

Blue Raiders escape with win over scrappy Lady Govs

MT builds 21-point first half advantage

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. –

Middle Tennessee built a 21-point first half lead against its old Ohio Valley Conference rival Austin Peay Tuesday night, but the visiting Lady Govs clawed their way back in the second 20 minutes before the Blue Raiders held on for a 69-63 victory inside the historic Murphy Center.

Sophomore Ebony Rowe tallied her second straight, season's fifth and career's 21st double-double with 22 points and 10 rebounds to lead Middle Tennessee (5-4). She netted 19 of her points in the first half before playing only 12 minutes after the break due to foul trouble and still managed to convert 10-of-18 field goals.

Junior Kortni Jones added 17 points, including four 3-pointers, while junior Icelyn Elie came off the bench for the first time this season to record 10 to go along with eight rebounds.

Freshman Shanice Cason handed out a career-best eight assists, matching the Austin Peay team total, while also grabbing a career-high seven rebounds, as MT won the battle on the glass, 41-to-27.

The Lady Govs were led by 23 points from Whitney Hanley, who knocked down 8-of-12 field goals



and all six of her free throw attempts. Jasmine Rayner poured in 15 points and Nicole Olszewski contributed a dozen. Leslie Martinez paced Austin Peay (2-6) with six caroms.

Middle Tennessee raced out a 6-0 start on three-straight buckets by Rowe, however, the Lady Gavs answered right away to force a 6-6 tie following a Rayner layup at 11:21.

The Blue Raiders then responded with a 25-4 spurt over the next eight minutes, featuring a pair of 9-0 runs, to jump out to their largest lead of the game, 31-10, with 3:41 left. Rowe continued to be the focal point of the offense, collecting over one-half of her team's points during the stretch.

Sophomore Laken Leonard and Jones hit a 3-pointer apiece helping MT expand its cushion. Austin Peay halted the surge with a pair of Rayner free throws at the 3:01 mark and used them as momentum, outscoring the Blue Raiders 9-2 the remainder of the period to pull within 14, 33-19, at the break.

The Lady Gavs continued to push offensively during the first seven minutes of the second half, capping a 15-3 run with an old-fashioned three-point play from Olszewski at 13:03 to trim the margin to two, 36-34.

Jones then buried back-to-back 3-pointers on consecutive possessions, keeping Middle Tennessee on top, and widening the margin back to eight, 42-34, at the 12:28 mark. Layups by Rayner and Olszewski helped APSU pull within five, 44-39, but another Jones triple at 7:41 made it a double-digit difference once again, 51-41, with 7:41 to play.

Consecutive turnaround jumpers from KeKe Stewart pushed it to a 13-point edge, 57-44, with 5:18 remaining. She would then connect on a pair of charity tosses just over two minutes later as the advantage swelled to 15, 65-50.

However, Austin Peay would not go away quietly, as Shria Buley started an 11-4 game-ending run with a layup at 2:41. The Lady Gavs trimmed the deficit to five a pair of occasions down the stretch, the last coming on a Martinez jumper with 14 seconds to play, as the visitors were forced to foul in an effort to prolong the game.

The Blue Raiders return to action at 6 p.m. Central Friday when they travel to Cincinnati, Ohio, to face Xavier in the only road game of December. The contest will be broadcast on the Blue Raider Network (WMOT, 89.5 FM; WGNS, 1450 AM, 100.5 FM, 101.9 FM) with Dick Palmer on the call.

Middle Tennessee Postgame Quotes

HEAD COACH RICK INSELL:

There's pivot points in every game and we had a 20-point lead at one time, and then we didn't finish up. We started throwing the ball all over the gym, not taking our time and knocking down shot, our free throw shooting was pitiful and we had 23 turnovers. Ebony Rowe had nine turnovers.

Give Austin Peay credit. They didn't quit, they scrapped the whole night and they made some shots. We had a hand on the ball and they made some shots.

It showed me something. We played a lot of that second half without Ebony who had four fouls, and with Kortni (Jones) fouling out (with 6:19 to go) the other kids come in and knocked down some shots. Janay Brinkley hit a big shot, KeKe Stewart came back in and got us six points when we

needed them. We just don't make it easy on ourselves.

If there was a positive to come out of this game, it was that our kids played without Kortni, one of our leaders, and Ebony, another leader, and we got a win. KeKe hit three big shots, and you take them out, they win the ball game.

We missed several free throws down the stretch, and we can't do that.

EBONY ROWE:

On having 19 points in first half, but only three in 2nd half

They threw a lot more zone at us, which is designed to stop the post, and they doubled, but I got myself out of the game by getting in foul trouble. I give them some credit, but it was mostly on me.

On losing big first half lead

I think we lost focus a little bit, and again that is something we have been working on. We've been stressing playing a full 40 minutes. When this team has high intensity and high focus, we can beat anybody in the country. As soon as we let our guard down, that's when teams start making a run on us.

KORTNI JONES

On team reaction to her fouling out

I am beyond proud of how my team played without me. They didn't get down when I fouled out, and that played a big part. Janay stepped in and did a good job, she made the exact same post entries that I did, she didn't lose focus, didn't have any turnovers. She and KeKe stepped up big time, and we hit some big free throws, and that played a big part in us coming away with a win.

On hitting a couple of big shots after shooting an air ball

It wasn't just the air ball, I think I had missed six 3s by then, including the air ball. That always gets me down, it's the most frustrating thing for a shooter to have an air ball. How many shots have I put up and hit the rim and I do something like that? We had a timeout after that and Coach got on me, "How many shots are you going to miss tonight?" That fired me up and I knew it was going to be serious and that I needed to hit my next two threes. That's what really got me going on those back-to-back threes. He always gets me.

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