

Middle Tennessee overcomes sloppy effort to pull out home win

Elie leads Blue Raiders with 22 points

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. –

Middle Tennessee committed 25 turnovers but also forced 25 by South Dakota State to hold on for a 59-49 victory in the home women's basketball opener Thursday night inside the historic Murphy Center. The Blue Raiders used an early advantage to claim the lead and then never surrendered it despite the sloppy play by both teams.

Junior Icelyn Elie, a Preseason All-Sun Belt Second Team honoree, led the Middle Tennessee (2-1) offense with 22 points on 7-of-8 field goals and 8-of-8 free throws. She added a team-high tying three steals and the squad's only blocked shot to her game-best matching eight rebounds in 28 minutes.

Classmate Kortni Jones also provided the Blue Raiders with an offensive target, knocking

down a pair of 3-pointers among her five field goals to finish with 16 points. Preseason Sun Belt co-Player of the Year Ebony Rowe was held to just six points, her career low, and just the second time she has not reached double-figure scoring. It snaps a streak of 30 consecutive double-digit point games for Rowe, who was previously contained to nine at Arkansas Nov. 21, 2010, also that season's third contest.

Jennie Sunnarborg topped the Jackrabbits with 10 points, as they struggled from behind the 3-point arc by hitting just 1-of-12 as a team. Leah Dietel added nine points to the attack, while Sunnarborg and Katie Lingle shared team-high rebounding honors with five apiece.



South Dakota State (2-1) jumped out to a 2-0 lead on an Ashley Eide layup nearly two minutes in, but after Elie tied the score a minute later and then added another bucket at 16:38 to give MT a 4-2 lead, the Blue Raiders never trailed again. The Lebanon, Tenn., native would eventually pour in the first eight Middle Tennessee points during the initial six minutes, building an 8-2 cushion.

A 5-1 SDSU run, capped by a Lingle layup at 10:07, closed the score within two, 9-7. The visitors stayed within two points before Jones nailed five consecutive for the Blue Raiders, including a 3-pointer, and freshman Shanice Cason drained a triple of her own for an 8-2 streak covering just over two minutes.

Jill Young attempted to keep the Jackrabbits within reasonable distance, pulling her team to a five-point deficit, 23-18, following a steal and layup at the 3:35 mark. However, Cason would convert a pair of free throws and later add her second trey at 1:36 to send Middle Tennessee into the intermission ahead 10, 28-18.

The cushion swelled to a dozen within the second half's opening minute on a pair of Elie free throws but would dip to eight, 31-23, when Megan Waytashek hit the lone South Dakota State 3-pointer of the night with 17:16 left.

Elie quickly built the advantage back to 12 over the next minute but again the Jackrabbits clawed within eight following jumpers from Dietel and Sunnarborg. The Blue Raiders maintained at least the eight-point edge over the next seven minutes, even pushing it back to 12, 48-36, on another Jones trey on her third consecutive attempt from long range at the 6:24 mark.

Dietel and Hannah Strop then took turns pouring in three points each for South Dakota State and Steph Paluch added a pair of charity tosses to ignite a 9-0 Jackrabbit run over the next three minutes to pull them within three, 48-45, with 3:43 remaining.

Rowe then helped push the advantage back to seven, 54-47, on her only two field goals, but Eide kept SDSU within five, 54-49, as the clock ticked under two minutes. Following a Rowe steal, sophomore Janay Brinkley drained a corner 3-pointer at the 1:41 mark to spark a 5-0 MT run to close the game.

Middle Tennessee will return to the road for its next game, a 1 p.m. Central start Sunday, at James Madison in Harrisonburg, Va.

Middle Tennessee Postgame Quotes:

HEAD COACH RICK INSELL

That was a big shot that Janay (Brinkley) knocked down for us, and that was a big rebound that Laken Leonard got for us at the end. It took chances away from them, and that's what we needed. We didn't shoot the ball well, we didn't react well to a lot of things, but give South Dakota State credit. They did a good job, they had us scouted and they took a lot of things away from us. They are smart, and they made us think every possession.

On Ebony Rowe

She battled. It was one of those games that she wasn't having a good game. She had four attempts all night, so what does that tell you? We knew they did a good job closing the center off, and we

were going to slash more, and Ice was able to make some big shots. It was one of those games that we battled and won. That's the bottom line. It didn't look good, and there is going to be some of them, but we won this one.

One of the things I liked was with about 10 minutes to go, we were struggling and we didn't quit. There was a time or two when we wanted to have a 'pity party', but we jumped out of it and came back.

We had a couple of young kids step up. With our team like it is right now, we need young kids like Laken and Janay stepping up and making plays because once you make a play, it's a little easier next time to make a play. They stepped up and make a play and I'm proud for them.

We had some good plays on defense and were able to create some turnovers, but we didn't handle the ball well. We were a little lax with the ball. And at half court, we got a little tired and let them slip back door on us, and that's nothing but fatigue right there.

James Madison will be the same type of game. They are a little bigger inside, but it will be the same type game up there Sunday afternoon.

On what team can improve on

We've got to do a better job passing the ball. Our interior passing was atrocious. We have to do a better job of recognizing change. We know what we need to do but we need to communicate better.

On Molly McFadden

Molly came in and gave us some enthusiasm and excitement and passion. She played hard and she didn't hurt us. It kinda fired the other girls up to see Molly come off the bench with kind of attitude. We were lucky to get by without Ice as long as she sat on the bench that first half.

KORTNI JONES

On reacting the SDSU's zone defense

I know that I didn't react very well myself. It wasn't something that we expected them to do. They had not played it the whole year and didn't play it against us last year. It definitely was frustrating and obviously my shooting wasn't as accurate as I had hoped. I tried to stay focused and to knock down at least one to keep us in a comfortable position. Then Janay stepped up and took a nice three for us.

On playing SDSU

Fundamentally, they are by far one of the best teams we have on our schedule, but it's good to play teams like that because you are likely to see it again down the road. What makes it so frustrating is that they are so smart, so when you get out there, you know that they know what you are doing, and where you are going with the ball.

ICELYN ELIE

On stepping up tonight

In the past two days of practice, coach has been trying to find that leader that he's been looking for. I think we have three or four players that can take that lead, but sometimes you have to have that one player that can step up.

On getting eight of the team's first nine points, then sitting the rest of the half with three fouls

It was very frustrating. It's hard sitting there watching the game, knowing that you should be out there helping your team. When I got back in in the second half, I played a little bit smarter.

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