Rowe’s historic night lifts Blue Raiders past Red Wolves

Insell improves to 57-1 in home conference games

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. – Middle Tennessee sophomore Ebony Rowe finished a perfect 13-of-13 from the floor en route to a career-high 29 points, while adding 11 rebounds and four steals, to direct the Blue Raiders to a 71-62 Sun Belt women’s basketball victory Wednesday night over visiting Arkansas State. The stellar performance is the best in school history, as one of three players with at least a 10-of-10 effort, and ties the Sun Belt Conference standard set by FIU’s Finda Mansare 13-of-13 showing Feb. 23, 2011 against Western Kentucky.

Rowe’s 13-of-13 topped the 12-of-12 by Kristi Brown Feb. 15, 1992, against Tennessee Tech and the 10-of-10 by Jonelda Buck Jan. 2, 1996, against Chattanooga. The Sun Belt co-Preseason Player of the Year finished with 29 points, surpassing her previous high of 26 at South Alabama Jan. 2, 2011. Coupled with her 11 rebounds, Rowe registered her 26th career double-double, and 10th of the campaign.

Junior Kortni Jones also added a double-double, the second of her career, with 12 points and 10 assists. The 10 assists equal her career best, set twice, with the last coming against Florida Atlantic Jan. 12, 2011.

Rounding out a quartet of Middle Tennessee (15-5, 7-0 SBC) double-digit scorers were freshman Shanice Cason and sophomore Laken Leonard with 13 and 11 points, respectively. Both finished

just a point shy of their career highs.

The Red Wolves also placed four players in double-digit scoring, led by 17 points from Jane Morrill. Quinishia McDowell contributed 15 points, while Shania Hurst and Ashley Olvera chipped in 13 and 11 points to round out the group.

Morrill, McDowell and Hurst each hauled in seven rebounds, as Arkansas State (7-12, 1-5 SBC) won the battle on the glass, 32-28.

The Blue Raiders raced out to a blistering start, connecting on three consecutive 3-pointers in a minute and 25 seconds to expand their early lead to 13-2 with 14:31 remaining in the first half. Back-to-back buckets from McDowell trimmed the margin to nine, 15-6, in the next minute but Rowe added a pair of consecutive layups of her own to push the advantage to 13, 19-6, at the 12:28 mark.

Following an Andi Watson free throw at 10:45 to pull ASU within 14, 24-10, Middle Tennessee saw its lead swell to a game-high 23, 36-13, just over three minutes later with 7:26 to play. Morrill would then score four of the next six Red Wolf points, slicing the gap to 19, 38-19.

Jones, however, hit another triple at the 4:05 mark to increase the difference back to 23, 43-20, before Arkansas State closed the period with a 10-2 run, including an Olvera trey and an old-fashioned three-point play from McDowell, to enter the locker rooms down 15, 45-30.

The Red Wolves maintained their push during the early stages of the second stanza, capitalizing on another Olvera 3-pointer as part of an 11-6 spurt to trim the deficit to 10, 51-41, with 14:20 remaining.

Despite the early struggles, the Blue Raiders bounced back with a 10-0 surge, featuring seven Rowe points and capped by a Cason triple at 10:19 to extend the lead back to 20, 61-41. Arkansas State, however, did not quit, and mounted an 11-1 run behind seven points from Hurst to again knock the MT advantage down to 10, 62-52, with 6:26 left.

Following a Rowe layup at 5:40 to halt the push, McDowell buried a jumper and Hurst converted the back-end of a two-shot foul situation to trim the margin to nine, 64-55, at the 4:32 mark. Cason dropped in a pair of charity tosses a minute later, but Olvera stepped behind the arc for yet another 3-pointer to close the Red Wolves within eight, 66-58, with 3:09 to go.

The two teams traded free throws down the stretch before Rowe and McDowell exchanged layups in the last seven seconds to decide the final outcome.

The win also improved Middle Tennessee's home conference record under head coach Rick Insell to 57-1, including 33 straight.

The Blue Raiders return to action at 5:05 p.m. Saturday when they hit the road for Mobile, Ala., and a meeting with South Alabama. It will be the first game of a doubleheader affair with the Middle Tennessee men’s team.

Dick Palmer will call 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

Very, very poor second half on our part. Nonchalant. Just a very, very poor job. I don't think we played with any kind of passion in the second half at all. Kortni had 10 assists, but on the defensive end, we just did not do a good job.

Arkansas State did a good job. They came back out in the second half and did what they had to do, got back in the ball game and had a chance to win it. You need to give credit to them, they played harder than us the second half. Brian (Boyer) and his staff did a good job and his kids played hard. Our kids did not play hard enough in the second half.

On ASU's closing the first half strong and using it as a spark for the second half

They did that and they will carry that spark with them the rest of the year. They are better than their record. Right now, they are one of the better teams in our conference.

We get like this. This is what we do. We come out and run our offense, and all of a sudden, we start free-lancing and doing our thing, and when we do that, it breaks our momentum and it affects us on the defensive end. And that is what happened. We did not play good defense in the second half at all.

We had 16 turnovers, and probably seven of them were unforced, that we just made ourselves. We play South Alabama this weekend in Mobile, and they are what? 4-1, 5-1 if they won tonight? That's a big game. Every game in this conference is big. There is nobody in this conference that is going to dominate anybody and that includes us.

EBONY ROWE:

When we started the game, I think we really showed that we can be a great team, we were executing on offense, we played great defense. I remember looking up and they only had two points. That just shows that we have a good team, but we just lost focus. We started playing the scoreboard and let them get back in the game. We'll take fault for that, and we just need to work on that.

On winning nine games in a row but still learning lessons along the way. Are you where you want to be at this point?

I can tell you right now that the coaching staff and the players are not satisfied with this win. It is more than just winning. Coach said before the game that if we are not getting better as a team, then the win doesn't mean anything. We are going to come in tomorrow (Thursday), work really hard in practice, go all out and hopefully build on our mistakes from this game, and hopefully do better against South Alabama.

On being 13-of-13 from the field for the game

I can't say that I have. I didn't even know until the guy on the radio said something about it. I give credit to our guards and the other post players. They were making amazing passes, just where it was easy for me to go up and get it and put it in. They made it easy for me, so I give credit to my

teammates for that.

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