Blue Raiders match program's best start with victory over Arkansas State

MT now 18-2 overall and 7-0 in Sun Belt

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - The Blue Raider bench proved to be the difference-maker in a 59-46 win for the Middle Tennessee men's basketball team over the Arkansas State Red Wolves on Thursday night at Murphy Center. MT's bench out-scored its ASU counterpart, 28-0, led by Kerry Hammonds' 13 points, as the Blue Raiders improved to 18-2 to match the best start in program history. MT also remains the only undefeated team in the Sun Belt at 7-0 after winning their 10th-straight on Thursday night. The streak matches the fourth-longest in program history and the 7-0 league start is the third-best in the school annals, both dating back to the 1985-86 season. The Blue Raiders start this season matches the 18-2 record of the 1974-75 season. In addition to Hammonds, Marcos Knight and JT Sulton also scored double-figures with 12 and 10 points, respectively. Sulton grabbed a team-high eight rebounds and had a pair of blocks, while Knight chipped in four assists. Bruce Massey showed his defensive prowess once again, collecting four steals to go along with four assists and two points. The Blue Raiders held Arkansas State (8-12, 2-4 SBC) to just 21.7 percent shooting the second half, as the Red Wolves went a 15-minute stretch with just one field goal during the latter frame. ASU finished the contest shooting 32.6 percent, led by Marcus Hooten with 15 points, but managed to hang around thanks to 13-of-22 free throw shooting. Massey got the Blue Raiders rolling with a steal and throw-ahead to Knight on the perimeter. Knight then kicked it inside

to Dendy for the opening dunk. Sulton's jumper made it 4-2 before the Red Wolves went on a 7-2 run for the 9-6 lead. Shawn Jones and Knight then sandwiched buckets around an Ed Townsel layup to make it a one-point game midway through the first half. The Blue Raiders regained the lead when Dendy completed a three-point play. Dendy picked up Sulton's missed layup and was fouled on the putback. After he knocked down a free throw, Hammonds was there for another putback to give MT a 15-12 advantage with 9:52 to go before the break. The 7-0 spurt continued with Massey's driving layup before Malcoln Kirkland ended ASU's 3:41 field-goal drought with a layup. Kirkland finished the game with 12 points. Following Kirkland's bucket, MT responded with seven more unanswered points, capped by James Gallman's triple to make it 24-14 at the 6:23 mark. The Red Wolves quickly cut the deficit back to five with five straight points from Hooten, kick-starting a 12-0 run. Brandon Peterson's turnaround layup and another basket from Hooten brought ASU back to within one and Trey Finn's 3-pointer put ASU back on top, 26-24, with 3:20 left in the opening half. Finn would go on to score 11 points in the contest, while Peterson managed a game-high 10 rebounds. Hammonds put a stop the run with a trey from the corner, seesawing the Blue Raiders back to a one-point lead. After Torin Walker knocked down a free throw, Hooten countered with a pair of freebies to knot things at 28, but it was Hammonds with another triple that gave the Blue Raiders a 31-28 advantage at the break. Knight scored the Blue Raiders' first three points of the second half, but Kirkland's back-to-back layups rallied the Red Wolves in front, 35-34. It was Knight again putting MT back on top, this time with a pass as he found Shawn Jones underneath for the lay-in. Hammonds drained his third bucket from long-range to make it a four-point gap nearly six minutes into the second stanza. The Blue Raiders went on a 14-4 run over the next seven minutes and, in the meantime, held the Red Wolves to one field goal during a 15-minute stretch. ASU took advantage of free throws to stay within striking distance, hitting seven in the span, but Sulton took over, scoring six straight points to give MT an 11-point advantage with 3:24 to go. Hooten finally ended an eight-minute field-goal drought for the Red Wolves with a 3-pointer at the 1:55 mark to cut ASU's deficit to 10, but Knight nailed a triple of his own for the final dagger. The Blue Raiders take their 10-game winning streak to South Alabama this weekend, squaring off against the Jaguars on Saturday. Tipoff is slated for 7:05 p.m. CT and the contest will air on WGNS (1450 AM, 101.9 FM, 100.5 FM), WNSR (560 AM) and WMOT (89.6) with Chip Walters and Kyle Turnham on the call.

Postgame Quotes

Middle Tennessee head coach Kermit Davis

Opening statement …

"The bench was a critical factor tonight like it has been in many games that we have won this season. We outscored them 28-0 in bench points. Kerry Hammonds, James Gallman and Shawn Jones were all great tonight. Jimmy Oden did a nice job in the second half of running and defending. I knew the game was going to be like it was. John Brady's team is very physical and tough. The key to tonight's game was our inability to force them to use their bench players. We could not even get into the bonus allowing us to shoot one-and-one free throws. We could not get them into foul trouble and they have a very good starting five. Their starting five all played more than 35 minutes, so they played the majority of the game."

On maintaining the team's current momentum …

"We just have to keep being a good practice team. We have to be very good tomorrow in our preparation for South Alabama. We still have to get balanced scoring. LaRon Dendy, who has been great for us all season, just did not have his best game tonight. I thought our other guys responded and played well off the bench."

On the play of Kerry Hammonds …
"He was playing terrific before he got injured. It has taken about three weeks for him to get healthy. We have seen the progress he has made in practice. Arkansas State has very big guards and they exposed Raymond Cintron with their size. Kerry Hammonds has lots of length and really played well offensively."

On the team's defensive effort in the second half …
"I think Arkansas State got a little bit tired and I think our bench players contributed to that. We played very well in the second half, holding them to 21 percent shooting and 32 percent for the game."

On the key to the team's success this season …
"We have been a very good practice team. It has been competitive in practice because guys want to play in games. Obviously, we are still playing guys in games based on how well they practice and we will do this against South Alabama on Saturday. When you have lots of depth, it forces them to be competitive during practice."

On tonight's crowd …
"The crowd was fabulous. It was great to see the student section packed and everyone in the community that came out tonight. I would like to thank everyone that came tonight. We had just shy of 6,000 people tonight. The students created lots of energy. It was not one of the most exciting games to watch as Arkansas State forces you to play a grinding type of game. The crowd was a critical factor in us winning the game tonight."

Guard Marcos Knight
On the team's 18-2 start …
"It feels nice, but we are not satisfied. We work hard every day. They say that if you work hard in practice, it pays off during games. We are going to continue to stay hungry and continue to work hard."

On being forced to play a slow tempo game …
"We have to simply find a way to win those types of games. We are not going to shoot great in every game. Great teams find a way to win these types of games. Arkansas State tried to slow the game down and make it a half-court game. However, we can play a half-court game when we need to. Arkansas State is a great team and it was a great win tonight."

On the team's defensive effort in the second half …
"At halftime, Coach Davis talked to us about defending. We did not defend or rebound very well in the first half. We got going defensively in the second half and got some easy baskets on the offensive end and rebounded the ball well."

On the support of the fans …
"We thank our student body and our fans for coming out tonight. They play a big part in all of our games. We ask them to continue to come out and support us the rest of the season."

Guard Kerry Hammonds
On returning from injury …
"I have been trying to work myself back into game shape by getting in as much practice as I can. I know the game is much different than practice, so I am focused on getting into the best shape that I

can."

On coming out of the game in the second half …
"I got winded chasing around Marcus Hooten and Trey Finn the entire game. I tried to fight through it as much as I could, but eventually I hit the wall."

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