Blue Raiders clinch Sun Belt East title with victory over UALR

MT earns 23rd win to tie school record

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - LaRon Dendy scored a game-high 23 points as the Middle Tennessee men's basketball team clinched the Sun Belt East Division title with a 68-60 win over the UALR Trojans in Saturday afternoon's national telecast at Murphy Center. The Blue Raiders, now 23-4 overall, tied the school-record for wins and, at 12-1 in league action, clinched a first-round bye and one of the top two seeds for the upcoming conference tournament. Dendy was virtually unstoppable in the first half, scoring 19 points, including the first 12, for the Blue Raiders. He finished the contest with six rebounds, two assists, two blocks and a steal as well. Marcos Knight and Kerry Hammonds also added double-figures, with 13 and 10 respectively. Hammonds tallied four assists, while Bruce Massey collected a game-high seven assists and three steals. MT recorded its fifth performance of 60 percent or better shooting, with the last coming on Dec. 10 against UT Martin. MT hit a 63.4 percent clip from the field, including a 70 percent first-half performance. It marked the fifth time this season the Blue Raiders have hit 70 percent or better in a half. Additionally, MT was 57.1 percent from beyond the arc, the second-best mark of the season. The Blue Raiders also out-rebounded the Trojans (12-14, 9-3 SBC), 30-23, and held them to 43.8 percent shooting. Will Neighbour led UALR's charge with 22 points and D'Andre

Williams had 18. The Trojans opened the game on a 7-1 run and stretched the lead to as many as six at the 14:30 mark when Neighbour knocked down a trey from the corner to make it 13-7. That's when Dendy took over. After sinking a free throw then knocking down two baseline jumpers, he added a 12-footer to score the Blue Raiders' first seven points. Dendy made it nine straight when he grabbed a rebound on a Hammonds' miss and put it back with a hookshot. To cap off his 12 straight points, he sank a three from the top of the key to pull the Blue Raiders within one at 13-12. Hammonds ended Dendy's streak with a shot just inside the stripe to give MT its first lead of the game at 14-13 with 12:29 remaining in the first half. Williams then rolled in a 3-pointer to put UALR back up, but Hammonds answered with a triple of his own to make it a 17-16 MT lead and kick-start a 10-2 run. It was a lead the Blue Raiders would not relinquish the rest of the way. Dendy's dish to a wide-open Massey underneath made it 19-16 and Jason Jones drained a freebie to make it a four-point game. Following a jumper from UALR's Courtney Jackson, Knight scored four straight points, making his first basket of the game then adding a pair of free throws to finish the run. Dendy continued his first-half onslaught with a slam and a free throw, giving MT its largest lead of the half at 27-20 with 7:30 left before the break. The Trojans battled back using a 10-4 run, thanks in part to Neighbour's five points. Williams cut the deficit to one with a trey, but Knight's fade-away put MT's cushion back at three with 2:30 to go. Dendy finished the half with a turnaround jam to give MT a 35-30 lead at the break. Hammonds chucked up a three with two seconds on the shot clock and Dendy dished to JT Sulton for a stuff to open things offensively for MT in the second stanza. Massey's free throw made it a nine-point advantage three minutes into the frame. UALR worked the deficit down to five, riding four points from Williams, but Sulton's four straight points, including an alley-oop on a pass from Massey, and Knight's 15-footer built the margin back to nine at the 13:20 mark. Cintron's first triple of the game gave MT its first double-figure lead at 50-40 with 11:34 to go, but back-to-back baskets for the Trojans, including a Williams' 3-pointer,quickly brought UALR back to within five. After Sulton hit a layup and Knight banked in a short jumper, the Trojans sandwiched a pair of 3-pointers around a Jimmy Oden layup to get within five once again at the 6:16 mark. It was back to a nine-point cushion after Hammonds hit a short jumper and Massey's layup rolled in off the back iron, then Dendy's first point of the second half stretched it to 10. UALR managed to cut it to six on seven straight free throws, but it was as close as they would get in the final 34 seconds, as MT held the Trojans without a field goal for the final 3:45. The Blue Raiders will play their final home game of the regular season next Saturday when Florida Atlantic comes to town for a 5:30 p.m. CT contest. The game will air on ESPN3 following the women's game. **Postgame Quotes**

COACH KERMIT DAVIS: I thought the game was about what I expected. Little Rock is always, in the last ten years, been the most physical team on a consistent basis that we play every year. I thought our offensive execution was terrific, 64%. I wish we could execute a little better at the free throw line. We are keeping teams in games.

It was a great atmosphere, national TV audience, we had a really good crowd, appreciate the fans, and it was a really, really good win for us to get first place in the Sun Belt for now.

(On record 23 regular-season wins): It is quite an accomplishment to win 23 games before Valentine's Day. There is a lot of basketball left, obviously. This team has done a lot of first's this year, and I'm proud of them for that.

(On Dendy picking up two quick fouls): I was very concerned when that happened. We needed for JT Sulton to play better, and he did in the second half. He ended up with nine points and five rebounds.

(On Dendy's first half performance): He was good, you could just tell that he was ready to go. He's been like that the last three or four weeks. Really, he's been consistent all year, but he's got a little different look in his eye over the last three or four weeks. He's playing well in games that matter most, which is great for us.

LaRon's unselfishness is his biggest quality. He just lends himself to try to win the game. You don't find that on a lot of transfers, and he's got that quality. He's made us a different team because of it. He's always had a good competitive spirit, but you can see he's more in-tune in meetings, more in-tune with his teammates. Every possession in practice is more important to him, and it wasn't always like that his red-shirt season. We had some early battles, in a good way, about him not playing every possession in practice. Every possession in practice is critical to him, and that is why he's playing like the best player in the league.

LaRon Dendy

On starting strong:

"It was on my mind. I felt like I had to come out and put the team on my back. I knew we had to win this game because it's important."

"It's a team game, but they kept getting me the ball. They recognized who was scoring, and they kept coming to me. I appreciate that."

On playing with foul trouble

"When I came out, I wasn't worried. I know that my team can execute and do well when I'm not out there. They can win without me. I felt like they held it down until I could get back in there."

Kerry Hammonds

On setting records:

"When you just win, the records are going to come. You usually don't think about records when you're out there playing. You just want to keep winning as many games as possible. We don't want to lose anymore."

On coming back since the injury:

"My conditioning has gotten better, but it's all confidence really. When you start making shots and believing in yourself, they start going down."

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