Three-game home stretch begins with WKU Thursday

Blue Raiders and Hilltoppers slated for 7 p.m. CT

February 8, 2012 · Athletic Communications

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - The Blue Raider men's basketball team opens a three-game home stretch with a key matchup against rival Western Kentucky on Thursday. The two teams will square off at 7 p.m. CT in Murphy Center on ESPN3 with Chip Walters and Kyle Turnham on the call. **GAME INFORMATION**
Date: Thursday, Feb. 9
Time: 7:00 p.m. CT
Location: Murfreesboro, Tenn.
Facility: Murphy Center

MEDIA INFORMATION
Radio: WGNS (1450 AM, 101.9 FM, 100.5 FM)/WNSR (560 AM)/WMOT (89.5 FM)
Play-by-Play: Chip Walters
Analysis: Kyle Turnham

Live Video: Available here
Live Audio: Available here
Live Stats: Available here

SERIES INFORMATION
Overall: WKU leads, 91-34 //
As Sun Belt foes: WKU leads, 16-8
At MT: WKU leads, 21-18 (dating back to 1957)
Under Davis: WKU leads, 13-8
First meeting: WKU 32, MT 21 (1914-15, location unavailable)
Last meeting: MT 57, WKU 39 (2/26/11 in Murfreesboro)
Last WKU win: WKU 68, MT 49 (2/28/09 in Murfreesboro)
Current Streak: MT, 4 games

Longest MT streak: 6 games (1924-1930) // Longest WKU streak: 23 games (1931-1955)

BLUE RAIDER FASTBREAK POINTS

--With MT's 71-66 win over FIU on Dec. 29, head coach Kermit Davis surpassed Jimmy Earle as MT's all-time winningest coach. It marked Davis' 165th MT victory, eclipsing Earle's mark of 164.
--MT's 20-2 start was the best in program history, topping the previous mark of 18-2 in the 1974-75 season.
--MT's 10-0 league start was the best in program history. It topped the previous mark of 9-0 set in the 1974-75 season when the Blue Raiders were a member of the OVC.
--MT's 12-game winning streak from Dec. 10 through Jan. 26 was the longest in 26 years and is tied for the third-longest in school history.
--MT has won 16 games by a double-figure margin, including eight of the last 11 contests.
--As of the NCAA statistics on Feb. 5, MT ranks eighth in the nation in field goal percentage (49.4). MT also ranks 17th in field goal percentage defense (38.9). The Blue Raiders ranked in the top three in field goal percentage for six consecutive weeks to open the season.
--As of Feb. 7, MT is one of only 10 teams in the nation to crack the 21-win mark already this season, currently tied for the third-most victories in the nation.
--MT's nine road wins this season are tied for the third-most in the country as of Feb. 6, with only eight teams in the nation already reaching the nine-win plateau on the road. The Blue Raiders also lead the Sun Belt with 45 league road victories in the past 10 years.

SCOUTING THE HILLTOPPERS

WKU (8-15, 4-6 SBC) has heated up lately, winning three of their last four contests, including a 75-66 victory over South Alabama last Saturday. The only loss during the stretch was a one-point setback at Florida Atlantic on Jan. 26. The Hilltoppers are led by Derrick Gordon with 11.7 points and 6.2 rebounds per game. Three more players are averaging eight points or better, including Jamal Crook (9.1 ppg), George Fant (9.0 ppg) and T.J. Price (8.5 ppg).

IN THEIR LAST MEETING

Middle Tennessee won its fourth-straight over rival Western Kentucky with a 57-39 victory on Feb. 26, 2011, at Murphy Center. JT Sulton led all scorers with 18 points after going 8-for-11 from the field. Jason Jones added 10 points for the Blue Raiders and had six rebounds. As a team, Middle Tennessee shot 40.7 percent in the game, taking advantage of 16 Hilltopper turnovers to score 23 points. The Hilltoppers struggled offensively, posting a 30.4 shooting percentage on the night with Steffphon Pettigrew being the only player to score in double figures with 15. For the first time since 1936, Middle Tennessee held the Hilltoppers to less than 40 points. It was also the first time since the 1930 season that the program won four straight against its biggest rival.

ALL ABOUT MT (21-4, 10-1 SBC)

The Clincher

MT can clinch a share of the Sun Belt East Division title with a win over WKU on Thursday. An MT win and a Florida Atlantic loss (at home against Denver) would give the Blue Raiders the out-right division title.

Dendy's dominance

Senior forward LaRon Dendy was named the Sun Belt Player of the Week on Jan. 30. Dendy picked up his first career weekly honor and the second of the season for the Blue Raiders after averaging 19.5 points, 5.5 rebounds and 2.0 assists in two games during the week of Jan. 23. Dendy put

together back-to-back double-digit scoring performances, including a career-high 22 points against Vanderbilt on Jan. 28. Over the two games, he shot an impressive 70 percent from the field while hitting 10-of-13 from the line. He also scored 17 against Troy on Jan. 26.

Dendy joins Marcos Knight as the Blue Raiders who have received weekly honors this season. Knight was named the league's player of the week on Nov. 22 following his first career double-double against Belmont. Dendy becomes the fifth different Blue Raider to earn the award. It marks the eighth weekly accolade in program history and the first time since the 2001-02 season MT has had multiple player of the week awards.

One-Two Punch

Bruce Massey and Marcos Knight are a dual threat when it comes to ball-handling. The duo is tied for first with a 2.0 assist-to-turnover ratio in league games. Massey also is tied for first in the conference with a 2.1 ratio overall.

Another Record on the Ropes

With 21 wins already this season, the Blue Raiders have surpassed the most wins during Davis' 10-year tenure. The Blue Raiders cracked the 20-win mark for the first time since the 1990-91 season when they went 21-9. The last time MT cracked the 20-win mark during the regular season was the 1988-89 season when the Blue Raiders were 23-8, including three postseason victories.

Most Wins in Program History
(including postseason)
1. 23, 1988-89
23, 1987-88
23, 1985-86
23, 1974-75
5. 22, 1986-87
22, 1981-82
7. 21, 2011-12
21, 1990-91

Most Wins in Program History
(regular season only)
1. 22, 1986-87
2. 21, 2011-12
21, 1985-86
21, 1974-75
4. 20, 1988-89
20, 1987-88
7. 19, 2009-10
19, 1990-91
19, 1981-82

Among the Nation's Elite

MT is one of only 10 schools in the country to have reached the 21-win plateau this season, and the 21 victories are currently tied for the third-most wins in the nation behind Syracuse (23), Kentucky (23), Murray State (23) and St. Mary's (22). Oral Roberts, UNLV, Creighton, Baylor and Missouri

also have 21 wins.

17 of 120

MT has won 17 of its last 20 contests. Prior to the loss at Vanderbilt, MT had won 16 of 17, marking the best 17-game stretch in program history. During the stretch, the Blue Raiders have won 14 games by double-figures and have collected 16 double-digit wins overall.

Nation Taking Notice

The Blue Raiders are currently receiving votes in the ESPN/USA Today Coaches poll. In the latest Coaches poll released on Feb. 6, MT received six votes, putting the Blue Raiders at 33rd nationally. It marks the seventh-straight week MT has received votes in the Coaches poll. The Blue Raiders received votes in the AP Top 25 earlier twice this season. MT garnered nine votes on Jan. 23 and also received two votes for the Nov. 21 edition of the AP poll. It marks the first time in program history the Blue Raiders have received votes in either poll. The Blue Raiders are also ranked No. 7 in the current CollegeInsider.com Mid-Major Top 25. In addition, MT currently sits 42nd in the Sagarin ratings, the highest rating of any Sun Belt team. The Blue Raiders also moved up two more spots to No. 45 in the NCAA RPI.

Starting It Off Right

The Blue Raiders got off to a 4-0 start this season, marking the first 4-0 start since the 1994-95 season. It also marked the first time in program history MT defeated three Division I opponents to open the season. MT's 20-2 start marked the best in school history. It topped the previous mark of 18-2 in 1974-75. Additionally, MT's 13 wins before the new year are the most in school history, surpassing the previous mark of nine in 1991. **And For League Starters**

MT's 10-0 Sun Belt start was the best conference mark in program history. The Blue Raiders broke the record of 9-0 set in the 1974-75 season as a member of the Ohio Valley Conference. **Gender Wars**

Both the Blue Raider men's and women's basketball programs got off to 10-0 starts in the Sun Belt. It marks the second time in the last four years both teams have started league play 5-0 or better (2008-09). WKU is the only other Sun Belt school to have both programs start at least 5-0, which occurred in 1992-93. No Sun Belt program has had both teams earn 10-0 starts. With a combined record of 40-9, the MT programs rank fifth nationally in wins and eighth in winning percentage.

Streaking Raiders

The Blue Raiders 12-game winning streak spanning from Dec. 10 through Jan. 26 was the longest since MT won a school-record 14 straight during the 1985-86 season. It ties the third-longest streak in school history, matching the 12-game mark during the 1980-81 season, and marks only the fourth time history MT has won at least 12 straight games.

Road Warriors

MT is currently 9-3 on the road after starting the season 4-0 in away contests, marking the first time since 1967-68 the Blue Raiders won four straight road games to start the season. The last time the Blue Raiders won at least four consecutive road games in a season was 2006-07 when MT reeled off five in a row during Sun Belt play. The Blue Raiders' nine road victories this season are tied for the second-most nationally and are tied for the most in program history. MT has won nine road games three times in history, with the most recent coming in the 1997-98 season. And with four of road victories coming in league games this season, MT has collected 45 league road victories in the past 10 years, the most of any Sun Belt school.

Offense vs. Defense

The Blue Raider offense got off to a hot start during non-conference play, but its the defense that has dominated in MT's 10 Sun Belt victories. In non-conference action, the Blue Raiders averaged 76.1 points per game, held opponents to 64.1 points per game, and shot 52.9 percent from the field, including a 41.2 percent from beyond the arc. Compare that to MT's 66.4 points per game, 45.2 percent shooting and 27.9 percent 3-point shooting in conference play. Despite cooling off offensively in league games, the Blue Raiders are holding opponents to 57.2 points per game, best in the conference, and have outscored their league foes by an average of 9.2 points per game. In fact, eight of the last 10 conference foes have scored 59 points or less.

Davis becomes all-time winningest coach

Head coach Kermit Davis became Middle Tennessee's all-time winningest coach in the Blue Raiders' 71-66 win over FIU on Dec. 29. It marked Davis' 165th victory at the helm of the Blue Raiders, surpassing former coach Jimmy Earle, who held the record with 164 wins. This season, Davis joins Earle, who spent a decade guiding the Blue Raiders, as the longest tenured coaches in program history.

Unselfish Play

MT has been one of the top assisting teams in Sun Belt this season, currently ranking second in the league with 14.8 assists per game. The Blue Raiders have 369 assists on 641 field goals and, with five games remaining, are on pace to collect the most assists of any team during head coach Kermit Davis' tenure. The 2006-07 squad had 401 assists, the most in the last 10 seasons.

Home Sweet Home

MT currently owns a nine-game winning streak at Murphy Center. The streak is the best single-season mark under head coach Kermit Davis and the longest single-season mark since the 1997-98 season when the Blue Raiders also won nine straight at home. It also matches the longest home winning streak since the Blue Raiders won 10 in a row at Murphy Center spanning the 2003-04 and 2004-05 seasons. With 11 wins already at home this season, the Blue Raiders have collected double-digit home victories in each of the past five seasons and in eight out of 10 years during Davis' tenure.

Cracking 300

MT head coach Kermit Davis earned his 300th career victory in the Blue Raiders' 65-62 win over Belmont on Dec. 13. Davis, in his 10th season at the helm of the Blue Raiders, holds a 245-180 record as a Division I head coach and was 66-25 as a junior college head coach.

Statistically Sound

MT is currently one of the hottest teams in the nation, ranking eighth in the country in field goal percentage (.494) and 17th in the country in field goal percentage defense (.389) according to the NCAA as of Feb. 5. Additionally, the Blue Raiders rank in the top 50 in six other categories:
Field Goal Percentage: 8th (49.4)
Win-Loss Percentage: 13th (84.0)
Field Goal Percentage Defense: 17th (38.9)
Scoring Margin: 29th (10.8)
3-Point FG % Defense: 35th (30.2)
Blocks Per Game: 38th (4.8)

Scoring Defense: 41st (61.1)
Assists Per Game: 48th (14.8)

MT also tops the Sun Belt in five categories (scoring offense, scoring margin, field goal percentage, field goal percentage defense and 3-point percentage defense) and ranks second in three more (assists, blocks and scoring defense).

Quadruple Threat
It's no surprise MT's offense is not only one of the best in the Sun Belt, but also in the nation. Four of the top nine shooters in the league are Blue Raiders. JT Sulton (.551) is third, Shawn Jones (.543) is fourth, LaRon Dendy (.540) is seventh and Marcos Knight (.494) is ninth. That kind of shooting has helped MT to shoot 50 percent or better in 11 contests, including four performances of better than 60 percent.

It's Not Just Offense
While the Blue Raider offense has been hot, the defense is no slouch either. MT leads the Sun Belt in field goal percentage defense (.389) and 3-point defense (.302), holding 22 of its 25 opponents under 50 percent shooting. In fact, 16 of 25 opponents have shot 40 percent or worse against the Blue Raiders, with South Alabama's .263 percentage marking a season-low for MT opponents.

Double-Double Duo
LaRon Dendy and JT Sulton each posted double-doubles against Akron on Dec. 4. Dendy collected 19 points and 11 rebounds, while Sulton had 16 points and 11 boards. It marked the fourth double-double of Sulton's career and the second for both Dendy and Sulton this year. It also marked the first time two Blue Raiders had a double-double in the same game since Michael Cuffee (24 pts, 10 rebs) and Marcus Morrisson (10 pts, 11 rebs) did it against Arkansas State on Jan. 13, 2005. It is the 75th time in program history at least two Blue Raiders have had a double-double in one game.
Speaking of Double-Doubles
Dendy added his third and fourth double-doubles of the season in back-to-back games to open Sun Belt play. Dendy had 11 points and 10 rebounds against FIU on Dec. 29, then followed that up with 21 points and 11 boards against South Alabama on Dec. 31. It marked the first time a Blue Raider had back-to-back double-doubles since Steve Thomas accomplished the feat in 2005. Altogether, he has 18 double-figure games this year and six games of 20 points or more. **The 10-Win Mark**
MT won 10 games within the first 12 this year, marking the fastest the program has reached the 10-win plateau since the 1990-91 season. It also marks the first time the Blue Raiders have collected at least 10 non-conference victories since the 2004-05 season when MT had 12 non-conference wins.
Halfway There
MT is 19-0 when leading at halftime. The Blue Raiders are outscoring opponents 957-805 in the second half compared to a 824-704 advantage in the first half. MT is shooting 53.4 percent in the second half, including a 39.9 percent clip from beyond the arc, while holding opponents to 38.8 percent in the second stanza. MT also hasn't trailed in the second half in eight of the last 12 games.
Oden in the Clutch
Senior guard Jimmy Oden was clutch against Tennessee State on Dec. 1. Oden finished with a career-high 14 points, going 11-for-12 from the stripe. In the final two minutes of the contest, Oden hit 10 consecutive free throws to seal the 77-62 victory. **Knight of Honor**
Marcos Knight was named the Sun Belt Player of the Week on Nov. 22. Knight averaged 16.3 points and 7.0 rebounds during a three-game stretch for the Blue Raiders. He became the first Blue Raider to earn the league's weekly honor since Desmond Yates on Jan. 25, 2010 and is the fourth Blue

Raider in program history to earn the award. **Painting the Town Blue**

In 21 of 25 games this season, including 17 of the last 20, the Blue Raiders have dominated their opponent in the paint. Altogether the Blue Raiders own a 794-580 advantage in the paint and have outscored their opponents by an average of 8.6 points per game in the paint. The widest margin came against Cumberland when MT owned a 42-8 advantage in the paint (+34). The Blue Raiders' season-high for paint points was 44 at South Alabama. The only contests where MT did not outscore its opponent in the paint were against Belmont on Nov. 20 when the Bruins held a 42-34 advantage, at FIU on Jan. 12 when both teams tied with 26 points in the paint, at Vanderbilt on Jan. 28, with the Commodores holding a 38-32 advantage and at Denver on Feb. 4, with Denver holding a 40-24 advantage. **Sulton Reigns**

Junior forward JT Sulton has developed into one of MT's most consistent players. He has started 36 consecutive games, the longest streak of any current Blue Raider. Sulton hasn't missed a start since Jan. 29, 2011. He became the first Blue Raider to record a double-double this season, collecting 12 points and 11 rebounds at Loyola Marymount. It marked the third double-double of his career, with his last coming against UALR (21 pts, 11 reb) in the 2011 Sun Belt tournament. Sulton has reached double figures in 17 contests this season and in those 36 consecutive starts, he has produced a total of 24 double-figure scoring performances. **Shooting the Lights Out**

MT's shooting performance against UCLA on Nov. 15 was one for the ages. The Blue Raiders smashed the school record, shooting a 71.4 percent clip from the field and surpassing the previous mark of 68.9 percent set in 1981. MT has now had four halves of basketball this season shooting 70 percent or better:

11/22 vs Cumberland 2nd half: 75.0%
11/15 vs. UCLA 2nd half: 72.0%
11/15 vs. UCLA 1st half: 70.8%
11/11 vs. Austin Peay: 70.0%

On record, the Blue Raiders had only bettered the 70-percent mark in one half three times in program history prior to this year:

.833 vs. Akron (2/4/82)
.800 vs. Tennessee Tech (1/8/81)
.724 vs. Austin Peay (1/12/87)

Raining Three's

Not only did MT set a record from the field, but the Blue Raiders also hit a Sun Belt record 90.9 percent of their 3-pointers against UCLA. The mark, also a school record, surpassed the previous league record of 90.0 percent set by UAB in 1986 and is tied for fourth in NCAA history.

(Min. 10 made)
03/06/11 - 93.3%, Ohio State (14-15) vs. Wisconsin
12/03/00 - 91.7%, Drexel (11-12) vs. Delaware
12/11/04 - 91.7%, Northern Arizona (11-12) vs. Willamette
11/15/11 - 90.9%, Middle Tennessee (10-11) at UCLA
02/01/88 - 90.9%, Duke (10-11) vs. Clemson
01/16/93 - 90.9%, Hofstra (10-11) vs. Rhode Island

And One More Thing

MT hit its first nine treys and finished 10-of-11 from beyond the arc against UCLA. The Blue Raiders didn't miss a trey until 1:39 to go in the game. Before the streak ended, MT's 9-for-9 performance matched an NCAA record for highest perfect 3-point field goal percentage in a game, set by

Minnesota against Penn State on Jan. 11, 2009. **Keeping Up with the Jones'**

Both Shawn and Jason Jones have played key roles for the Blue Raiders this season. Shawn has had seven double-figure games, including a 15-point performance, matching his career-high, against FIU on Dec. 29. Jones ranks second on the team with 30 blocks. After missing the first four games and nine total, Jason has produced four double-figure games in 16 appearances, including three starts. He also has chipped in 15 assists and six steals. **Playing Extra**

MT and Belmont played into double overtime on Nov. 20, marking the first overtime game of the season for the Blue Raiders. Last season, MT played four overtime games, including one double-overtime contest, ironically, a loss to Belmont on Dec. 7, 2010. The two contests against Belmont are the only double-overtime games for the Blue Raiders since a triple overtime loss to New Mexico State in 2002. **Spreading the Wealth**

MT's 10-of-11 3-point performance against UCLA was far from a one-man show. In fact, it was a six-man show. Six different Blue Raiders hit a triple, led by Raymond Cintron and Bruce Massey, who each went 3-for-3. In addition, five Blue Raiders scored double-figures. Altogether, 10 Blue Raiders have had at least one double-digit performance this year and nine of them have had multiple double-figure games. **Hammonds Stepping Up**

Sophomore guard Kerry Hammonds reached double-figures for the third time in his career with 11 points against Cumberland, including a 3-for-3 performance from beyond the arc. Hammonds also recorded career-highs in assists (5) and blocks (4) in the contest. After missing seven games, Hammonds picked up where he left off, scoring a season-high 13 points against Arkansas State on Jan. 19. **It's Good to be 80**

With multiple scoring threats, it's no surprise MT has cracked the 80-point mark six times in the first nine games. The Blue Raiders scored 80 or more only seven times all of last season. **Dendy is Dandy**

After sitting out last season due to NCAA transfer rules, LaRon Dendy has made an immediate impact for the Blue Raiders. He netted 21 points in the season-opener against Austin Peay and was one rebound shy of a double-double, collecting nine boards. He notched his first double-double of the season at UCLA, collecting 16 points and 13 rebounds, then added his second double-double with 19 points and 11 rebounds against Akron. Three times since the first Austin Peay contest, Dendy has matched his 21-point perfromance (vs. Cumberland, UT Martin and South Alabama). In the Sun Belt opener against FIU, Dendy posted his third double-double of the season with 11 points and 10 rebounds, then added his fourth with 21 points and 11 rebounds against South Alabama (12/31). Dendy added his sixth performance of 20 or more points with a career-high 22 at Vanderbilt (1/28). He has also shown versatility on the court, ranking first on the team in scoring (13.9 ppg) and blocks (42) and third on the team with 47 assists. **Tremendous Transfers**

In addition to Dendy, three other transfers have made a considerable impact this season:

Chipola Junior College transfer Marcos Knight has started each contest. Knight is the team's second-leading scorer with 12.0 points per game points and is third with 5.4 rebounds per game. He posted his first career double-double with 17 points and 11 rebounds against Belmont. Knight became the third Blue Raider to post a double-double this season and has reached double-figure scoring in18 contests. His career-high of 19 points came against North Texas on Feb. 2.

Bruce Massey dished out a career-high eight assists against Belmont and leads the team with 88 assists this season. In addition, the Dodge City Community College transfer went 3-for-3 from beyond the arc against UCLA, marking his first 3-point attempts of the season, and scored a season-high 14 points. He made it back-to-back games in double-figures with 11 against UNC Greensboro. His 42 steals are the most on the team.

Mississippi Gulf Coast Junior College transfer Raymond Cintron came off the bench and sank a pair of free throws in his first D-I contest against Austin Peay, then added his first D-I triple against Loyola Marymount. He heated up against UCLA, draining 3-of-3 treys to finish 4-for-4 from the field with 11 points. He followed that performance with a career day against Belmont, going 5-for-9 from 3-point land en route to a career-high 18 points. Cintron added his third double-figure game with 12 points, including 6-of-6 free throw shooting, against UT Martin. He then matched his career-high of 18 points against Ole Miss and made it back-to-back double-figure performances with 12 points against FIU on Dec. 29. Against Troy on Jan. 26, Cintron matched his career-high of six field goals and five treys, finishing with 17 points in the contest. He has started 13 of the last 15 contests. **Sun Belt Championship Information**

Booklets for the 2012 Sun Belt Men's Basketball Conference Championship are now on sale. Cost is $83 and includes a ticket to all eight sessions for the tournament in Hot Springs, Ark., March 3-6. Fans can purchase tickets by calling 1-888-YES-MTSU or visiting GoBlueRaiders.com.

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