Blue Raiders down UNC Greensboro, face Belmont in championship Sunday

Tipoff slated for 3:30 p.m. CT in Murphy Center

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee men's basketball shot 60 percent in the second half to pull away from UNC Greensboro for an 82-60 win on Saturday night in the EA Sports Maui Invitational Regional Games at Murphy Center. The Blue Raiders (4-0), off to their best start since the 1994-95 season, will take on the Belmont Bruins (1-2) in the championship game of the tournament on Sunday at 3:30 p.m. CT. in Murphy Center. Junior guard Marcos Knight led the Blue Raiders with 17 points and three steals, while three others posted double-figure performances as well. Junior forward JT Sulton netted 16 points, sophomore forward Shawn Jones scored 12 and junior guard Bruce Massey added 11. Massey also had three assists and three steals. Sophomore guard Kerry Hammonds chipped in a team-high four assists and matched Knight and Massey with three steals. For UNCG (1-3), Aloysius Henry had 12 points and Korey Van Dussen scored 11. The Spartans will face Towson (0-3) in the consolation game on Sunday at 1 p.m. CT. Although MT was out-rebounded, 34-30, the Blue Raiders forced 23 turnovers and scored 26 points off the takeaways while turning the ball over 14 times. The key for MT was the free throw line, where the Blue Raiders went 28-for-36, compared to the Spartans' 9-for-18 performance. The Blue Raiders had a rough start, falling behind by as many as nine midway through

the first half. Jones' dunk at the 9:27 mark sparked a 10-0 rally, capped by Knight's only triple of the game, to give MT a 22-21 lead with 5:44 to play. The two teams seesawed through the final minutes of the opening frame, but MT took the lead at the break, 29-27, after Knight sank a pair of free throws. Senior forward LaRon Dendy knocked down a pair of free throws to open the second half, and the Blue Raiders wasted little time stretching the lead to eight after a 10-4 run to begin the second stanza. MT held the Spartans without a field goal for 4:32 midway through the second half and, in the meantime, built the lead to 18 thanks in part to a pair of 3-pointers from junior guard Raymond Cintron. After going 3-for-3 from long range against UCLA, Massey knocked down his fourth consecutive triple against the Spartans at the 2:46 mark to give the Blue Raiders a 28-point lead, the largest of the contest. The Spartans made a pair of late 3-pointers, but couldn't overcome the Blue Raider defense as MT took home the 82-60 win. **Postgame Quotes**

Head coach Kermit Davis

On his team's performance in the first half and how MT fought through adversity

"They're a good group of guys, but we fought them a little bit the last couple of days, not in a bad way. But we had just a little bit of UCLA lingering in us. I could tell. UNC just really buckled down and was real physical, made some things tough on us. One thing I like about our team is we fought through some adversity and got the game back right. There's a lot of different ways to win games with a lot of different lineups. We had to go small because of foul trouble, but found a way. There's a lot of things we can improve on. Another thing too, what a great crowd for a Saturday afternoon. That was terrific, and I think we'll need to grow. And it should be a great environment here tomorrow afternoon."

On his team's offensive production in the second half compared to the first in games this season

"The ball never went side-to-side in the first half, and, in the second half, we had 11 assists to only five turnovers and we shot 60 percent. That was kind of like what it was like at Marymount second half, Austin Peay second half, UCLA second half. So, that's just something we have to continue to be much, much better in." *On experience that MT got with multiple lineups because of foul trouble and the depth of this season's team*

"When we can absorb LaRon (Dendy) and have him play only 18 minutes, and we've got Jason Jones and Torin Walker out, and we went deep into our bench, I think that says a lot about what we can do, what we've done already and still fight through some things. Sometimes in years past, we couldn't absorb these kinds of injuries, and we've had some (injuries) to some key guys, but this year we're much improved in that area." **Forward JT Sulton**

On the team's slow start

"I just think we did not come out with as much energy as we needed. Our last few practices have not been as good as normal. We just had to turn it up in the second half."

On getting involved in the offense

"The whole key to our offense is moving the ball and sharing the ball and just playing as a team. In the first half, we just settled for the first open shot. When we drove the ball, it appeared we were not looking to score or attack their 1-3-1 defense, but in the second half we did a much better job."

On the game against Belmont

"It is going to be a big game. Since I played against them last year, I know that they are a good team. They are going to come in here and try to get a win. That is the whole objective of the game. We just have to match them physically because they are a very physical team. Many of their players like to shoot 3-point shots, so we just have to get up and guard them, rebound and play physically the entire game."

Guard Marcos Knight

On the team's defense

"Our offense starts on the defensive end. We got ball pressure by Bruce Massey and we were able to take away their size, which is important. Our defense leads into our offense. Whenever we play well defensively, it translates into a better offense."

On whether the team came out flat after the win over UCLA

"The win over UCLA was a great win, but we have to put that behind us and move forward. We came out a little flat and we only had three assists at one point as we were not moving the ball from side to side like Coach Davis talks about. In the second half, we shared the ball more and you can see that we had 82 points by the end of the game compared to only 29 at halftime."

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