’Cats declawed as Blue Raiders knock off No. 6/6 Kentucky

Fourth win over nationally-ranked foe in program history

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. – Middle Tennessee women’s basketball weathered a tenacious Kentucky defense to pull out just the fourth win in school history over a ranked opponent, and tie for the highest opponent ranking of the quartet, as the Blue Raiders defeated the No. 6/6 Wildcats, 70-58, inside the historic Murphy Center Wednesday night. Three of the four ranked-opponent wins have come under head coach Rick Insell, with all three against Southeastern Conference competition.

Middle Tennessee (9-5) earned the first triumph against a ranked foe Feb. 5, 1977, when it defeated No. 6 Tennessee Tech 80-78 in Murfreesboro. The other two came in the last seven years, as the Blue Raiders handed No. 8/8 Georgia a 70-62 setback in Athens, Ga., Dec. 7, 2006, and No. 8/8 LSU a 67-56 loss inside the historic Murphy Center exactly four years ago in 2007.

Wednesday’s win came in front of a season-high 5,186 in attendance, the ninth-largest women’s crowd inside the historic Murphy Center in program history.

Leading the charge offensively for Middle Tennessee was junior Icelyn Elie, a Preseason All-Sun

Belt Second Team honoree, with 23 points on 9-of-11 field goals and 5-of-7 free throws.

She was joined above the 20-point plateau by sophomore Ebony Rowe, the Preseason Sun Belt co-Player of the Year and Lexington, Ky., product with her eighth double-double of the season and 24th of her career with 21 points and 12 rebounds. Rowe has now posted a double-double in both of her meetings against her hometown school, converting 7-of-10 field goals and 7-of-8 free throws in the victory.

Junior Kortni Jones dropped in four 3-pointers among her 15 points, while handing out a game-high six assists and swiping a game-best four steals She played the full 40 minutes, as did sophomore Laken Leonard, who grabbed six defensive caroms, collected three steals and chipped in four points.

The Blue Raiders shot a season-high 86.4 percent (19-of-22) from the charity stripe and outrebounded the Wildcats, 39-38, against a team that entered the contest with a +8.2 margin on the glass.

Kentucky (11-2) was led by Bria Goss' 12 points, the lone player to reach double figures. She only made 4-of-14 field goals and 4-of-9 free throws for her team-leading total, as the Lady Cats were held 14 points below their season-low point total, while shooting a season-worst 32.3 percent from the floor.

A'dia Mathies topped UK with eight rebounds but the Wildcats suffered from behind the arc, only connecting on 2-of-18 (11.1 percent) attempts.

The game started with multiple turnovers by both teams, as neither was able to get into an offensive rhythm. Kentucky had six miscues and Middle Tennessee had three entering the first media timeout at 15:49 with a 0-0 deadlock. After the short break, Keyla Snowden tossed in a pair of free throws to put the first points on the board and give the Lady Cats a 2-0 edge.

Sloppy play caused by aggressive defense on both ends continued until Jones hit her first triple to give her team a 3-2 lead at 14:31. The squads traded buckets and Snowden's trey at 10:52 forced the game's only tie at 9-9.

From there, the Blue Raiders used an Elie layup and two free throws from freshman Shanice Cason to grab a 13-9 lead and never look back. Samarie Walker quickly cut the deficit in half, but an old-fashioned three-point play from Elie increased the lead to five, 16-11, with 9:26 remaining.

Goss made the back-end of a two-shot foul at 5:41 to cut the MT advantage to four, 20-16, Cason capped a 7-0 Blue Raider spurt with a 3-pointer to give Middle Tennessee a 27-16 edge with 3:20 left in the first period. Goss dropped in a layup at the other end, but Jones answered with another 3-pointer to make the margin a dozen, 30-18.

Another 7-0 Blue Raider run during the final two minutes helped send Middle Tennessee into the locker room ahead 15, 37-22, tying for the second-largest halftime lead this season.

The Wildcat defense picked up its pace early in the second half, causing problems for the Blue Raiders. After an Elie bucket started the period, UK used a 7-0 run itself to trim the margin to 10, 39-29, with 16:52 to go. Six missed MT shots aided the Lady Cats' cause before Elie ended the drought with a layup at 15:25.

Kentucky continued to push defensively, while using an old-fashioned three-point situation from Mathies and points from Maegan Conwright, Goss and Bernisha Pickett to pull within five, 44-39, at the 10:35 mark. It was the closest the Wildcats had been in 15 minutes.

Elie's old-fashioned three-point play a minute-and-a-half later preceded a Rowe layup and Middle Tennessee was able to make it a 10-point difference once again, 49-39. Kentucky, however, did not quit, and sliced the margin to five two more times, the last coming on Azia Bishop jumper for a 53-48 score with 5:42 left.

After a Mathies free throw with 4:47 remaining made it a 57-49 contest, the Blue Raiders reeled off an 11-2 run, featuring a pair of Jones 3-pointers, to put it out of reach at 68-51 with 1:36 left. Conwright hit two free throws, Pickett added UK's only other triple and Walker contributed a jumper to close the Wildcat scoring down the stretch with the last Middle Tennessee points coming via a pair of Rowe charity tosses with three seconds left.

The game put an end to the Blue Raiders' non-conference campaign, as they will enter Sun Belt play full time starting at Noon Saturday against South Alabama. The matchup will be televised live on the Sun Belt Network (CSS locally) with Lyn Rollins on play-by-play and Debbie Leonard as the color analyst.

Dick Palmer (play-by-play) and Duane Hickey (color analyst) 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.

Middle Tennessee Postgame Quotes

HEAD COACH RICK INSELL:
I'm awful proud of our players. One of the things we've been working on is mental toughness, closing out a game. We knew Kentucky was going to come out hard and heavy the second half. Early on, we protected the ball and executed our offense, and that got us the lead, and we knew coming back after halftime they were really going to get after us. We were able to make a couple of clutch baskets that pushed us back out to nine, then 11, and then Kortni hit a couple of threes. We hit free throws down the stretch. When you rebound and hit your free throws, you've got a chance to win. We outrebounded them by 39-38, and our 19-of-22 free throws was the best we've shot in no telling how long.

I'm awful proud of our basketball team and I'm proud of this program. It's a big win for our program and a win that could possibly help us at the end of our season. On Kentucky's first half turnovers They were making some passes that we were able to get in the lane and once we got in the lane and knocked down a pass or two, next thing you know we were able to get another steal or two. Laken Leonard had three steals, Kortni had four and we had 11 overall. But it came down to hitting free throws, just being mentally tougher, and tonight we were.

On answering when Kentucky cut the lead to five in the second half
We had a free throw and Kortni made a three. She has a tendency to do that. She hides and next thing you know, there she is. I don't know where she came from, but I was awful proud she knocked that one down.

On tough schedule
These kids have had it tough. We started at Penn State, James Madison, should have won the Arkansas game, should have won the Georgia Tech game, we've had a tough schedule up to this point.
That's why we play those games. We play them for our fans and we play them to put this program on the next level and we play them for games like this to get us tougher. And I think that might have played into our favor tonight.
We beat a good basketball team tonight. They've got a great team, they're 6th in the country, they are not there for luck, they are there because they are that good. I think they have a chance to go the Elite Eight, with a chance to get in the Final Four. Coming back off the Christmas break might have affected them some, playing here might have affected them some, who knows? The bottom line is we got a big win.

On handling Kentucky's early pressure
We changed everything. I think that may have thrown them off. Everything we have done so far on our press sets, we changed. They had to go in at halftime and set their defense to what we were doing in the first half and it worked. We panicked a couple of times, but our kids were able to execute it and that's why we were able to pass thru their pressure early.
I thought we played pretty good "D". I thought we had them scouted real good. We weren't going to guard some of their players out on the perimeter, and we didn't, and I think that caused them some problems. They are slashers. They want to put the ball on the floor and go to the rim, and we were able to help off with our post players, and over-help on one or two of them. That gave them problems because it didn't open up any lanes for them. And another thing was Mathies got into foul trouble early and they had to take her out, and she's their best player.

On Rowe getting two fouls within 23 seconds
I chewed on her a little bit but she came back like the winner she is. Sometimes you have to get in their heads a little. I'd hate think we had to get along without Ebony. She's a winner. She had a double-double, 21 and 12, and that's every night for Ebony Rowe.

KORTNI JONES
On what the difference was in closing out this game after letting a couple of similar games slip away
I think we learned from previous games. We felt like we could have beaten Penn State and Arkansas, and when you look back at those films, it makes your heart ache. You think "Gosh, we could have been in the top 25 rankings." Tonight, before the game, Ebony made a statement that we had given away too many, so tonight we are going to have to take it home and I think that also helped us in taking the win.

On Kentucky's second half pressure
Coach emphasized how much pressure they would be putting on us when they came out in the second half. We got a little "shook" at the start, but having that lead gave us a little room for error, and once we kinda settled down, it made it a lot easier to find the open man.

On hitting the big 3-pointer to regain the momentum

I think it was a big momentum clincher, and to be honest, I couldn't believe I shot it. After I shot it, I thought it better go in because that was one of those shots like "we could really get in trouble for taking that shot so quick." But after I hit that shot and the crowd reacted, it was like they were thinking "she just hit a three," so I think it really crushed their momentum.

On SBC play resuming on Saturday with South Alabama
I think this win sent a message to every team in the Sun Belt Conference. We have grown a lot, especially playing against some of the better teams. I think a lot of those teams in the Sun Belt will look at our schedule and see we've been playing against some really good teams. Beating Kentucky sent a really strong message.

EBONY ROWE
On her two quick fouls
It was just frustration. Two stupid fouls and I got down on myself for a minute, and Coach got in my face for a minute. But one thing I know about Coach Insell, is that he believes in me, and that he just wants to push me and him putting me back in was just a statement in how much he trusts me, and believes I can help this team. It just made me feel good that my coach has that much faith in me.

On free throws
I've struggled with free throws and the coaches have told me it's just a mental thing, you'll hit them when you need them. And I think all that extra work and extra time paid off. We really wanted this win, so we made the count when we needed them.

On the win
Nice is an understatement as far as the wins goes. I wanted it, not just for me because Lexington is my hometown, but I wanted it for our team because we work so hard. We've had some frustrating losses this year and people were kinda down on us a little, but we stuck together, we know we have a good team. We can build on this win and go farther. It was a great win and I'm excited to see what we do next.

ICELYN ELIE
On scoring MT's first nine points of second half
At the beginning of the game, it was a little frustrating, but I have to trust in my team to look inside, then shoot and score. Coach Insell has been emphasizing in practice just ripping and going to the basket and taking advantage of that helped us out a lot.

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