Second half comeback lifts Lady Lions past Blue Raiders

MT was on top for first 31 minutes of the game

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UNIVERSITY PARK, Pa. – Middle Tennessee maintained the lead at halftime and through the first 11 minutes of the second half, but No. 12/14 Penn State held the Blue Raiders scoreless over the final 8:29 to mount a come-from-behind 65-49 women's basketball victory Sunday afternoon in the championship of the Lady Lion Classic. Preseason All-Sun Belt selections Ebony Rowe and Icelyn Elie paced Middle Tennessee with a double-double apiece. Rowe tallied 12 points and added a game-best 13 rebounds, while Elie contributed a team-high tying 13 points to go along with her 10 boards before fouling out with two minutes left. Kortni Jones matched Elie's offensive output on the strength of hitting one-half of the team's six 3-pointers. Zhaque Gray led Penn State with 15 points, one more than the reigning Big 10 Freshman of the Year Maggie Lucas' 14. Lucas hit three of the Nittany Lions' five triples, all in the second half, while Gray drained the other pair. Ariel Edwards added 10 points to match the Blue Raiders with three players in double figures. Mia Nickson and Nikki Green each hauled in 10 caroms to help PSU win the rebounding battle, 50-40. The Blue Raiders again started with a flurry, jumping out to a 12-2 lead at the first media timeout at 15:56. Elie knocked down the game's first bucket, a 3-pointer, and added a jumper before Rowe poured in the next four. Stewart hit a top-of-the-key triple at 16:57 to cap a 10-0 spurt during a three-minute span. The Lady Lions got into their offensive groove after the timeout, scoring the next four,

three at the foul line, to pull within four, 12-8. Ajanaku halted the run with a 12-footer before Jones buried a 3-pointer to push MT back on top by seven, 17-10, with 11:43 left. Coming out of the timeout, Elie hit a pair of free throws to increase the margin to nine, but Penn State (2-0) tallied nine of the next 11 points, including a power-drive old-fashioned three-point play from Ariel Edwards at 8:00 to trim the deficit to two, 21-19. A pair of Bentley charity tosses knotted the score at 21 apiece but again Middle Tennessee would not let PSU take the lead. Elie hit a baseline jumper before Zhaque Gray answered to tie the game again at 23-23 with 5:08 to play in the period. Cason intercepted a pass at her own 3-point arc and raced to the other end, only to be fouled by Bentley. The Blue Raider rookie knocked down both free throws and Elie added another close-range jumper to make it a four-point difference, 27-23, with 3:14 to go. The two teams traded free throws but Rowe's basket at 1:33 and a pair of Jones knockdowns from the foul line helped MT take a 32-26 edge into the halftime intermission, with the lone Penn State basket coming via Bentley in the final five seconds. The Nittany Lions opened the second stanza with Lucas connecting on her first 3-pointer, also the team's first of the game, at 19:45 before a Gray jumper closed them within one, 32-21. However, Jones warmed up again from the outside, draining a pair of triples over the next two minutes and Stewart contributed one of her own at 15:38 to push the Middle Tennessee (1-1) advantage to 10, 41-31. Edwards would hit the next two Penn State baskets to cut the deficit to six, 41-35, but Rowe grabbed a layup to make it an eight-point margin, 43-35, with 12:22 left. Gizelle Studevent hit a pair of jumpers over the next three minutes, while Rowe kept the Blue Raiders ahead, 45-43, with 9:19 on the clock. After Middle Tennessee could not convert on the offensive end, Lucas hit a 3-pointer in transition to give the Lady Lions their first lead, 46-45, at the 8:50 mark. However, Jones drove into the lane and put the Blue Raiders back on top by one on the ensuing possession. Rowe then hit a pair of free throws to increase the MT lead back to three, 49-46, with 7:04 left, but on the next Penn State possession, Gray drained a triple to force the third tie. The 3-pointer ignited a 19-0 streak to close the game, as Middle Tennessee missed its final eight looks at the basket. Sophomore Janay Brinkley earned her first career start Sunday, finishing with four rebounds, three assists and two steals in 24 minutes. The Blue Raiders will return to action when they play host to South Dakota State inside the historic Murphy Center at 7 p.m. Thursday. Tickets for the contest are available by calling 1-888-YES-MTSU or logging onto GoBlueRaiders.com.

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