

Blue Raiders edge Mean Green in road battle

Win streak reaches a dozen with two-point victory

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DENTON, Texas – Middle Tennessee made plays down the stretch when it needed to, both offensively and defensively, to preserve its 12-game win streak and unbeaten Sun Belt record Thursday evening in knocking off North Texas, 70-68, inside the Super Pit in Denton, Texas. The 12-game run ties for the sixth longest in school history as the Blue Raiders picked up their eighth straight in the series with the Mean Green. Junior Icelyn Elie led all players in scoring with 22 points, including 6-of-7 field goals and a career-best 9-of-10 at the free throw line. She was one of four Middle Tennessee starters in double figures. Sophomore Ebony Rowe tallied 18 points, 14 of which came during the second half, and grabbed a game-high tying eight rebounds. Freshman Shanice Cason added a career-best 16 points, including a pair of 3-pointers, while junior Kortni Jones



contributed 11 as the MT starters netted 67 of the team's 70. North Texas also placed four players in double-digit scoring, led by Sara Stanley's 14 points off the bench. She hit 6-of-7 field goals, including her lone shot from behind the arc, and hauled in a game-high equaling eight boards. Laura McCoy (13 points), Jasmine Godbolt (12) and Brittney Hudson (12) completed the quartet of high scorers for the Mean Green, while Godbolt matched Rowe and Stanley with eight caroms. The Blue Raiders overcame a four-point halftime deficit to pull out the victory. In a physical matchup that could have been decided either way, Middle Tennessee made the plays down the stretch for the win. The game's third tie came following a Rowe layup at the 2:57 mark, as she forced a 63-63 knot. Elie would convert a pair of free throws 49 seconds later to put MT on top by two. On the ensuing North

Texas (13-10, 6-4 SBC) possession, Jones pick-pocketed McCoy near the midcourt stripe and her pass to Rowe forced another Mean Green foul. Rowe dropped in 1-of-2 for a three-point cushion but Hudson raced to the other end for an uncontested layup to make it a one-point Blue Raider lead with just 1:36 left. The next Middle Tennessee possession resulted in a Jones look down low to a wide-open Elie for a layup. Both teams had turnovers before Hudson added another layup for a one-point difference, 68-67, with 24.2 seconds to play. Forced to foul and put the Blue Raiders at the charity stripe, Cason made 1-of-2 but a Laken Leonard infraction with 6.9 seconds remaining kept North Texas' hopes alive. Hudson made 1-of-2 of her attempts and Middle Tennessee secured the team rebound. The in-bounds pass located Jones and she again made 50 percent of her attempts, pushing the lead to two. Stanley tossed a wild half-court attempt as the buzzer sounded but it fell short, giving the Blue Raiders the win. The second half had started with the Mean Green opening an eight-point, 41-33, advantage following a Desiree Nelson jumper at 17:56. In just a minute and 20 seconds, MT chipped away on layups from Rowe and Elie, plus an Elie 3-pointer, to pull within four, 44-40. McCoy connected on her fourth triple of the game a short time later for a 47-40 edge, but the Blue Raiders did not quit. Seven-straight points and an overall 12-1 spurt put Middle Tennessee ahead, 52-48, following a Jones 3-pointer to cap the run at the 12:07 mark. North Texas trimmed the deficit to one twice over the next three-and-a-half minutes, the last on a Hudson jumper at 8:30, but the Blue Raiders responded with four-straight points to keep the margin at five, 58-53, with 7:25 to play. After Stanley missed a shot, she got her own rebound, stuck back a subsequent attempt and drew the foul entering the under-eight minute timeout. Following the break, she hit the free throw to pull her team within two, 58-56. The lead grew to four again on a pair of Rowe free throws, but Stanley again found the bottom of the net and Godbolt added a layup at 4:55 to make it a 60-60 score and set up the final dramatics. Middle Tennessee claimed the early lead on the strength of points in the paint from Preseason All-Sun Belt selections Rowe and Elie. Cason then gave MT a 13-6 advantage following a scooping layup and subsequent free throw at the 14:13 mark. However, the Blue Raider offense would be stymied over the next six minutes, as it only produced three points, all at the foul line. Meanwhile, North Texas used three 3-pointers from McCoy, including a pair from 25-foot range, combined with buckets from Tamara Torru and Nelson to stake a 19-14 edge with eight minutes left. Jones finally ended the Middle Tennessee (18-5, 10-0 SBC) field goal drought with a jumper at 7:05 but Torru answered with a triple pushing the difference to a half dozen, 22-16. Following a pair of Kasondra Foreman free throws, Cason finally dropped in the Blue Raiders' first 3-pointer of the game at 5:16. The Mean Green maintained an eight-point advantage through a pair of Godbolt free throws with 4:52 to play in the period. As the four-minute mark was passed, Jones intercepted a backcourt pass and raced to the other end for an uncontested layup. Her play ignited an 8-4 MT run to close the stanza, slicing the deficit in half, and pulling her team to within 35-31 at the break. Dick Palmer will have all the action 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.

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