Dominant second half lifts MT past Lady Jags

Blue Raiders mount 36-5 run over nearly 15 minutes

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. – Middle Tennessee started the second half with a 36-5 run, covering nearly 15 minutes, to reverse a two-point halftime deficit and mount a 60-39 victory over visiting South Alabama Saturday afternoon in Sun Belt women's basketball action inside the historic Murphy Center.

The Blue Raiders found themselves down 22-20 at the intermission in part due to a 5-of-23 (21.7 percent) effort from the floor, although the Lady Jags were shooting just 8-of-31 (25.8 percent) during the opening 20 minutes. It was the first time Middle Tennessee (10-5, 2-0 SBC) had trailed at the break since Dec. 3 against Arkansas.

Four starters netted double-figure points, including double-doubles from junior Icelyn Elie and sophomore Ebony Rowe. Elie led all players with 17 points, and grabbed a team-high tying 11 rebounds for her fourth double-double of the campaign and seventh of her career. Rowe matched her performance on the glass, while chipping in 12 points.

Freshman Shanice Cason added 12 points plus a career-best six steals and junior Kortni Jones tallied 10 points to go along with her game-high five assists.

Leading the way for South Alabama (7-6, 0-1 SBC) was Taylor Ammons with a double-double of her

own, recording 11 points and hauling in a game-best 16 rebounds, including 12 off the defensive glass.

Cason ignited the second-half run with solid play early in the period, swiping a steal off the initial Lady Jag possession, and after a pair of 3-point misses from Jones, she knotted the score at 22-22 with a jumper after just 32 seconds had passed.

Following a 30-second timeout for USA, the rookie missed both free throws after taking a hard foul underneath the hoop. Her hard intensity on both ends of the floor drew the praises of the Blue Raider faithful before she added an old-fashioned three-point play at 17:40 to extend the MT lead to 27-22.

Before the ball crossed midcourt on the next South Alabama possession, Cason took it away again and got the rebound off her own miss. A quick Middle Tennessee timeout set up a 3-pointer from sophomore Laken Leonard, which touched nothing but net, before Cason grabbed another steal at 16:58 with her team ahead eight, 30-22.

Mary Nixon finally put the Lady Jags on the board with a jumper at 16:30, but Cason immediately answered. She then added the back-end of a two-shot foul situation and located Jones three minutes later for a triple to widen the margin to 15, 42-27, with 9:41 left.

Elie then took control of the scoring column, registering five-straight Blue Raider points, and the lead would swell to 29, 56-27, at the 5:23 mark following a Rowe putback on her own miss.

Sarda Peterson ended an over six-minute drought for South Alabama with a jumper on the next USA possession, but again, Cason countered with a bucket of her own. Ammons then netted six of the next 10 Lady Jag points down the stretch, as the visitors used a 10-2 run to close the game and decide the final outcome.

The game started with neither team able to pull too far ahead with MT holding a three-point cushion, 11-8, following a Rowe layup at the 14:42 mark. Lauren Walker then forced the game's first tie with a 3-pointer 26 seconds later to start a 7-0 South Alabama spurt.

Sophomore KeKe Stewart brought the Blue Raiders back within two, and after a pair of free throws by Jones just over a minute later at 10:05, it would not be until nearly eight minutes later, at 2:17, that Middle Tennessee would score again when Rowe knocked down a pair of charity tosses to make it 20-17 in favor of USA.

The final five combined points of the half all came at the foul line.

The Blue Raiders will return to action when they open the 2012 calendar year with a 5:15 p.m. Thursday road game at Troy in Troy, Ala. Both Middle Tennessee programs are slated to play the Trojans that night before returning home to the historic Murphy Center next weekend for a doubleheader starting at 3 p.m. Saturday against Louisiana.

Dick Palmer will have all the action from Thursday's contest live on the Blue Raider Network on 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

How do you go 11 minutes without a field goal and have a 36-5 run right after that?

I don't know, you need to explain that to me. We didn't make many changes at halftime. We decided what we wanted to do with how they were playing Ebony (Rowe) and Icelyn Elie down low. Made a few changes with our adjustments there, came back out and did a pretty good job. But, the whole key was Shanice Cason showed up at the top of that press, made a play or two or got a deflection. Shanice brought some enthusiasm.

Has Shanice Cason's all-around game developed well?

She's a winner. She sensed that we were a bind right there and weren't playing good. Someone had to step up, and that's what a winner does.

You got the big upset over Kentucky and you get a win now here. Is this how you wanted to turn the calender?

I'd have rather turned it at about 14-1, but we'll take 10-5.

SHANICE CASON

Are you feeling that as the season goes along your game is becoming more complete?

It's never complete. You know it's all those things that coach tells me I need to do, and I have room for improvement. So, there's never a time when I think, 'Hey, I'm at a stopping point, and I can't get any better.'

You went 11 minutes without a field goal in the first half and went on a 36-5 run in the second. How do you go from that bad to really that good in the second half?

In the locker room at halftime, coach was talking about how we had no intensity whatsoever. So, our momentum when we came back out, it just made me more excited to get after it.

You obviously didn't get the press late in the first half. The press seemed to turn things around in the second half. Do you feel like that turned it some?

We're very athletic, so with our length, height and speed, we're able to create some turnovers. So, when we drop back, we have to stop and let them set up in their offense. So, when we're able to get after it, we're at our best.

You upset Kentucky and then you get this big win here, is this what you wanted to do to finish the year?

Yes sir, we wanted to set the tone that we're a good team, we're the best team in our conference. So, it's just up to us to set that tone because our conference is very strong this year. We just have to be ready physically and mentally.