Cold shooting costs Blue Raiders against Lady Vols

MT faces in-state foe for 12th time

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KNOXVILLE, Tenn. – Middle Tennessee women's basketball struggled from the floor all night, connecting on a season-low 23.8 percent and it could not overcome a first-half run by No. 8/8 Tennessee in falling, 82-43, Tuesday night inside Thompson-Boling Arena in Knoxville, Tenn. Junior Kortni Jones led the Blue Raiders with 16 points but they came via a career-high 25 field goal attempts, including 14 from long range. She was joined in double figures by sophomore Ebony Rowe, who poured in 10 points, on a team-best 5-of-8, while also grabbing a Middle Tennessee-high eight rebounds. Cierra Burdick came off the bench to pace the Lady Vols with a double-double of 14 points and 10 caroms, eight defensively. Ariel Massengale and Shekinna Stricklen provided UT with a trio in double-figure scoring, netting 14 and 12 points, respectively. Glory Johnson added nine points and nine rebounds, as Tennessee won the rebounding battle, 53-30, and shot 44.8 percent from the floor for the game, including a 59.3 percent clip during the first 20 minutes. The Blue Raiders claimed an early edge when Laken Leonard knocked down a triple from the wing at 17:46, but consecutive buckets from Stricklen, including an 18-footer at the top of the key, brought the Lady Vols back and put them on top for the first time, 6-5. Stricklen's conversions ignited a 17-0 run, which featured seven straight points, and nine of 11, by Massengale as Tennessee (3-2) pulled ahead using backcourt steals and racing to the other end for uncontested layups. The surge was

finally stopped by an Elie make at 12:48 but Taber Spani kept the Lady Vols ahead with a 3-pointer at the other end. Jones then registered the next five Middle Tennessee (4-3) points, including a scooping layup and a 3-pointer that bounced high off the rim before falling through. Another Spani triple at 9:29 gave UT a 27-16 advantage at the under-eight media timeout. The Lady Vols then used an Isabelle Harrison jumper, free throws by Meighan Simmons and a corner trey from Stricklen to help increase their margin to 16, 36-20, with 3:45 to play in the period. Back-to-back 3-pointers by Stricklen and Burdick were the start of a 12-4 spurt to close the half, as the Blue Raiders' only field goal down the stretch came via Rowe with 55 seconds left, as UT built a 48-24 advantage at the break. The opening stretches of the second half was used by Tennessee to continue to build its cushion. On the strength of an old-fashioned three-point play from Massengale and four-straight free throws, including three by Johnson, helped the Lady Vols keep up a rapid pace offensively, while shutting down the Blue Raiders on the other end. Tennessee increased its edge to 28, 58-30, by the 11:06 mark. The lead swelled to 32 within the next minute and then at 9:37, three technicals were issued after a jump-ball situation. Two of the infractions were called against the Lady Vols, and with only one against Middle Tennessee, the Blue Raiders were rewarded with a pair of charity tosses. Jones hit the second of the two-shot situation. Free throws continued to push the Lady Vols ahead, as the lead reached 35 behind a Harrison make at the 8:29 mark. Jones hit an 18-footer and Cason knocked down a pair of free ones herself with 6:24 remaining, pulling Middle Tennessee within 32, 67-35, coming out of the under-eight minute timeout. After Rowe kept the Blue Raiders at the same deficit a minute-and-a-half later, Alicia Manning was fouled on a layup and she dropped in the and-one to increase the difference back to 35, 72-37, with 4:28 to play. Jones buried another 3-pointer but before the under-four timeout, Burdick and Briana Bass with a spinning layup, helped swell the lead to 36, 76-40. Tennessee used a 6-3 run down the stretch, with only Jones hitting a triple, to help decide the final margin. Middle Tennessee will look to regroup when it begins a stretch of seven out of its next eight games at home by playing host to another SEC foe, Arkansas, at 7 p.m. Saturday inside the historic Murphy Center. The contest will be broadcast on ESPN3.com and through the Blue Raider Network of radio stations.

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