Top-seeded Raiders survive No. 9 ULM, 59-56

Three reach double figures to advance to semifinals

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HOT SPRINGS, Ark. - No. 1 seed Middle Tennessee used a critical Icelyn Elie block and layup to survive a scare from No. 9 ULM, 59-56, on Saturday in the quarterfinal round of the SBC Championships at the Summit Arena.

The Blue Raiders (23-7) opened up to a 13 point lead midway through the first half, but the Warhawks chipped away and narrowed the lead to six at halftime. The game went back-and-forth in the first half as ULM (10-21) went on a six point run to tie the game. In total, the game tied on 12 different occasions.

With the Raiders holding a 55-54 lead, Elie recorded a critical block to prevent the go-ahead lead. Elexar Tugler tied the game, but MT used a layup with 45 seconds to go to help MT remain ahead. Kortni Jones drained two free throws in the final 20 seconds. A last second heave by ULM fell short.

Middle Tennessee advanced to its 10th Sun Belt semifinal appearance. MT's win over the Warhawks marked the first time this tournament that the higher seed won the game. The Raiders will host No. 5 seed FIU, who defeated No. 4 seed Arkansas State 57-50.

Elie led MT with 17 points, five rebounds and three blocks in 40 minutes. The Lebanon product was 6-of-12 from the field and 4-of-4 from the charity stripe. All-America candidate Ebony Rowe earned her 18th double-double this season and the 50th of career with 16 points and 14 rebounds.

Jones tallied 16 points, including two three-pointers. Perhaps the most important stat was Jones' perfect 6-of-6 performance at the free throw line. Laken Leonard added six points and five rebounds for MT, while dishing out an assist.

For the contest, MT made 19-of-51 attempts for 37 percent. The Warhawks were 40 percent (23-of-57) from the field. Rebounds favored the Blue Raiders, 40-36. MT made 17 free throws, ULM

connected on eight.

The Blue Raiders opened up the game on a 9-0 run to take a 17-5 lead with 8:43 to play. However, ULM cut the deficit to 26-20 at the half. Elie led the Raiders with 11 points, while Rowe had nine rebounds. The Raiders shot 38 percent in the half and scored 10 points off Warhawks turnovers.

In the second half, ULM used solid defense and hot shooting to even the game at 30. From there, the game was tied 11 times in the second half. The Warhawks were 50 percent from the field, draining 14-of-28 attempts. MT was held to 37 percent, but hit 11 free throws down the stretch.

On Sunday, Middle Tennessee takes on No. 5 seed FIU. The Panthers knocked off No. 4 seed Arkansas State, 57-50. The Raiders and FIU tip off at Noon in a televised game on the Sun Belt Network.

NOTES

Middle Tennessee improves to 10-0 all-time against ULM ... The Raiders are now 28-6 all-time in the Sun Belt Tournament and 9-2 in Hot Springs ... Ebony Rowe registered her 18th double-double this season and the 50th of her career ... Kortni Jones moves into a tie for sixth all-time with Patrice Holmes and Chelsia Lymon with 124 career games played.

Middle Tennessee Quotes

Opening Statement from Head Coach Rick Insell:

"I thought going into this Monroe was the most improved team in our conference, I told the girls that. They are very athletic, they are very sound fundamentally, they know who they need to shoot the ball and where the need to shoot the ball and they get it to those people and they finish. It was tough on these two kids all night long (Icelyn Elie and Ebony Rowe) and these two kids are All-Americans. I give them a hand. They played us tough. I'm proud of them but I'm also proud of our bunch."

Question for Head Coach Insell: Is it good to get a close game out of your system?

"This is the way it's been all year from the very beginning. If you look back before Christmas we were in three overtimes. This is the way this bunch has been all year long and they know how to play under this type of pressure."

On being the first higher seed to win a game in the women's tournament...

I said coming into this tournament to everybody that there were nine or ten teams that could win this tournament. I don't know who would believe me, but I've gone through the conference and played everybody twice.

Question for Icelyn Elie: Did you expect a scare in the quarterfinal game?

"Definitely not scare, but like coach said he told us from the beginning that they were the most improved team that he has seen already. They impressed us whenever they came in, especially the post.

Question for Ebony Rowe: Did you see this game going down to the final possession?

"Honestly, I thought that most of the game. That's the thing about tournament time. Everyone gives you their best shot. Like coach said before we started, everything before this point doesn't mean anything, it's a new season.

On how ULM got back into the game...

"We made a lot of silly plays, no disrespect to them. They played really hard, that's how they got back into the game. We just made a lot of silly plays on ourselves, not rotating over on defense, bad passes when we didn't' need to. It's a game of ups and downs. They're going to go on a run, we're going to go on a run. As long as we're up at the end, that's all that matters.

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