Last-minute push secures home victory over Lady Toppers

Jones breaks single-season 3-pointers made record

February 8, 2012 · Athletic Communications

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. – Middle Tennessee was pushed to the limit Wednesday night, outscoring Western Kentucky by four in the final minute and grabbing crucial rebounds to hold off its chief rival, 67-64, inside the historic Murphy Center in Murfreesboro, Tenn. The win is the 14th straight for the Blue Raiders and improves their home conference record under head coach Rick Insell to 59-1 during the last seven seasons.

Insell was honored pregame for the recent announcement of him joining the 2012 class of the Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame. Wednesday he led Middle Tennessee (20-5, 12-0 SBC) to its ninth-straight 20-win season and 35th consecutive home conference victory in addition to remaining the lone unbeaten Sun Belt program in either women's or men's basketball this season.

Also highlighting the night was junior Kortni Jones, who not only finished with a game-high 23 points, but also became the Blue Raiders' single-season record holder for 3-pointers. With her first of a career-high tying six triples on the night dropping in at the 15:33 mark of the first half, Jones surpassed Sandy Brown's mark which had stood since 1988. Jones raised the bar to 90 with her half dozen and inched herself

to within six of the single-season Sun Belt standard, established in 2003 by Leslie Logsdon of Western Kentucky.

Jones finished the night by making eight field goals, also equaling a career best, to go along with four assists, game-high tying three steals and a blocked shot in 40 minutes.

Classmate Icelyn Elie nearly matched Jones' output, pouring in 20 of her own with a team-best nine rebounds and a career-high tying three blocked shots. Elie and Jones are the first set of MT teammates to score at least 20 points apiece since they both accomplished it in the last home game, Jan. 25 against Troy.

Sophomore Laken Leonard chipped in 13 points on the strength of three 3-pointers and added a career-best five assists.

LaTiera Owens led the Lady Toppers with a double-double of 18 points and a game-high 11 rebounds. She was joined in double-figure scoring by Chaney Means (12 points) and Alexis Govan (11).

In a close game throughout, with neither team able to build a double-digit cushion, Leonard buried her final triple of the night at the 5:35 mark to give the Blue Raiders their largest lead, 59-50. However, six-straight WKU points in just over two minutes brought the deficit to a one-possession game, 59-56, with 3:12 to play.

Just under a minute later, Elie grabbed a defensive rebound then was rewarded on the other end with one of Leonard's helpers to push the edge back to five. Owens would then counter with a layup of her own and Jasmine Johnson converted 1-of-2 free throws to pull the Lady Toppers within two, 61-59, with 1:41 left.

Following a Jones miss from long range, consecutive Western Kentucky (6-17, 3-8 SBC) shots were missed. Sophomore Ebony Rowe secured the defensive board on the second attempt, but her possession was short lived as Owens stole the ball right back. A Teranie Thomas pass located Means standing behind the arc and Means drained the triple to give WKU its first lead, 62-61, since a 25-23 advantage at the 5:24 mark of the first half.

Rowe then drew a foul with 46 seconds remaining and hit both free throws, putting MT back on top by one. Following an Owens miss at the other end, Elie again picked up the loose rebound and forced a foul to be called. She hit 1-of-2, keeping it a one-possession difference, 64-62, with 27 seconds left.

After she missed the second, Leonard rushed the lane to grab the carom, drawing another Western Kentucky foul. Leonard then knocked down both of her attempts, extending the lead to four with 22 seconds to go. A careless foul by Rowe allowed the Lady Toppers to make a pair of free throws of their own, by Owens, with five seconds to play before a final trip to the charity stripe by freshman Shanice Cason sealed the triumph with just 3.9 seconds on the clock.

Cason opened the game with a quick 3-pointer, but a 9-5 Western Kentucky, capped by a Vanessa Obafemi trey put WKU ahead, 9-8, with 14:15 left first half. The two teams battled back and forth for the next eight minutes before a Chastity Gooch jumper and Danay Fothergill triple provided the Lady Toppers with their largest advantage at five points, 25-20, with 5:52 remaining.

Jones connected on a 3-pointer 30 seconds later and added another at the 3:13 mark to give MT a one-point lead and ignite a half-closing 9-2 spurt, sending Middle Tennessee into the intermission ahead five, 32-27.

Leonard's 3-pointer at the 16:26 mark of the second half pushed the difference to seven, 40-33, and it would remain that just over a minute a later. However, Govan converted an old fashioned three-point play and Means tallied a triple at 14:18 to pull Western Kentucky within one, 42-41.

Cason ended a three-minute scoring drought for the Blue Raiders with a layup at 12:05, but Owens answered with one of her own and 1-of-2 free throws to knot the score at 44-44. Jones and Leonard tallied back-to-back treys as Middle Tennessee built its nine-point edge with a 12-3 run, setting up the final stretch.

Wednesday's victory was the eighth straight in the series for the Blue Raiders, their longest consecutive streak against the Lady Toppers. The 14-straight wins overall is the fifth best in program history, including four under Insell's watch.

Middle Tennessee will return to action at 3 p.m. Sunday when it plays host to UALR in the annual Play4Kay game live on the Sun Belt TV Network, shown locally on Comcast/Charter Sports Southeast (CSS).

Dick Palmer and Duane Hickey 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 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:
Give them (WKU) credit. They did a good job, they changed their defenses, they really played harder than us. I guess because we played so well this weekend, maybe we thought that we were going to come in and that Western was just going to mail it in. Maybe they'll listen to us now. In this league, it's every night you are going to have to fight, and tonight we had to battle. Western came in and did a real good job. They are well-coached, their kids played hard. They made a few mistakes down the stretch and it cost them. We didn't play well at all, but you have to give the credit to Western for that.

On Kortni Jones
Kortni is just Kortni. She had about five turnovers and three of them were unforced. But she had four threes at halftime and she hit two in the second half that helped us.
We did a poor job of shooting free throws. You can't win championships hitting 11-of-19. You can't win championships getting out-rebounded 44-35. You can't do it and that's what happened tonight. Western has a very athletic team; they went to the boards and it paid off.
I thought our best player in the second half was Laken Leonard. She had a couple of big threes in the second half and she made a couple of big passes. That pass inside she made in the second half

to Icelyn Elie, we needed. It was a tie ballgame then. She made another pass to Ice cutting back door and went up and tipped the ball in. That was a big play.

We have to come in tomorrow (Thursday) and get right back to the fundamentals. We had some break downs in fundamentals and Western took advantage of it. We've got to come back in and do a better job tomorrow. We are not going to win any championships playing like we played tonight. We still don't have this thing clinched. Right now we are 12-0 and we are closer than we were two hours ago, but we still don't have this thing clinched. What we want to do first is to win that No. 1 spot in the Sun Belt Conference and we still haven't done that yet.

KORTNI JONES:

We knew Western Kentucky went from zone to man-to-man from time to time, but from the films we watched, they had never done it like that (changing defenses) to any team before. Give a lot of credit to Western because they really got us out of rhythm and it was from the first possession. I am just thankful that we were able to hit shots and make free throws when we needed them. We are big on making threes. If they shut off the inside, then we know that is the time for the perimeter to step up and make threes. We come in early in the morning every day to improve our 3-point shooting. I am just grateful that me, Laken, Shanice (Cason) and everyone else that hit big shots for us were able to do so.

On getting open looks

I was very surprised. I think that's the first time this year that I've shot wide-open threes. One time I was running down the side, and I'm thinking, "they don't see me" and I sprinted all the way to the other side, and I think that was the most open I've been all year. I was very surprised because most teams chase me around.

On breaking MT's single-season record for made 3-pointers

I was surprised because I hadn't kept up with it. I was running down the ramp at the end of the game, and a man handed me the net and told me I had broken the record, and that was the first I had heard it. I am thankful for my teammates because they are the reason I got it. If they hadn't gotten me the ball, I wouldn't have even come close. I am excited. It feels good to put your name in the history book, and to do it twice in one year, it really feels good.

ICELYN ELIE:

On Western rebounding

It was pretty surprising, but they battled hard and we weren't expecting them to hit us in the mouth the way they did. It was very physical down there, but we came back at them there at the end, but it was tough.

Printed on May 21, 2013
Original URL: http://www.goblueraiders.com/content.cfm/id/58349