Davis earns record-breaking win in Blue Raider victory over FIU

Davis surpasses Earle as program's all-time winningest coach

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Blue Raider men's basketball head coach Kermit Davis became Middle Tennessee's all-time winningest coach with the team's 71-66 victory over the FIU Panthers in the Sun Belt opener for both teams on Thursday night at Murphy Center. The 10th-year head coach has 165 victories at the helm of the Blue Raiders, surpassing former MT coach Jimmy Earle, who held the record with 164. Junior forward JT Sulton scored a season-high 17 points and led five Blue Raiders (12-2, 1-0 SBC) in double figures. Sophomore forward Shawn Jones matched his career-high of 15 points and senior forward LaRon Dendy posted his third double-double of the season with 11 points and 10 rebounds, in addition to chipping in three blocks. Junior guard Raymond Cintron scored 12 points and Marcos Knight added 11 points to go along with six assists, six rebounds and three steals. FIU (3-10, 0-1 SBC) saw a trio of Panthers reach double-digit scoring, paced by Phil Taylor's 22. Jeremy Allen tallied 17 points and Dominique Ferguson added a double-double with 14 points and 11 rebounds. The Blue Raiders matched their season-low with just eight turnovers, while capitalizing on 16 FIU turnovers and converting them to 20 points. The Panthers did, however, out-shoot MT, hitting 51 percent of their shots compared to the Blue Raiders' 40 percent. The free throw line also proved to be a critical part

of the game, as MT was 27-of-42, a season-high for attempts, while FIU finished just 10-of-23. Allen sank a 3-pointer to open the contest, but a dunk from Dendy and a Knight free throw tied the contest in the early going. The two teams traded the next three baskets before Sulton knocked down four consecutive free throws to give MT a 9-7 lead at the 14:11 mark in the first half. Cintron then found Sulton for the alley-oop dunk and the Yazoo City, Miss., product added another free throw as he scored seven straight points for the Blue Raiders, sparking a 6-0 run. Cintron capped the run with a triple to make it 15-9 with 12:52 remaining in the frame. The Panthers used a 7-2 run to pull within one with 10:44 to go in the half before the Blue Raiders responded with a 9-0 run to stretch the lead to as many as 10 after Cintron drained another trey to make it 26-16. Allen's pair of free throws after a technical foul was called on Dendy with 4:41 to play brought FIU back within two, but this time it was Zane Gibson with the answer on a 3-pointer that put MT back up by five. A jumper from Sulton stretched the Blue Raiders' lead to eight with 2:45 to go, giving him 12 first-half points. Ferguson's pair of layups whittled the Panthers' deficit down to three with eight seconds left before the break, but he picked up a technical foul with 1.3 seconds on the clock and Cintron sank both free throws to give MT a 38-33 halftime lead. Sulton picked up where he left off in the second half, throwing down a dunk to open the second stanza. Although Taylor's jumper sparked a 6-0 run to cut MT's lead down to one again with 16:51 remaining in the contest, the Blue Raiders hit six consecutive free throws, including four straight from Jones, to go back up by seven. After Gilles Dierckx's layup made it 46-41, Dendy picked up a loose ball and dished to Knight for the finish under the basket to give MT the seven-point advantage. A pair of free throws from Taylor brought the Panthers within five once again, and this time it was Cintron responding with a triple for the 51-43 advantage with 12:16 to go. Dendy converted defense into offense with 9:21 left, blocking a shot, picking up the rebound, then passing across the court to Knight on a fastbreak for the layup to make it 56-46, matching MT's largest lead of the game. FIU battled back with another 6-0 run, again getting baskets from a trio of Panthers to cut the deficit down to four at the 6:08 mark. The two teams traded the next four baskets, but it was Taylor's triple that pulled the Panthers within four. MT answered another triple from Taylor that made it a three-point contest with another rousing alley-oop, as Massey connected with Dendy to make it 68-63 with 1:32 to play. Jones made it back-to-back possessions with a dunk on a pass from Knight, then Cintron took control of a loose ball with 24 seconds left and converted one of two free throws on the opposite end. Allen's layup in the final three seconds accounted for the final score of 71-66. The Blue Raiders return to the court on Saturday for a contest against South Alabama. Tipoff is slated for 2:30 p.m. CT at Murphy Center and the game will air on the Sun Belt Network following the women's contest, which is scheduled for noon. **Postgame Quotes**

COACH KERMIT DAVIS: The type of game didn't surprise me one bit. I had watched FIU, they should have beaten Maryland, had Dayton by 10 at Dayton, beat George Mason. I knew we were going to get their best shot.

We had good looks, but we struggled sometimes shooting the ball. We showed good balance, we had five guys in double figures. I just told our team that there are going to be a lot of games around the country in different leagues, just like that. That is just what league play is, and I'm proud of our guys for finding a way to win.

They played very physical, we weren't at our complete best, but home openers in league play are like this.

(On how 165 wins feels): It feels good to just be 1-0 in league play. That's the most important thing. But it is quite an honor to be the winningest coach, and there have been a lot of really good

coaches at this school. Coach Earle is one of my very best friends, and it feels good to be mentioned in the same breath with him.

A lot of it is staying power. Sometimes you do your best job with some injuries and trying to win 17 games.

(On hustle plays tonight): Loose balls and the 50/50 balls are something we talk about all the time. In the first half, we were up nine or ten, and I thought FIU got a lot of those balls, but in the second half we came up with them when we had to.

(On entering conference play): The field kind of levels out when you get into conference play. Some nights there may be some lop-sided games around the league, but most of them are going to be battles. From our standpoint, when you are off to an 12-2 start, you are going to get every team's very best shot. That's just one of those things we are going to have to be ready for every night.

(What has been the biggest factor in your success at Middle Tennessee?): The opportunity I was given to coach here. We still have a lot of goals out there, obviously the NCAA tournaments is something we have really strived for. I think we have done it these ten years with class. Our guys conduct themselves in the community with no problem. All the community service stuff we do. Graduating players, which will be 24 in a row in May.

(How tough was it to come back after such a long layoff after beating Ole Miss last week?): Tonight was only our second game in about 16 days. We had played so many games in a row, then had this layoff. We need to get back in the groove of playing, and get our rhythm back.

MARCOS KNIGHT (on how tough the conference opener was): Coach talked to us about conference play, how tough it was, and how good everybody in our conference is. He said a lot of games will be ugly like that, but we have to find a way to win, and we did tonight.

The game was pretty physical early, but after that technical foul, it kind of cut a lot of stuff out, but all games are going to be physical. We have to be ready for a physical game like that.

(On low shooting percentage for the team): There are going to be some games like that. We are not going to hit every shot. We have to do a lot of things like rebound and defend, get the 50-50 balls. But we'll shoot better Saturday.

SHAWN JONES: We expect to get everybody's best shot. We and Denver are at the top, so everybody's gunning for us.

My role is to come in off the bench and make some plays and pick everybody up, get some rebounds, things like that.

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