

# Second half comeback falls short in NCAA Tournament

## Blue Raiders end season at 26-7

March 18, 2012 · Athletic Communications

**NASHVILLE, Tenn.** – Middle Tennessee put the pressure on host Vanderbilt early in the second half, forcing a 28-28 tie, but the Blue Raiders were unable to hold on in dropping a 60-46 decision to the Commodores Sunday evening in the NCAA Tournament First Round inside Memorial Gymnasium in Nashville, Tenn. Middle Tennessee found itself down the entire first half but netted seven of the second period's opening 10 points to knot the scoring on a pair of free throws from freshman Shanice Cason at the 15:58 mark. The Blue Raiders stayed within one just over a minute later before Vanderbilt mounted a 17-3 spurt in the next eight-and-a-half minutes to put the game out of reach. Junior Kortni Jones led Middle Tennessee (26-7) with 12 points, including a pair of 3-pointers, both of which came during the early second-half run. She finishes the season with 115 triples, ranking second nationally, and extending her single-season school and conference record.



Sophomore Ebony Rowe was the only other Blue Raider to reach double figures, netting 10 points to go along with her game-high tying 16 rebounds for her 16th double-double of the campaign and 32nd of her career. Fourteen of her 16 boards came on the offensive glass, as she helped MT win the battle on the boards, 41-to-39, against the taller Commodores. Junior Icelyn Elie matched

Rowe's effort with 16 caroms, 10 of which came defensively. As good as Middle Tennessee was getting rebounds, it struggled shooting by connecting on just 28.1 percent for the contest, including 25.0 percent from behind the 3-point arc, and adding just a 50.0 percent effort at the charity stripe. Vanderbilt was led by Jasmine Lister's 19 points with the bulk of her total coming at the foul line on an 11-of-14 performance. Elan Brown contributed 12 points, featuring three treys, while Stephanie Holzer topped the 'Dores with 10 rebounds. Vandy started the game by tallying the opening four points before a driving layup from Jones finally put the Blue Raiders on the board at 17:44. A corner 3-pointer from sophomore Laken Leonard, one of three treys she hit on the day, kept it a one-possession game, 11-8, with 13:37 to go. However, Kady Schrann posted the next four points in a 6-0 spurt as the Commodores built a 17-8 lead at the 11:02 mark. Leonard dropped in another long-range bomb to halt the run. Jones and Rowe then added layups, helping trim the deficit to four, 19-15, as Middle Tennessee used a 7-2 streak over a seven-minute stretch as Vanderbilt (23-9) missed five shots and had five turnovers during the lull. Another Jones layup and a free throw from Rowe brought the Blue Raiders within four, 22-18, but the final minute saw the Commodores score three points to take a seven-point, 25-18, advantage into the locker rooms. Jones got things started quickly in the second frame with her first triple just seven seconds into the half. She then paired with Elie to sandwich a Brown 3-pointer to cut the margin to two before Cason's charity tosses knotted the scoreboard at 28-28 with 16:58 to play. With its post players saddled with foul trouble during the first half, Vanderbilt went back to them when a bucket was needed most. Holzer hit a jumper at 15:41, breaking the deadlock, and igniting a 20-5 surge during the next eight-and-a-half minutes. Christina Foggie, the SEC's leading scorer, knocked down her only 3-pointer of the contest after another Elie layup sliced the Vandy edge to one, 31-30, at the 14:48 mark. It would be the only MT points until she added another at 10:02, keeping her team within five, 37-32. From there, the Commodores ripped off an 11-1 run, capped by a Schrann layup, to push their advantage to 15, 48-33, with 6:27 left. Rowe's jumper at 3:46 made it a 13-point difference, 50-37, but the Blue Raiders would get no closer down the stretch. By the time Lister hit two more free throws with 50 seconds remaining to give Vanderbilt its largest cushion, 57-39, Middle Tennessee began to substitute in bench players. In the final 30 seconds, junior Jamila Ajanaku and senior Molly McFadden, in her last game as a Blue Raider, both hit jumpers. McFadden's points were the final bucket of the contest and came with 4.6 seconds left. Middle Tennessee concludes its campaign with a 26-7 record and reaches its 15th NCAA Tournament in program history, playing Sunday in the Fresno Region live on ESPN2. McFadden, the program's only senior, is the only Blue Raider who will not return next season for head coach Rick Insell's eighth campaign at the helm.

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*Printed on July 26, 2014*

*Original URL: <http://www.goblueraiders.com/content.cfm/id/59636>*