Second half 12-0 spurt keeps Blue Raiders unbeaten

MT is only team left in SBC without a loss

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DENVER – Through a long road trip to Denver, battling a massive snowstorm, the Middle Tennessee women's basketball team weathered the West Division-leading Denver Pioneers to remain unbeaten in conference action with a 75-63 triumph Saturday inside Magness Arena in Denver, Colo. Sophomore Ebony Rowe led the way with her 11th double-double of the season and 27th of her career with 17 points and a game-high 10 rebounds. Junior Kortni Jones paced Middle Tennessee with a game-best tying 20 points, including four 3-pointers, while junior Icelyn Elie and freshman Shanice Cason each contributed 14. Denver was led by Morgan Van Riper-Rose's 20 points, also featuring four triples, while Emiko Smith chipped in 14 points. The reigning Sun Belt Player of the Week, Kaetlyn Murdoch, was held to 10 points, while Maiya Michel topped DU with six rebounds.

The Blue Raiders trailed for the majority of the first half but used a 7-0 run and 11-2 spurt over a four-minute span to take the lead, their second since Cason's opening basket. Jones and Laken Leonard dropped in 3-pointers during the surge to help MT build a 32-25 lead with 3:24 left. The Pioneers would build their cushion to as much as six early, the first on a Van Riper-Rose triple at 15:11 for an 11-5 lead heading into the initial media timeout. After Jones knocked down her first trey of the contest, Van Riper-Rose answered with another from long range to make it 14-8. Five-straight points, capped by an old-fashioned three-point play from Elie, trimmed the deficit to one in just over

a minute. Elie would connect on a 3-pointer at 10:38, again cutting the gap to a single point, 17-16, before Cason went to the hoop for an old-fashioned three-point play a minute later. Van Riper-Rose knotted the score at 21-21 with 8:26 remaining and Jordan Johnston pushed Denver on top by a pair, 23-21, before the Middle Tennessee (19-5, 11-0 SBC) run. Early moments of the second half saw the Blue Raiders push their advantage to seven three times in the opening four minutes, the last on a Jones jumper with 16:35 to play for a 42-35 advantage. However, Morgan Shell and Murdoch quickly responded to trim it back to three. After an old-fashioned three-point play from Cason, Van Riper-Rose hit a jumper and then added a 3-pointer on back-to-back possessions to make it a one-point difference, 45-44, with 13:45 remaining. Smith then hit a jumper to put Denver (16-7, 8-3 SBC) on top by one. The Pioneers would extend their lead to four over the next four minutes. Murdoch kept her team ahead by three, 56-53, at 8:26 but then Rowe ignited a 12-0 run covering just over four minutes to put the Blue Raider advantage at nine, 65-56, with 4:05 to play. After Murdoch halted the drought with a free throw, the next six points went through the MT hoop, as the swell grew to 14, 71-57, at the 2:18 mark. The final 11 Middle Tennessee points came at the charity stripe, including four straight from Cason to grow the lead to a game-high 16, 75-59, with 1:27 to go. The final three home games will kick off at 7 p.m. Wednesday when the Blue Raiders welcome rival Western Kentucky to the historic Murphy Center. 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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