winner Game 8 - 2:30 p.m. (Sun Belt Network) - Summit Arena

Championship Game

- Game 11: Winner Game 9 vs. Winner Game 10 - 1:00 p.m. (ESPNU) - Summit Arena

All times Central (CT) and subject to change

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