Overtime heartbreaker for Blue Raiders in tournament final

Elie nets career-best 29 points

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HOT SPRINGS, Ark. – Middle Tennessee put together an impressive comeback after trailing by as much as 22 in the first half but came up just one point short in dropping a 71-70 decision to UALR in the Sun Belt Tournament championship game Tuesday afternoon. The Blue Raiders never quit after the big deficit and played an extra five minutes for the second time this season. Leading Middle Tennessee in scoring was junior Icelyn Elie, an All-Sun Belt Second Team pick, with a career-high 29 points on 12-of-22 field goals, including 3-of-4 from behind the arc, and a rebound shy of a double-double with nine boards. She also had three blocked shots and an assist in playing the full 45 minutes. Elie scored 19 points during the second half, matching the entire Trojan output for the period. Sophomore All-Sun Belt First Team selection Ebony Rowe added her 15th double-double of the season and 31st of her career with 12 points and a team-best 15 rebounds to go along with three assists. Junior Kortni Jones, also a member of the Sun Belt's First Team, chipped in 18 points, including four more 3-pointers to raise her season total to 113. The trio combined to knock down 8-of-9 free throws. Setting the tone for UALR (20-12) was a 20-point effort from the conference's freshman of the year, Taylor Gault. She was one of four Trojans in double figures. Marian Kursh contributed 18 points and a game-best 16 rebounds, while Taylor Ford (13) and Janette Merriex (11) also were in double-digit scoring. The Blue Raiders went to Rowe for the

game's first bucket but UALR responded with 18 straight, capped by consecutive triples from Gault and Merriex, to take an 18-2 advantage with 13:23 remaining in the first half. Jones finally ended Middle Tennessee's drought with her first triple on the next possession and then sophomore KeKe Stewart hit a turnaround jumper for five-straight MT points. The Trojans then rattled off six-straight points of their own on an old-fashioned three-point play from Britteni Williams and another Gault trey to push their advantage to 17, 24-7, with10:14 left. After three-straight Middle Tennessee (26-6) layups, a Merriex triple capped another 7-0 UALR surge. Stewart's jumper at 6:49 cut the margin down to 14, 31-17, before eight-consecutive points for the Trojans, four apiece from Gault and Ford, provided the game's largest difference, 39-17, at the 4:13 mark. Redshirt sophomore Lauren March and Merriex traded 3-pointers, keeping the Blue Raiders down 22. Middle Tennessee then would outscore UALR 11-2 in the final three minutes, with Gault's buzzer-beating jumper the only Trojan points, to draw within 13, 44-31, at the intermission. Taking it possession-by-possession to begin the second half, the Blue Raiders tallied a 15-2 run during the first six-and-a-half minutes, capped by a pair of Elie charity tosses at 12:33 to force a 46-46 tie. It was the game's first deadlock since 2-2. Following a Kursh free throw to give UALR the one-point edge, Elie went back to work with a layup and MT claimed its first lead since Rowe's opening bucket at 48-47 with 11:42 remaining. The two teams then went back-and-forth, covering nearly the next four-and-a-half minutes, before Jones buried a triple to give Middle Tennessee a two-point, 57-55, advantage with 7:05 to go in regulation. The lead stretched to four on an Elie jumper and then five on two Jones free throws at 5:56, 61-56. Within the next minute, however, the Trojans' Gault hit a jumper and Ford converted an old-fashioned three-point play to knot the score once again, at 61-61, with 5:03 on the clock. Neither team would score again until the waning moments. With the ball in her hands, Jones forced a foul to be called while she was attempting a 3-pointer with just 8.7 seconds to play. She hit the first and third of the three shots, giving the Blue Raiders a two-point cushion, 63-61. Without a timeout, UALR raced down the court and Gault's 17-foot heave dropped in to send the game to overtime. Elie opened the extra frame with a triple but Kursh countered with a layup to keep it a one-point contest, 66-65. Two Rowe free throws extended the margin to three, 68-65, but another layup, this time from Ford, kept the Trojans within one. For the third time of the overtime session, Middle Tennessee pushed its lead to three, on an Elie layup at 2:01. Two Ford free throws on the next UALR possession trimmed the deficit to one, 70-69. Both teams had several chances down the stretch to put the ball in the basket, but neither squad was able drop in a shot. The Trojans called a timeout with 28 seconds left to set up a play and with the Blue Raider defense guarding Gault heavily, Ford broke free to give her team a 71-70 advantage. Jones then took control of the MT offense, but as she drove to the hoop, she was forced to pass out to an open Janay Brinkley. The Middle Tennessee sophomore's attempt rimmed off and Jones threw up one final shot but could not find the bottom of the net to end the contest. Tuesday's contest marked the third time in four years the two teams have played for the Sun Belt title with the Blue Raiders winning the previous two times, in 2009 and 2010. Middle Tennessee will now await its postseason fate. The ESPN NCAA Tournament Selection Show will be at 6 p.m. Monday night.

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