Middle Tennessee back to title game with Monday win

Blue Raiders on ESPNU Tuesday with semifinal victory

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HOT SPRINGS, Ark. – Middle Tennessee women's basketball will play for its seventh Sun Belt Tournament title in nine appearances following a 63-53 victory over FIU in Monday's semifinal from the Summit Arena in Hot Springs, Ark. The Blue Raiders will face UALR for the third time in four years. Tuesday's championship game at 1 p.m. will be broadcast nationally on ESPNU with Adam Amin and Tamika Raymond handling the play-by-play and color analyst duties, respectively. Middle Tennessee (26-5) secured its spot and advanced another day after outscoring the Panthers 10-2 in the final 4:50 after FIU closed within two behind a Fanni Hutlassa 3-pointer, her third of the contest. The Blue Raiders also were sparked by a stellar defensive effort on the league's player of the year, Jerica Coley, who was held to nine points. It was her only non-double digit scoring effort of the campaign. Junior Kortni Jones, an All-Sun Belt First Team honoree, led the Middle Tennessee with 20 points, her 12th time reaching the plateau this year. Sophomore Ebony Rowe, who joined Jones on the conference's first team, added her 14th double-double of the season and 30th of her career with 19 points and a team-best 12 rebounds. Rounding out a trio of double-figure scorers for the Blue Raiders was All-Sun Belt Second Team pick Icelyn Elie with 14 points. The threesome combined to net 53 points, matching the entire FIU (22-10) output. Hutlassa guided the Panthers

with 21 points and 14 rebounds, including 11 on the defensive glass. Finda Mansare gave the squad a pair in double digits, chipping in 14, including 10 in the second half. FIU jumped out to a quick 5-0 lead on a Hutlassa triple and jumper from Coley and would then extend its margin to 14-4 by the 13:58 mark following consecutive Mansare layups. Despite the early 10-point deficit, Middle Tennessee did not panic and it mounted a 15-7 spurt during the next five-and-a-half minutes to close within two, 21-19, on an old-fashioned three-point play by Rowe and a 3-pointer from Jones. The Panthers maintained their slim lead, pushing it back to four, 25-21, with 5:36 to go, but the Blue Raiders made it a one-point difference, 25-24, on an Elie layup. Coley pushed it back to three on the next FIU possession before sophomore Laken Leonard hit a circus 3-pointer from the corner to knot the score at 27-27 with 1:45 left. MT was faced with a near shot clock violation before Leonard's wild attempt, which saw her pick the ball up off the floor with two seconds left and just heave it towards the hoop, went through the net. Her triple seemed to provide the momentum the Blue Raiders sought, as Elie then hit a layup and Jones dropped in a 3-pointer with 28 seconds remaining to send Middle Tennessee into the locker rooms ahead five, 32-27. Coley appeared to hit a buzzer-beating shot but the attempt was waved off as it came after the horn. The Blue Raiders were able to stay ahead by as much as five during the opening three-and-a-half minutes of the second half before back-to-back scores by Mansare trimmed the margin to one, 41-40. The two teams traded conversions before Mansare hit a jumper and Sasha Melnikova hit a layup at 11:09 to put FIU on top, 46-43. Middle Tennessee then tallied a 7-0 run behind a layup from Rowe and five-straight points via Jones to claim a 50-46 advantage at the 8:19 mark. Jones added another layup with 4:55 left to keep the lead at five before Hutlassa's final 3-pointer made the difference a pair, 53-51, five seconds later. The Blue Raiders then extended their lead down the stretch, hitting three field goals in four attempts and making 4-of-6 free throws to ice the victory. Middle Tennessee has pushed its all-time semifinal record in the Sun Belt Championships to 9-0, having never lost in its path to the title game. Tuesday's contest, which will be for the conference's automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament, can be heard on the Blue Raider Network of WMOT (89.5 FM) and WGNS (1450 AM, 100.5 FM, 101.9 FM) with Dick Palmer and Duane Hickey calling all the action.

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