Jones carries Raiders past WKU with career-high

MT wins ninth straight to keep first in SBC East

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- **Box Score (PDF)**

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - In a matchup of the top two teams in the Sun Belt, Middle Tennessee knocked off rival WKU 79-57 behind a career-defining day from senior Kortni Jones on Sunday afternoon inside the Murphy Center.

The Blue Raiders (15-5, 10-1 Sun Belt) opened up to a 16 point margin the first half before the Lady Toppers (15-5, 8-3 SBC) narrowed the deficit to nine at the break. WKU used a 10-4 run to cut the Raider lead to 46-43.

MT used its' staunch defense to hold the Lady Toppers from making a field goal in the final seven minutes. Middle Tennessee extended their win streak to nine, while now holding a two game lead in the SBC East.

Jones netted 28 points, including nine free throws, to top a previous career-mark of 25. The Oak Ridge native was 8-of-13 from the field, while matching a season-best five steals. Lebanon's Icelyn Elie reached double-digits for the 17th time this season with 22 points and eight rebounds.

For the 45th time in her career, Ebony Rowe notched a double-double with 13 points and 12 rebounds.

Offensively, the Raiders shot over 50 percent in the first half and 48.3 percent (28-of-58) in the game. MT held WKU to 33 percent (22-of-66) for the contest. The Raiders controlled the boards, 41-to-37, while picking up 14 assists and 14 steals.

Down early, Shanice Cason hit two free throws to spark a 15-2 run that lasted over six minutes. Near the end of the run, MT's Jones hit two quick fast break layups in less than 20 seconds after steals from Cason and Rowe, respectively.

The Blue Raiders forced WKU into foul trouble early in the half, picking up six fouls in just over five minutes to get into the bonus, and earned 16 trips to the free throw line in the first half. MT shot 74

percent (17-of-23) from the line in the game.

WKU put together an 8-2 run in the final three minutes of the half to make the score 41-33, and took advantage of cold shooting by MT for the first few minutes of the second half, pulling within three, 46-43 at the 14:23 mark.

After a well-positioned timeout by head coach Rick Insell around 13 minutes, MT woke up and strung together seven unanswered points quickly to put the lead back into double-digits.

With five minutes to go, Middle Tennessee exploded with 12 unanswered points in four minutes to put the game away. WKU scored just two free throws in the final five minutes.

The Raiders travel to Florida this week with a visit to FIU on Thursday, Jan. 31 and Florida Atlantic on Saturday, Feb. 2.

NOTES

Senior guard Kortni Jones set a career-high with 28 points and matched a season-best with five steals ... Ebony Rowe recorded her 45th double-double with 13 points and 12 rebounds ... Rowe has now reached double figures in 81 of 84 career games ... She has scored double-digits in 28 straight contests, which is sixth in the NCAA ... Caroline Warden set a career-high with four points and two made field goals ... Middle Tennessee has won 11 consecutive games over WKU and Rick Insell improves to 15-3 all-time against the Lady Toppers.

Head Coach Rick Insell

Opening Comments:

I'm very proud of our basketball team. Western Kentucky gave us two or three shots, we were able to get ourselves under control and push them out. We executed our offense, hit our free throws and we did everything we needed to do.

On Kortni Jones' leadership:

Kortni gave us the leadership on the perimeter we needed today. To start the game, she got the steal up the line and that kind of set the precedence. When she comes to play, she is pretty tough and today she was pretty tough. She knocked down her free throws, she hit 3-of-5 3 pointers, that's what you got to do. She ran our basketball team, anytime you saw her come back a time or two to get the ball when Caroline (Warden) was in there to give her a little comfort zone and she scored a couple times.

On how the experience showed today:

Michelle (Clark-Heard) has done a good job. She took her system and put her players in her system and they are pretty good. You know they are going to be a team that you have to contend with because they have two great scorers in (Chastity) Gooch and (Alexis) Govan. If you have two good scorers and the personnel around them like they got that fill their roles, they have a good basketball team, they are going to be in the mix.

Senior Guard Kortni Jones

On her stretch of 3-pointers:

Coach Insell always says 3-pointers are back breakers, especially when you are on a run and getting a little bit of hope.

On how much pride they take in being so dominant in this series they last few years:

A lot of pride, I actually got a text from Alysha Clark this morning, and it said we haven't lost to Western Kentucky at home and it better not start today. And when you get a text from someone as good as her, knowing that I played with her and seeing how hype they were about beating WKU it was kind of like your focus better be there because otherwise you will hear it from every single player that has come before you.

Senior Forward Icelyn Elie

On how the guarding of Ebony Rowe opened things up for her:

It actually opened things up pretty well. They guarded her and she did what she could, but with her getting the ball and kicking it out I think that helped us out more than anything.

On how they are playing better now like they were expected to:

I think we are playing a lot better than we were at the beginning of the season. I don't think we had much confidence then, but I think we have pulled together and come together as a team, and you know played together. I think that is one of the biggest things that has pushed us and helped us along the way.

WKU Head Coach Michelle Heard-Clark

Opening Statement

I was proud of our kids. We came out in the second half and fought and put us in a position where we were in the game. MT shoots the three well. Kortni Jones got a wide-open shot and after that one she got on a roll, and we didn't get out and contest the shots like we needed to, and that was the game changer.My staff and I have to go back and make some adjustments and make sure that doesn't happen again. We were right there in the ball game, and we need to be able to keep doing the things we need to do to keep getting better and finish out a ball game like that.

On Jones' 3-pt shot to start a MT run in last nine minutes:

That was a huge back-breaker. I've been watching her for years, and she's a big-time player. And big-time players step up and make shots. I look at our kids, and we had Alexis and Chasity show up and we didn't have anybody else show up. To play great teams like Coach Insell's teams, we need to have everybody show up to play.

Sophomore Forward Chastity Gooch

On giving up three-point plays:

It was frustrating. We just needed to sit down and guard. After we made that run, we just let down a little on defense. They made their run, and we weren't able to fight back after that. Kortni Jones can flat-out shoot the ball, and as a team, we need to be more aware of it. Coach adjusted to it and I don't think we took it as seriously as we should have.

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