Blue Raiders roll over Golden Eagles in Wednesday victory

MT wins seventh straight in series

November 23, 2011 · Athletic Communications

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. – Middle Tennessee used a 12-2 run early in the first half to pull away and never look back, as it claimed a 74-55 victory over Tennessee Tech in non-conference women's basketball action Wednesday night inside the historic Murphy Center in Murfreesboro, Tenn. The win marked the Blue Raiders' seventh straight in the long-time series, which was played for the 74th time Wednesday.

Preseason co-Sun Belt Player of the Year Ebony Rowe paced the Middle Tennessee (3-2) offensive output with a game-high 20 points, including 8-of-10 field goals. She added a team-best eight rebounds, three blocked shots, two assists and two steals.

Junior Kortni Jones was the only other Blue Raider to reach double figures, pouring in 15 points, 12 of which came from behind the 3-point arc, to go along with her game-best five assists and seven steals.

Middle Tennessee forced 33 Golden Eagle turnovers, including a dozen by Tacarra Hayes despite her double-double effort of 14 points and 10 rebounds to top the visitors.

Hayes opened the game with the first points just six seconds after Tennessee Tech (2-3) secured the tip and then added a pair of free throws 30 seconds later to give TTU an early 4-0 edge. The Blue Raiders would then rally to score six of the next eight points, capped by a Rowe layup at 17:39

to force the game's only tie.

The Golden Eagles responded with a pair of Kylie Cook free throws for an 8-6 advantage, but Jones countered with her first 3-pointer on the next Middle Tennessee possession to put her team on top, 9-8. The trey ignited the 12-2 run, which featured a steal by freshman Shanice Cason and her converting an uncontested layup at the other end with 14:31 left.

Another Jones triple made it an 18-10 contest before back-to-back Rowe layups increased the margin to double digits for the first time at 22-12 with 9:44 remaining. Rowe's old-fashioned three-point play at 8:07 push the edge to 14, 29-15, and Tennessee Tech remained down by at least 10 the remainder of the period.

Sophomore Laken Leonard, who earned her first start of her collegiate career, drained her second of two first-half 3-pointers at the 1:07 mark to increase the cushion to 14, 41-27, before the teams alternated hitting free throws down the stretch and MT took a 44-29 lead into the break.

Hayes again scored quickly to begin the second half, needing only nine seconds, but a pair of Leonard free throws kept it a 15-point difference with 19:07 to play. Hayes then tallied six of her team's next eight points in an 8-0 run to bring the Golden Eagles within seven, 46-39, at the 12:37 mark.

Middle Tennessee, however, did not wilt and used a 9-0 spurt, including a pair of buckets from sophomore KeKe Stewart to push the lead back to 16, 55-39, with just under 10 minutes on the clock. After Candace Parson stopped the drought, another Stewart jumper with exactly three minutes to play capped an 11-2 surge and putting the Blue Raiders ahead, 69-46.

Sophomore Janay Brinkley knocked down a corner 3-pointer with 1:51 left then turned up the intensity defensively with a steal and subsequent layup 30 seconds later to give Middle Tennessee its largest lead of the evening at 26, 74-48.

Tennessee Tech scored the final seven points, five of which came at the foul line, to decide the final outcome.

Leonard tied her career-best output with eight points, while grabbing a career-high three caroms, making two 3-pointers and dishing three assists in a career-best 35 minutes.

Redshirt freshman Stephanie Myers made her collegiate debut for the Blue Raiders, playing the final minute.

The game also marked the 200th in the collegiate career for MT head coach Rick Insell, who increased his win total to 151 with the triumph.

Middle Tennessee hits the road for its next two contests, starting at 12:30 p.m. Saturday in Johnson City, Tenn., against ETSU. The Blue Raiders then travel to Knoxville, Tenn., for a 7 p.m. Tuesday meeting with No. 6/7 Tennessee live on SportSouth (Comcast channel 26 local).

Both games will be carried on the Blue Raider Network (WMOT, 89.5; WGNS, 1450 AM, 100.5 FM, 101.9 FM) with Dick Palmer handling play-by-play.

Middle Tennessee Postgame Quotes

HEAD COACH RICK INSELL:
I was real proud of them tonight. We had a good game plan, we stuck to it early, then we got down, and came back, took the lead, went to the boards. Icelyn Elie was going to the boards hard in the first half, and in the second half, we got some good play from KeKe (Stewart).

On not scoring in first seven minutes of the 2nd half
We mishandled some passes, and that's what has happened to us in some of our other games. We've gotten into a little bit of a lull, and we've got to get over that. Basically what we need to do is go to the block, get the ball to Ebony and let her go in there and get them in foul trouble and get some three-point plays. That's what got us out of it, we went right back to feeding her the ball. She was able to get some fouls on them, which created some mismatches. There are some things we need to work on, we're still a young team, still trying to develop our chemistry and I'm proud of them.

We had two days of good practice when we got back from James Madison. We got beat by James Madison. They were as good as us, but they weren't better than us. They just came out and took it to us, and we didn't challenge them. That's kinda what South Dakota State did. The girls sat down and had a good talk among themselves, a lot of good came out of it, we came out and had a good day of practice. We had another good day of practice on Tuesday and had a good walk-thru today. They were ready to play tonight. We came out with a lot of emotion and a lot of excitement and that's what we gotta do.

On the development of some of the younger players
We have some more young ladies that got a chance to play tonight, but we've got a couple more that are growing up and doing some good things. You saw some good things out of Laken (Leonard) and some good things out of Janay (Brinkley). At James Madison, Dymon Raynor came in and gave us a good two minutes, but she's got to be more aggressive. Lauren March is a great shooter and we have to find a place in the lineup for her. We've been working her the last couple of days at the three position just to see what we could get. Stephanie (Myers) came in tonight, and had three turnovers when she got in there, but she had a great two days of practice, blocking everything they shot. She's making those other kids better players by being as aggressive on defense as she is.

Right now, we are not where we need to be, but we don't need to be playing in mid-February form right now. We scored 74 points tonight, we beat a good basketball team and held them to 55 points, and we got a lot of room for improvement, so that's exciting.

On Laken Leonard playing 35 minutes tonight
Laken came from a program (Jackson County) that knew how to win, she had a coach (Jim Brown) that knew how to win. She was a Miss Basketball finalist. She won state championships. That's why we recruited her because she brings that to our basketball team. The last week and a half, she's been doing that. You are going to be seeing more and more of her, you're going to see more of Janay. They are just going to keep getting better and better. Jamila (Ajanaku) gave us some good minutes tonight. We've got a lot of room to improve and we are going to get better.

LAKEN LEONARD:
My whole hometown was here to watch me tonight, my friends and my family, my high school coach. It was a great time and I enjoyed it. I think I still have a lot of growing to do, and I still have a lot to learn, but overall, I think I did a pretty good job and stayed calm. I hit some shots I needed to and our

team pulled thru when we needed them to.

On slow start in 2nd half
Tech came out and hit some quick buckets, but we stayed calm and under control and got going again.

Printed on May 19, 2013
Original URL: http://www.goblueraiders.com/content.cfm/id/56842