Blue Raider pair net career highs in tough loss to Georgia Tech

Cason, Leonard reach double figures for first time

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. – Middle Tennessee held a three-point halftime lead but could not hold on, dropping a 58-47 decision to visiting Georgia Tech in non-conference women's basketball action inside the historic Murphy Center in Murfreesboro, Tenn.

The Blue Raiders built their edge at the intermission by grabbing a five-rebound advantage against the taller Yellow Jackets. The end result on the boards was a 41-41 tie, but Middle Tennessee hauled in 18 offensive caroms to just 14 by Georgia Tech.

Sophomore Ebony Rowe led a trio of Blue Raiders in double-figure scoring with 16 points. Joining her were a pair with career highs, as freshman Shanice Cason tallied 13 points and sophomore Laken Leonard added 12 points to go along with her career-best seven rebounds.

Sasha Goodlett paced the Yellow Jackets with 15 points, 13 of which came in the second half. Mo Bennett posted a double-double of 10 points and 10 rebounds, while Tyaunna Marshall also chipped in 10 points for Georgia Tech (6-3).

Leonard's first triple gave Middle Tennessee an early 7-4 lead two minutes into the game; however, the Yellow Jackets quickly responded with a 7-0 spurt behind a pair of Metra Walthour treys to claim an 11-7 lead with 15:50 to play.

Rowe forced another deadlock at 11-11 and neither team was able to go ahead by more than three

during the next seven minutes. Then, Leonard buried her second 3-pointer and Cason capped the 9-0 run by making the second of two foul shots resulting from a Georgia Tech technical and added a layup on the ensuing possession to push the Blue Raider advantage to nine, 26-17, with 5:36 left in the opening period.

The Middle Tennessee (6-5) offense then went cold down the stretch, as an 8-0 Yellow Jacket surge closed the gap to one before Leonard sank a pair of free throws with 55 seconds left to give MT a 28-25 halftime cushion.

The two teams traded baskets to start the second frame and Cason's jumper at 16:23 provided the Blue Raiders with a 36-31 lead. Marshall ignited a 10-0 run during the next four minutes as Georgia Tech reclaimed the advantage on a pair of short-range jumpers from Chelsea Regins and Bennett for a 41-36 margin with 11:59 to play.

After Cason brought Middle Tennessee back within two on a 3-pointer, Goodlett scored four of the next points to extend GT's lead back to eight, 47-39. Rowe would add four points of her own in a six-point Blue Raider stretch, helping her team trim the deficit to two, 47-45, with 6:11 remaining.

Marshall drained a corner triple just before the shot clock expired on the next Yellow Jacket possession as Georgia Tech would close the game with an 11-2 run, as the Blue Raiders were forced to foul. The Yellow Jackets made four of the eight attempts at the charity stripe to put the game away.

Middle Tennessee will take the next week off for fall semester final exams. The Blue Raiders return to action in one week, next Sunday at 2 p.m., by playing host to former Ohio Valley Conference foe Tennessee State.

Middle Tennessee Postgame Quotes:

HEAD COACH RICK INSELL:
What can I say, we had another shot to win a big game, we just didn't do the things we needed to do down the stretch, the last four or five minutes. We gave up too many easy baskets. We knew they were big and we had to keep them off the board. We got a little bit tired. We've got to learn to fight through that wall. Right now we haven't fought through that wall yet. Everybody gets a little tired, but you've got to hit shots, to trust your offense. When you get tired, you start trying to do things mentally that you haven't tried to do all day. You make errant passes, lazy passes, you don't stick with your rules. When you get tired it affects that part of your mind, that's what happens.

On the MT bench getting outscored 17-0
We can go deeper than that but I have to learn to trust them in practice. You can't trust a player in a game. You don't come to a game and show up. You show up in practice every day. When you show up in practice and do what you need to do, that you can get into our offenses, you can box out and stuff like that, and we haven't been doing that. When they start doing that, at that point, we'll start using more of them.

On rebounding in the game
We did rebound the basketball, but still we didn't rebound when it counted, right there at the end of the game. When we go the play by play, I think you'll see that they (GT) got three or four rebounds two times in a row, and those were big possessions. At that time, we were only down three or five

points. And when we go down by five or seven, they are able to play a little freer.

On Laken Leonard and Shanice Cason getting career highs
Laken and Shanice played like we wanted them to play. They played hard. Laken had 12 points and seven rebounds. Shanice had four rebounds from the point guard position and 13 points. We can live with that. They were not at all intimidated by Georgia Tech's size.

We had a great game plan, our coaches did a good job. We did a good job of executing our game plan. We shot the ball 64 times to their 55. Of course, they had those big girls inside pushing us around. Then we got lazy and tried to do some things we can't do. That has been our M.O. this year

On Kortni Jones
Kortni is our best player and when your best player is 0-9. If she shows up like she did the other night at Xavier, it's over. She had a career high the other night (six 3-pointers), but when your best player is 0-9 it affects your whole team. That's the bottom line.

SHANICE CASON:
It was important for us not to be intimidated by their size and we weren't. They were bigger than us, but we felt like we were stronger. But at the end, them being bigger affected us a little bit. But no, we weren't intimidated at all.

On this being a big opportunity to get a quality win
Especially at home, yes. There is nothing like having a three-game winning streak, and just knowing that we can come back home and play just as well.

On shooting falling off in the 2nd half
We did get tired at the end, but we know you have to pull everything that we have in us and push on. It is late in the game and, yes, we are fatigued, but if we want to win, then we have to push on.

On being physical
I love being physical, I really do. I love to take a charge, especially in transition. Even if they do pass the ball, I still stand there and take a charge because I know that is a "stop" for us.

LAKEN LEONARD
On getting tired late
I think it is just a part of being a young team and us having to learn roles. The more we do it, the better we will get at it. I think we already have gotten a lot better at it.

On hesitating to shoot 3-point shots sometimes
It has been a huge transition for me from high school, because in high school, I was more of a slasher and a penetrator. Now in college, I feel like my role is more of a 3-point shooter, so I feel like sometimes I hesitate when I should shoot. Coach gets on me a lot about it

On banking both of her 3-pointers
Hey, it's Christmas time, the bank is open