

Blue Raiders battle Vanderbilt to the wire

Dendy scores career-high 22 points

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. - LaRon

Dendy scored a career-high 22 points, but the Blue Raider men's basketball team came up short in a back-and-forth battle against the Vanderbilt Commodores, falling 84-77 on Saturday afternoon at Memorial Gym in front of 14,316 fans. JT Sulton, Bruce Massey and Marcos Knight also cracked double-figures.

Dendy finished the contest 8-for-11 from the field and was a big reason for MT's 57.4 percent shooting in the contest. He also went 5-for-6 from the free throw line, adding four rebounds, two assists and two blocks in the contest. Sulton scored 12 points, while Massey and Knight each had 10. Massey also tallied a game-high five assists as the Blue Raiders fell to 20-3 on the season. MT was also hot from beyond the arc, hitting 7-of-13 shots for 53.8 percent. Kerry Hammonds knocked down a pair of key treys off the bench,

accounting for six of the Blue Raider's 15 bench points. The Blue Raider defense held Vandy's bench scoreless. The Commodores (16-5), however, created 17 points off 14 MT turnovers, while the Blue Raiders produced seven points off nine Vandy turnovers. Vandy also held a 28-22 advantage on the glass. Four Commodores scored double-figures, led by John Jenkins with a game-high 26 points. Festus Ezeli tallied 21, including an 11-for-13 performance from the line. Jeffery Taylor had 17 points and Lance Goulbourne finished with 11. Goulbourne also had a game-high eight rebounds. It was a seesaw affair from the get-go, as Vandy opened the game with a 7-2 run before MT responded with a 10-0 spurt, taking its first lead of the contest when Knight and Raymond Cintron sank back-to-back 3-pointers. The Commodores went a 4:22 stretch without a field goal



while the Blue Raiders worked the lead up to five. MT built the lead to as many as eight on JT Sulton's lay-in with 8:22 to play in the first half and the Blue Raiders maintained the lead until the 6:19 mark when a Jenkins' trey tied the game at 28. Dendy answered with a triple of his own and Massey added a layup to make it a five-point MT advantage again. The two teams engaged in their second tie of the contest with 4:11 to play after Ezeli completed a three-point play, then the Commodores took a 35-33 lead on the ensuing possession. Massey knocked down a pair of free throws to knot it up again, but another Jenkins' 3-pointer and Ezeli's jumper down the stretch gave Vandy a 44-39 edge at the break. Sulton scored MT's first four points of the second stanza with back-to-back jumpers, then Dendy caught fire to score the Blue Raiders' next six points. Dendy went on to score 15 points in the second half. A pair of free throws for Sulton pushed MT back into the lead for the first time in the latter frame, but Jenkins' immediate 3-pointer put the Commodores back up by two with 14:43 to play. Dendy knocked down a pair of free throws to make it 55 all before Vandy reeled off back-to-back layups for another four-point lead. MT rose to the challenge again, as Dendy threw down a rousing dunk on a lob from Massey and Knight drove into the lane for a pull-up jumper. Massey turned defense into offense to give the Blue Raiders a 62-59 advantage when he came up with a steal and got the ball ahead to James Gallman. Gallman drove underneath the basket before kicking to Hammonds in the corner for the go-ahead triple. Vandy trimmed the deficit back to one with 7:55 left in the contest on a layup from Taylor and tied the contest for the seventh time after Jenkins completed a three-point play. The two teams traded baskets on the next two possessions before Jenkins added another three-point play to give the Commodores a one-point edge, but another 3-pointer from Hammonds put MT back on top, 75-74, at the 3:30 mark. Tied at 76 with 1:57 to go, Vandy went on an 8-1 run, taking advantage of layups from Jenkins and Ezeli in addition to four free throws down the stretch to capture the seven-point win. The Blue Raiders' three-game road swing continues on Thursday, as MT re-engages in Sun Belt action at North Texas. Tipoff is slated for 7 p.m. CT in Denton, Texas. Following Thursday's contest, the Blue Raiders will travel to Denver for a 3 p.m. CT game on Saturday, which will air on ESPN2. **Postgame Quotes**

MT head coach Kermit Davis

Opening Statement

"I'm sure Kevin said the same thing, what a terrific atmosphere for a basketball game. I'm a big fan of Vanderbilt's team. I enjoy watching them play even when we're not playing against them. They play the right way, great speed and size, they're well-coached, they play smart, and they've got great experience on that team. I thought at the end, our team kind of went out of character for a minute and a half and it summed the game up. They just made two or three plays at the end, had a couple of breakdowns, two-possession game, but I thought it was just a great college game today."

On LaRon Dendy's play:

"He was terrific today. He made a lot of big field goals for us. We were down two, pick and pop for LaRon and he kind of fumbled the ball and he was supposed to drive right at Ezeli, and then we were down two and we never switched a high ball screen, we kind of switched and Ezeli laid it in right there. But LaRon really did, he played fantastic."

On where the team stands at this point in the season:

"I think we already knew we have a really good competitive team, but when you test your mettle at Vanderbilt, who, it's like any college team, with that experience right there, they can make a deep run in the NCAA tournament, you go to their home floor, and then play the way we played today, I think it just re-emphasized what we already thought. We have a really competitive team that can play with most teams in college basketball."

Junior guard Bruce Massey

On the NCAA Tournament feel to the game:

“When we came to warm-up, we could feel that it was going to be a tough atmosphere from the get-go. We knew Vandy was a great team coming in. We knew they had experience. They’ve been together three or four years, so we knew this was going to be a tough road game. Also, it let us know what we need to work on.”

On the difference at the end of the game:

“Their veteran attitude, their confidence, and their experience kicked in. They made plays down the stretch that we’re not really used to it in these types of games. Veteran teams do that, so now we know what we need to work on going back to practice.”

On the upcoming road trip:

“Going back to Sun Belt Conference play we need to realize that this is a conference game. We are still number one, people are still trying to knock us off, and so we have to get right back to work.”

On where MTSU stacks up:

“We think we can play with a lot of teams across the country, but we have to keep working hard. If we just play our game, and make more plays down the stretch like they did, we’ll be fine.”

Senior forward LaRon Dendy

On Vandy making more plays at the end:

“It was bad execution on defense and offense in the last two minutes. We live and we learn. We have a lot of games ahead of us. We’re going to work on it, and get better from it.”

On the need to make changes:

“Everything should stay the same. If anything, we should just get better. Look at this game, learn from it, and get better from it.”

On making a statement:

“I feel like we accomplished something. We showed the world that we can play with big teams like this. Even though we didn’t get the win, we know that we learned from it, so when we play big teams in the future, we’ll play harder and we’ll know what we have to do.”

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