

Middle Tennessee completes historic home Sun Belt dominance

Blue Raiders 61-1 in home conference games last seven years

February 18, 2012 · Athletic Communications

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. – Middle Tennessee finished off its sixth unbeaten Sun Belt home slate in the last seven years, improving its record at the historic Murphy Center to 61-1 during the period, with a 65-41 victory over Florida Atlantic Saturday afternoon on Senior Day. The Blue Raiders remained the lone unbeaten in conference action this season and extending their overall win streak to 16, tying for third in program history and currently the third best nationally. Middle Tennessee (22-5, 14-0 SBC) enters the final week of the regular season already having secured the program's fourth-straight East Division title and No. 1 seed in the upcoming conference tournament. Saturday's triumph marked the 12th in 13 tries against the Owls in school history and was the sixth-straight in the series. Junior Icelyn Elie paced the Blue Raiders with her second-straight double-double with 13 points and a game-high 10 rebounds. It marks her ninth



double-double of the campaign and 12th of her career. Classmate Kortni Jones led all players in scoring with 21 points, including four 3-pointers, to move within one of the single-season Sun Belt record. She also stands one attempt shy of the single-season conference mark after tossing up 10 Saturday. Sophomore Ebony Rowe added 13 points and eight rebounds, all on the offensive glass, while swiping a team-best four steals. Florida Atlantic (14-11, 9-5 SBC) was led by 10 points from

Chenise Miller, the lone Owl in double figures, while Takia Brooks hauled down a team-best eight boards. Four-straight Middle Tennessee layups allowed the Blue Raiders to race out to an 8-2 advantage during the opening six minutes. However, Kimberly Smith would answer with five-straight points for FAU and a pair of Teri Stamps free throws capped a 7-0 spurt and provided the visitors with their final lead, 9-8, with 12:39 to play in the first half. Jones and sophomore Laken Leonard responded with consecutive triples in the next minute-and-a-half, igniting a 15-2 spurt entering the final five minutes of the period, as Middle Tennessee built a 23-11 cushion on an Elie layup at the 5:04 mark. Smith ended the drought with another 3-pointer at 4:26, bringing the margin to single digits and a Latavia Dempsey jumper just under a minute later closed the gap to eight, 24-16. However, six-straight Blue Raider points closed the half, including a triple from KeKe Stewart with 29 seconds to play, sent MT into the break ahead, 30-16. A lull in scoring marred the early portions of the second half and neither team was able to put points in their respective column until Vontrice Dennis netted a layup for the Owls at 16:41. She would later add a free throw, helping Florida Atlantic to slice the deficit to 10, 33-23, with 14:09 remaining. However, Jones would tally the next seven Middle Tennessee points, followed by a Leonard trey and four-straight from Elie to push the margin to as high as 20, 47-27. FAU would chip away and trim the deficit to 14, 49-35, behind an 8-2 run, but the Blue Raiders countered with eight-straight points of their own, all from Rowe and Jones, to stretch the margin to 22, 57-35, with 4:52 left. The two teams would trade baskets through the final minutes with Elie providing the final five Middle Tennessee points, including a 3-pointer at the 1:34 mark. Saturday's game also marked the final home contest in the career of senior Molly McFadden. McFadden played five minutes and grabbed a defensive rebound. The Blue Raiders return to action when they head to Monroe, La., for a 5:30 p.m. Thursday tip against the ULM Warhawks. It will be the first of two road games for Middle Tennessee to close the regular season. 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 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 4-6, 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:

We made some big plays at opportune times, is about all I can say. Kortni Jones had a great second half, she made some great reads and we took advantage of them.

They (FAU) were very aggressive inside with our posts, and she (Jones) had to do some things outside, and she did. Laken Leonard hit some big shots for us. And Ice (Icelyn Elie) had another double-double. It's hard to contain both Ice and Ebony (Rowe), and I thought KeKe (Stewart) came in and hit a big three for us.

Ever since I have been here, FAU has been the most physical team we play in the league. They don't play dirty, they play aggressive and they play hard, and that is what you want out of a team. They gravitate to their coach. She's a good coach and she gets them to play hard. Give them credit for that. They have beaten some good teams this year.

On going undefeated in conference at home

We can talk about it now. We can't lose one here now. I'm proud of them. You just can't lose at home. You have to hold serve at home. If you are going to win a championship, you have to win on the road, and these kids have done that.

I am very proud of them, but I told them before and after the game that we need this challenge of going to Monroe (ULM) and Western. This is going to get us more focused going into the tournaments, having these last two games on the road. Monroe nearly beat Denver today, at Denver, so that tells you a little bit. That is going to be a tough, tough place to play on Thursday night. And we know that, so we are going to have to go in there very alert and very focused.

On Tina Stewart

There is not a day that we don't think about Tina Stewart and her being on this team. When we go back and look at film from last year, what we see is Tina Stewart. And the things that she is doing are the things that we need this year, her toughness, her slashing ability and her leadership. We miss her and we love her.

KORTNI JONES

On holding them to 16 in the first half and 41 for the game

Coach puts a lot of emphasis on defense. We know they are a penetrating team and they had one really good 3-point shooter, so our focus was to guard penetration, slow them down, help down and we did all three of those things.

On taking charge when FAU clogged the middle

It was something I needed to do. They were really rough on Ebony and weren't letting her get open passes or open shots, so I know if they are doubling hard on her, then I have to be at least a little bit open. Coach told me to take over, and it becomes a mindset that I go into, and I do my best to get the team going.

On keeping up team momentum going into the final two conference games on the road

Coach always tells us that championships are won on the road and he tells us that before every road game. It put us in that mindset of better focus. The Sun Belt Conference tournament is on the road. I think it is really good that we have our last two games on the road. A lot of teams are playing at home, and they won't get that feeling of having to play on the road until they get to the tournament. I think it will actually work to our advantage.

On playing for Tina Stewart this season

We play for Tina. There is not a single game that we don't think about her. She was extremely tough and it is good that no one has forgotten about her. I think it gave her parents, and us, and the rest of the community, a sense that she is still here with us. Every time we play bad, he will say something about Tina and that sparks us. On the break, we all hold up two fingers and a zero, for 20, which is Tina's number. We are going to try to win the Sun Belt championship for her, because if she were here, there would be no question that we would win it.

EBONY ROWE

On going undefeated in league play

That is something that we definitely talk about. We just take it one game at a time. We have such good crowds at home games, we have such good supporters and we wanted to leave them on a good note since they have come and supported us all year.

Is this one of the more physical teams that you have played

I would say so. Later in the season, every team gets more physical, everyone wants to win. It just gets more competitive. That is what you can expect late in the season. You just have to deal with it and get physical back with them.

Printed on July 29, 2014

Original URL: <http://www.goblueraiders.com/content.cfm/id/58640>