

Dendy's dominating double-double lifts Blue Raiders over WKU

MT clinches share of Sun Belt East Division title

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - LaRon Dendy posted career-highs with 26 points and 14 rebounds for his fifth double-double of the season, powering the Middle Tennessee men's basketball team to a 72-64 win over Western Kentucky University on Thursday night in front of a season-high 7,080 fans at Murphy Center. With the victory, the Blue Raiders clinched a share of the Sun Belt East Division title and tied the school-record with 22 regular-season victories. MT (22-4, 11-1 SBC) also extended its home winning streak to 10 games in front of the largest crowd to attend a league contest this season. In addition to the double-double, Dendy also matched his career-high with four assists and chipped in a block and a steal. He was especially effective in the second half, scoring 19 points and collecting 10 boards in the latter frame. Marcos Knight posted his team-leading 20th



double-figure game of the season with 12 points and grabbed eight rebounds, while Raymond Cintron scored 11 and Kerry Hammonds added 10 points. Bruce Massey facilitated the offense with eight assists, matching his career-best, and Hammonds tacked on two assists, two blocks and three steals. The Blue Raiders collected a season-high 51 rebounds and capitalized on 21 offensive boards for 15 second-chance points. The MT defense held the Hilltoppers (8-16, 4-7 SBC) to 33.8 percent shooting, while the Blue Raiders hit 38.8 percent of their own shots. T.J. Price led the way

for WKU with 14 points and George Fant tallied 12 points to go along with 11 boards. Knight made an early impact, blocking the Hilltoppers' opening attempt then converting a layup at the opposite end for the game's first basket. WKU responded with two quick 3-pointers to take the 6-2 lead two and a half minutes into the contest. Hammonds, earning his first start since Nov. 26, brought the Blue Raiders back with a triple to tie the game at six, but a 5-0 run gave the Hilltoppers an 11-6 advantage, their largest lead of the game, with 14 minutes remaining in the early frame. Both sides went nearly four minutes without a field goal before James Gallman drained a long-range jumper to end the drought and spark a 10-2 run. Torin Walker sank a pair of free throws to bring MT back within one midway through the first half. MT continued to rally when Knight drove into the lane and dished off to Dendy for the slam, then Dendy put back his own miss to give the Blue Raiders their first lead since the opening basket at 14-13 with 8:47 to go. JT Sulton's steal and fastbreak dunk gave MT a three-point lead before Cintron upped it to four with his first trey of the contest. After Knight tipped in his own miss, Dendy came up with a defensive rebound and drove to the opposite end before dumping off to Hammonds for the finish and the six-point lead. A triple from Kahlil McDonald and two free throws from Fant cut the Hilltoppers' deficit to one at 23-22 with just under four to play in the frame. Knight helped MT stretch the lead back to six with a dish to Dendy for another jam and followed that with a jumper for the 28-22 lead, but WKU closed out the half with a pair of baskets to pull within two at the break. An early 3-pointer for Price put WKU back on top, 31-30, to start the second stanza, but a 9-0 spurt for MT quickly made it an eight-point ballgame the other way, and the Blue Raiders never looked back. Hammonds' hook-shot kick-started the rally before Knight banked in a jumper and Dendy found Sulton for a stuff to make it 36-31 with 17:10 to play. After a pair of Hilltopper layups worked MT's lead down to four, Cintron hit a three and Dendy followed with a three-point play to give the Blue Raiders their first double-figure advantage at 45-35 with 12 minutes remaining. The Blue Raiders built the lead to as many as 12 with 9:45 left in the contest, but WKU cut MT's lead in half with a 6-2 run and inched within four at the 3:35 mark after making six consecutive free throws. That was as close as the Hilltoppers would get the rest of the way. After hitting a free throw, Dendy battled for a rebound and putback to make it a seven-point game with under two minutes to play. WKU managed to make it a five-point game after McDonald drained three free throws with 24 seconds remaining, but Cintron hit 5-of-6 free throws down the stretch to seal the MT victory. The homestand continues for the Blue Raiders on Saturday with a contest against the West Division-leader UALR. The league's top two teams will square off at Noon CT in Murphy Center on ESPN2 with Rich Hollenberg and Mark Adams on the call. **Postgame**

Quotes

HEAD COACH KERMIT DAVIS: I expected absolutely nothing different from that game. I wish we could have shot better from the free throw line, but Western Kentucky competed really, really hard. They've been playing like that the last two weeks, they've got a lot of toughness on that team. That is what a rivalry game is all about. It was a hard-fought game, and we were fortunate enough to win.

(On winning last five games vs. Western): I don't really think it does anything for our confidence. It's good because Western has dominated this series for however many years, and the overall record speaks for itself. Now winning five in a row is hard to do against them, it's really hard to do, and it is going to be even harder to win six in a row in a couple of weeks.

(On LaRon Dendy playing better in the second half): He had to. He got a shot blocked in the first half, he was off balance, he wasn't physical at the rim. In the second half, he got his nose going right at the rim, he started rebounding the ball, and he was a dominant player. He needs to start games like that, but he was terrific in the second half.

(On slow start to the game): We played selfishly in the first half. We hadn't done that in a while. At one time out, I asked 'Has everybody got a shot up now? Is everybody good now?' It was like everybody was trying to get a shot off. That's not our identity. We are one of the best field goal percentage teams in the country because the ball moves from side to side, we make extra passes. We lost our identity in the first half. Western had something to do with that, too. They played awfully hard. In the second half, we shot over 50%, and we shared the ball better.

Ray (Harper) has got Western playing really hard. They are physical around the rim, and I think Teeng Akol is going to be a great player in our league.

(On tonight's atmosphere): No question about it, the atmosphere was great. To have over 7,000 people is terrific, and I hope we can have more than that on Saturday when we play UALR, and that our team will be better on national TV the second time.

(On free throw shooting): It was atrocious. Last week we're at Denver and we shot them great. We do pressure situation free throw shooting in practice, and we were playing at home tonight. We have been shooting free throws better the last two or three weeks, but tonight, if we step up there and hit free throws, we are not scrambling at the end like that. Free throw shooting is like rebounding. You've got to have some toughness about you. You gotta get up there and make some shots.

LARON DENDY: Coach pulled me aside at the half and said I was playing weak, that I was looking for calls, to play through the other players and the calls will come. I felt like I had to turn it up in the second half. Bruce (Massey) came up and told me to keep playing through it, you are looking for the foul, just play hard, and everything came to me in the second half.

The fans really showed up tonight, and it made it more like a rivalry game, and we knew we had to play like it was a rivalry game. They have a good, young team, and we look forward to seeing them again in two weeks.

BRUCE MASSEY: At halftime, Coach got on to us about being selfish, and everybody was trying to make only one or two passes, and doing their own thing. Coach talked about trusting our offense and moving the ball, reversing it, and things would open up. We were also able to run the floor in the second half.

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