East Division share earned Sunday afternoon

Blue Raiders tie fourth-longest win streak in school history

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. – Middle Tennessee women's basketball guaranteed itself a first-round bye in the upcoming Sun Belt Championships and a share of the league's East Division by defeating UALR 59-51 Sunday afternoon in the annual Play4Kay game live on the Sun Belt Network inside the historic Murphy Center in Murfreesboro, Tenn. The Blue Raiders have put together 15 straight victories, tying for the fourth longest in program history, and improved to 60-1 in home conference games the last seven seasons under head coach Rick Insell to match Stanford for the best mark nationally.

Middle Tennessee (21-5, 13-0 SBC), in the midst of its ninth-straight 20-win campaign, pulled away from the Trojans in the second half after the two teams entered the intermission tied 25-25. It marked the first time this season and just the fifth under Insell's watch the Blue Raiders were tied at the break.

Junior Icelyn Elie paced Middle Tennessee throughout the contest with her eighth double-double of the season and 11th of her career with 11 points and a game-high 16 rebounds, equaling her career best. She grabbed a dozen of her boards on the defensive glass.

Sophomore Ebony Rowe nearly had a double-double of her own with a game-high 17 points,

including a 5-of-6 performance at the foul line, and nine rebounds to go along with her game-best two blocked shots and game-high tying three steals.

Junior Kortni Jones gave the Blue Raiders a trio in double-figure scoring with 12 points, including a 3-pointer to inch within five of the single-season Sun Belt record. Her five attempts from behind the arc lifted her into first place on the school's single-season chart with 260, surpassing the 256 by Jackie Pickel in 2010. Jones needs just 11 attempts to equal the single-season conference mark.

The Trojans also had three players net double-figure points, led by 13, including their only triple, from Taylor Ford. Britteni Williams added 11 and a team-high tying eight rebounds, while Taylor Gault finished with 10. Hannah Fohne matched Williams' effort on the glass.

The Middle Tennessee defense also stepped up in the final 20 minutes, limiting UALR (13-12, 8-4 SBC) to just 9-of-32 from the floor (28.1 percent). The Trojans' 18-of-60 (30.0 percent) field goals for the game is the lowest field goal percentage by a Blue Raider opponent this season.

Conversely, MT also struggled in the first half, connecting on just 28.6 percent of its shots; however, the Blue Raiders recovered to drop in 54.5 percent in the second stanza and finish 20-of-50 (40.0 percent) for the game.

In a battle typical of the series lately between the two programs, it was a physical affair with both teams having their chances to pull away but were unable to do so until the final minutes for Middle Tennessee.

Neither team gained more than a three-point lead through the opening 11-and-a-half minutes until the Trojans broke free from a 13-13 tie with a pair of Ford free throws and a Kiera Clark jumper at 8:25 to claim a four-point edge, 17-13. It would prove to be UALR's largest lead of the entire contest.

The Blue Raiders, however, responded with a 6-0 run of their own as redshirt sophomore Lauren March ignited the spurt with a jumper off an offensive rebound she grabbed. Jones then added a free throw and an old-fashioned three-point play to put MT back on top, 19-17, at the 4:34 mark.

The back-and-forth contest continued to ensue down the stretch, including five more ties. Another Clark jumper provided UALR with a three-point advantage, 25-22, with 37 seconds remaining before a double-technical foul was called. Middle Tennessee used the situation to its favor, using two Jones free throws nine seconds later and another one by her with six seconds left to force the halftime deadlock.

Three quick fouls called on the Trojans in the first 11 seconds of the second period eventually led to the first point, a free throw by freshman Shanice Cason. Again, the difference remained one possession, until Jones drained her lone 3-pointer at 16:42 to widen the gap to four, 33-29. It would be the largest Blue Raider lead to that point.

Within the next minute, a Rowe layup pushed it to five, 35-30, before Williams hit two free throws and Ford converted an old fashioned three-point play to bring the score to 35-35 with 13:37 remaining.

Only one free throw from sophomore Laken Leonard would put MT back on top briefly before UALR

regained the lead on a Ford jumper at the 12:45 mark. Layups by Leonard and Jones sandwiched a Rowe jumper as a 6-0 Middle Tennessee spurt made it a five-point difference, 42-37, with 9:53 left.

The Trojans brought their deficit down to two twice in the next minute-and-a-half before Leonard tallied a top-of-the-key 3-pointer at 7:46 to extend it back to five, 47-42, heading into the under-eight media timeout. Another Rowe layup pushed it to six, 49-43, at the 6:54 mark.

The teams traded buckets over the next three minutes before Jones located Leonard for a back-cut layup and Elie hit a jumper at 2:30 for an eight-point cushion, 55-47. Free throws were traded during the next minute and a pair at the charity stripe from Rowe with 26 seconds to play gave Middle Tennessee their largest lead, 59-48. Ford dropped in a trey with 15 seconds to go to decide the final outcome.

The Blue Raiders will conclude their home slate at 3 p.m. Saturday when they play host to Florida Atlantic in an ESPN3.com broadcast. Middle Tennessee will honor its senior class after the game and before the men's contest that follows in the doubleheader.

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:
It was another tough Little Rock-Middle Tennessee game. They played tough defense, we played pretty good defense, we got on the boards. Ice (Icelyn Elie) went back in there and got some rebounds.
They do a good job. They've got an athletic team, a young team, much like us. It's a big win for us. We are one win away from closing out this season undefeated at home (in conference). And we are also one win away from clinching the championship in the league. We clinched a share today, but I don't like sharing.
The kids need this week off. Laken Leonard was the difference, I thought. She made some big shots. She hit a big three, and then made a great catch of a feed underneath, and then made another great move to score. And we needed that right through that time. And Ebony Rowe was 5-of-6 from the free throw line today. I didn't expect that.
I knew that Ebony was going to come out with fire in her eyes because she didn't feel like she played well the other night. There was no need for any of us to say anything to her because she knew. I was proud of our team.

EBONY ROWE:
About difference in second half
At halftime, Coach wasn't down on us. We knew it was going to be a tough and physical game, and this was one of those games that we knew we were going to have to grind out and work harder than them. So many people in the second half stepped up. Ice made some incredible plays jumping over people, Laken made some crucial shots, so it was just a team effort. Everyone knew that we had to

step up in the second half to beat a really good team.

On the possibility of going undefeated in conference play this season
It is definitely on our minds. The thing that we have really talked about this season is the rocky start we had. We probably dropped some games that we could have won. We talked about it with the coaches and one thing that hasn't been done in a long time is going undefeated in conference play. I think Coach said it had only been done a few times before. That's been our goal, and we are going to stick to it, and take it one game at a time until we reach it.

LAKEN LEONARD:
On the physical play and low scoring of the game
The coaches prepared us for it these last few days in practice, Telling us it was going to be physical, and making our defense push on us in practice on every possession that we were running. Personally, I like it. The more physical, the better I like it.

On getting wide open under the basket a few times
I think they got so focused on Ebony because she does what she does, and they kinda forget sometimes that I am standing out there. Every now and then I can slide behind them.

On the possibility of going undefeated in conference play this season
We've been through so much as a team this year, and all of this has made us stronger and closer. We are a unique team all the way around. We just get closer and closer every day.

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