

Powerful finish propels Raiders into SBC title game

MT advances to 10th title game in 11 years

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HOT SPRINGS, Ark. - A second half comeback propelled Middle Tennessee into its' 10th Sun Belt Championship title game, as the top-seeded Blue Raiders upended No. 5 seed FIU, 68-59, Sunday afternoon at the Summit Arena.



The Blue Raiders (24-7) were held to under 40 percent shooting in the first half, knocking down just 7-of-19 attempts. FIU (19-12) also outmanned MT by 10 boards

in the opening stanza. The Panthers opened to their largest lead of 10 early in the second period. MT shot 52 percent (13-of-25) down the stretch and used 19 second half points from All-America candidate Ebony Rowe to secure the win.

MT makes its' 10th Sun Belt Championship title game appearance in 11 years on Monday. The Blue Raiders return to the SBC Championship for the second consecutive year and faces No. 2 seed UALR in a nationally televised game on ESPNU set for 1 p.m.

With eight minutes remaining, the Raiders trailed 50-51. Rowe's layup at 8:10 gave MT its' first lead of the half and sparked an 18-to-9 run to end the game. Rowe finished with 21 points and 10 rebounds for her 19th double-double this season and the 51st of her career. The junior knocked down 7-of-10 from the line.

FIU's Jerica Coley drained a jumper at 3:13 to cut the Raiders' lead to 60-59. Kortni Jones hit a critical shot on the next possession to extend the MT advantage to three. Jones added two more free throws and Caroline Warden picked up a critical steal before drawing a foul to add two more points.

Jones finished the game with 26 points, going 7-of-14 from the field and 8-of-8 at the charity stripe. The Oak Ridge product dished out seven assists in 40 minutes of action. Warden scored 10 points with three assists and a steal.

Icelyn Elie narrowly missed a double-double with 10 points and eight rebounds. The Lebanon

product also notched two assists and two steals in 40 minutes.

Overall, MT shot 46 percent (20-of-44) from the field, while both teams corralled 33 rebounds. The Raiders had 14 assists and produced three blocks, all of which were from Rowe.

In the first half, Middle Tennessee opened on a four point run. It was short-lived as both squads traded baskets. A four minute scoring drought gave the Panthers an opportunity to take a six point lead into the locker room. For the half, Coley had 15 points as FIU shot 46 percent (13-of-28). Jones led MT with 13.

FIU capitalized on its momentum and stretched the edge to 10 points before MT clawed its way back in. MT used several layups and combinations of free throws to tie the game. From there, the Raiders went on an 18-9 run to secure its' 10th title game appearance. Coley, the nation's leading scorer, was held to just seven second half points.

The Blue Raiders take on No. 2 seed UALR for Monday's Sun Belt Championship game. Tip is set for 1 p.m. at the Summit Arena. It will be televised on ESPNU.

NOTES

Ebony Rowe (989) moves within three rebound of the all-time rebound leader Jennifer McFall's total of 992 ... Rowe earned her 51st double-double with 21 points and 10 rebounds ... MT is 10-0 in Sun Belt semifinal games and 7-0 under Rick Insell ... The Blue Raiders improve to 2-0 against FIU in the Sun Belt Tournament ... Kortni Jones (255) is two made 3-pointers away from become the school's all-time leader. Brandi Brown has the current school record of 257 ... Jones is tied for fourth with 125 career games played ... The 10 point deficit was the largest the Raiders have overcome this season.

Middle Tennessee Quotes

Opening Statement from Head Coach Rick Insell:

"Heck of a game, heck of a game. Two very good teams, two teams that didn't want to go down. Two teams that have been battling each other now since these kids have been freshman and all the through to right now. Same type of players, same players as a matter of fact. They respect us, we respect them. It's a great game, great game. I hate that we had to put them out, but I'm very happy that we get to move on and I'm very proud of our basketball program right now."

Question for Head Coach Insell: On defending Jerica Coley...

"We've been playing Coley for three years and she's been doing what she did this afternoon every game to us. We knew that we were going to have to make her work on the defensive end and that's what Kortni was talking about. You've only got so much energy and we wanted to take some of that out. I think you saw that late when she was not nearly as accurate late with her shot as she was early. The kids did a good job of rotating in and out and everybody was going to have to guard her."

Question for Ebony Rowe: On the strategy behind guarding Jerica Coley...

"She's a heck of a player. We needed Janay's (Brinkley) quickness at times to slow her down and when she got tired I think me and Ice (Icelyn) were on her and he (Coach Insell) wanted us to use our length. You're not going to stop her, but you can slow her down and contest her shot and that's

what we tried to do."

On her difference of play in the first half compared to the second half...

"Coach came up to me at halftime and we had a one-on-one conversation and said, 'Look, you've only taken three shots.' I knew that I wasn't being aggressive, I wasn't asking for the ball and I just needed to step up for my teammates. Kortni got me the ball and made some amazing passes in the second half and we got it done."

Question for Kortni Jones: On getting Ebony going in the second half...

"After playing with Ebony for three years, you kind of learn what passes she will catch and what passes she prefers. I try to put it right on the money; I try to make it easy for her. I just try to get her the ball, she's our horse. I think I understand that and everybody on this team understands that. When you go to her, it's almost a 100 percent chance that she's going to score and I definitely didn't mind."

On being down ten points in the second half...

"I looked at Ebony and Ice (Icelyn) and said we have to make something happen. Everybody is here for the same thing and we're going to get a championship. Coach put an emphasis on sticking with the offense and doing what we know is going to win us the game and I think that's what we did."

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