

# Middle Tennessee escapes with hard-fought victory in conference opener

## Key first-half run sparks win against FIU

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### MURFREESBORO, Tenn. –

Middle Tennessee used a late first-half run to overcome a seven-point deficit and never looked back in picking up a 58-53 triumph over FIU Wednesday night in the Blue Raiders' Sun Belt Conference women's basketball opener inside the Murphy Center in Murfreesboro, Tenn.

Middle Tennessee (8-5, 1-0 SBC) found itself down 19-12 following a Kamika Idom jumper at 6:51 of the first half. Just over a minute later, at 5:48, the Panthers' top scorer, Jerica Coley, was plagued with her third foul and forced to sit the remainder of the period.

The Blue Raiders took advantage of her on the bench, putting together a 13-2 spurt to close the half, including a 10-0 to open the stretch, and claim a 25-21 halftime edge. MT caused eight FIU (7-5, 0-2 SBC) turnovers during the run, which concluded with a 3-pointer by sophomore Laken Leonard, an old-fashioned three-point play from classmate Ebony Rowe and a trey from junior Kortni Jones.

Rowe finished with her seventh double-double of the campaign, and 23rd of her career, with 15 points and a game-high 13 rebounds. Jones led all scorers with 18 points, including four triples,



while junior Icelyn Elie gave the Blue Raiders a trio in double-figure points with 10.

Fanni Hutlassa added a double-double of her own for the Panthers, tallying 13 points and grabbing 10 rebounds, helping her team to a 42-to-31 edge on the glass. Coley topped FIU with 17 points, 13 of which were scored in the second half, while Finda Mansare chipped in 13 points.

MT started the game with a 7-0 run, enticing the Panthers into four quick miscues in the opening two minutes and causing the game's first timeout. FIU came out of the 30-second break by scoring nine straight to garner its first lead, 9-7, behind five Hutlassa points. After freshman Shanice Cason nailed a 3-pointer to put the Blue Raiders back on top, 10-9, the Panthers used a 10-2 run to take the seven-point advantage before Coley's third foul.

Middle Tennessee held possession to start the second half and quickly located Rowe under the basket for a quick layup just three seconds into the stanza. Jones would bury two triples among her eight-straight points, the last two buckets coming on Cason assists, to push the Blue Raider advantage to 37-29 with 15:49 left.

A pair of Coley charity tosses at the 14:02 mark sliced the deficit to a half dozen, 40-34, and Carmen Miloglav pulled FIU within four, 42-38, with 10:37 remaining. The difference remained four just over a minute later following a Hutlassa tip-in, but then Jones answered with a 3-pointer on the next Middle Tennessee possession to ignite a 6-0 run and help build the lead back to 10, 50-40, with 8:02 to play.

The two teams traded baskets for the next three minutes but consecutive jumpers from Elie and Jones provided the Blue Raiders with their largest lead, 58-45, at 2:54. Eight-straight Panther points closed the game, including an Idom triple just before the buzzer, and helped decide the final outcome.

Middle Tennessee will return to action when it closes the non-conference portion of its schedule a week from tonight, at 7 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 28, when it plays host to nationally-ranked Kentucky.

Dick Palmer and Duane Hickey will have all the action on the Blue Raider Network of WMOT (89.5 FM) and WGNS (1450 AM, 100.5 FM, 101.9 FM).

In addition, 2012 Sun Belt Conference Tournament booklets are now on sale at the Middle Tennessee athletic ticket office. Cost per booklet is \$83 and includes a ticket to all eight sessions of the Sun Belt Championships, March 3-6, in Hot Springs, Ark.

Fans can purchase booklets by calling 1-888-YES-MTSU or visiting [goblueraiders.com](http://goblueraiders.com).

#### **HEAD COACH RICK INSELL:**

It was not a pretty sight, but we won the game. (Jerica) Coley is a player, for a guard, she just put them on her back.

I was proud of our kids. I think Shanice showed she was a freshman tonight, but she deserves a game like that. I thought Kortni did a good job when we switched over on the defensive end and she hits some big threes for us.

*On getting Ebony Rowe and Icelyn Elie more involved in the game in the second half*

Well, we got them the ball. They did a good job of rippin' and going to the basket. That's what we've got to do.

Ice didn't really have a great game, 4-of-13. We won a game tonight when we didn't play one of our better games. I'm proud of our players. We've come thru a hard stretch, probably a harder stretch than anybody in the conference. And we had to start with one of the better teams in the conference in FIU. They had everything to gain and really nothing to lose because they are playing us on our home court. We've played a tough schedule and then having to play them, so I was really proud that our kids toughed it out.

They get to go home Christmas with a good taste in their mouth, they are 8-5, and probably could be 11-2, but we can't worry about that, all we can worry about is what's ahead of us. We've got Kentucky coming in here on the 28th.

*On losing rebounding battle in the first half*

They were really dominating us at halftime. I think it was 24-11, something like that, and we were just standing around. We got into shooting our threes, and that's what they wanted us to do. We wanted to attack their post players with Ebony and Ice and we weren't doing it. Once we started getting the basketball and getting out into transition, then Laken Leonard hit a couple and I think Kortni hit one, then Shanice made a big-time play off the board.

We got into that shot clock thing again and they played us man-to-man all night after we had practiced all week on our zone offense. She (FIU Coach Cindy Russo) did a good job. They threw some things at us that we weren't expecting. I never expected them to play man-to-man and they played it the whole game.

**EBONY ROWE:**

Coach Insell definitely chewed us out at half about not working hard enough in the first half. We knew they were going to be physical and we had to be more physical. In the second half, Ice and I tried to step up. When one of us got a little tired, the other one stepped up.

*On Christmas vacation*

You have no idea how excited we were when Coach Insell walked into the locker room and said, 'Let's go home'. Everyone is excited to get a couple of days with their families and just to get some rest, much-needed rest.

**ICELYN ELIE:**

They really got on us at half about not going to the boards. The biggest thing was they started getting it in to us and us taking advantage of that.

*On a spurt when she took over the game in the second half*

It was tough and physical, but I knew I had to step up and do something since I didn't start off doing that.