Sun Belt Champions! Blue Raiders claim regular-season title, set school wins record

MT earns No. 1 seed for upcoming Sun Belt tournament

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - The Middle Tennessee men's basketball team claimed the Sun Belt's regular-season title on Saturday evening with a 72-59 victory over Florida Atlantic in front of a season-high crowd of 7,605 fans at Murphy Center. The Blue Raiders collected their program-record 24th victory and clinched the No. 1 seed for the upcoming conference tournament, riding LaRon Dendy's game-high 20 points and 10 rebounds, his sixth double-double of the season. At 24-4 overall and 13-1 in the Sun Belt, the Blue Raiders surpassed the previous single-season record of 23 wins, produced four times in program history, with the most recent coming in the 1988-89 season. MT also matched the program-mark for the most conference wins, set in the 2009-10 season. The Blue Raiders earned their first No. 1 seed for the Sun Belt tournament and with it have an automatic bid to the National Invitation Tournament (NIT). With a bye in the first round of the league tournament, MT will play March 4 at 6 p.m. CT. Additionally, MT wrapped up the home portion of the schedule on a 13-game winning streak, the longest since MT won 14 spanning the 1996-97 and 1997-98 seasons. The 14 home victories this year also tie the school's regular-season record, set in 1973-74. JT Sulton and Raymond Cintron also scored double-figures, with 11 and 10 points, respectively. Sulton scored nine of his 11 in the

second half. The Blue Raiders finished the contest shooting 49 percent and held the Owls (11-16, 7-7 SBC) to 34.8 percent from the field. MT also owned a 33-28 advantage on the boards and collected 34 points in the paint compared to Florida Atlantic's 16. A trio of Owls scored double-figures, led by Shavar Richardson's 16 points. Dennis Mavin and Jordan McCoy had 10 apiece. Dendy turned a near turnover into a rousing dunk to open the contest for MT, but early turnovers plagued the Blue Raiders as the Owls held a 7-4 advantage five minutes into the game. MT rallied back with a 9-2 run, getting production from four different Blue Raiders during the spurt, including a trey from Cintron. The onslaught continued as the Blue Raiders stretched the run to an 18-4 mark, thanks in part to six more points from Dendy and a Kerry Hammonds triple. MT opened up an 11-point margin with 5:30 remaining in the first half, holding the Owls to two field goals over 10 minutes during the first stanza. Free throws expanded MT's lead to 29-14 with 3:17 to go, as Cintron and Sulton drained four straight for the 15-point cushion. Florida Atlantic, in the meantime, hit a nine-minute field goal drought, but managed to hit six free throws to stay within striking distance. Alex Tucker finally broke the Owls' drought with a layup at the 1:35 mark to work the deficit back to single digits, but Cintron answered with a 3-pointer to make it a 32-20 game with 27 seconds remaining before the break. Tucker closed out the half with a pair of free throws, as MT held a 32-22 halftime advantage. The Owls inched back with back-to-back buckets to open the second half, pulling within six before Dendy cracked double-figures with a tip-in to put the lead back at eight. After Shawn Jones' turnaround jumper, Dendy's pair of free throws made it a double-figure lead once again for the Blue Raiders. Marcos Knight continued the 12-0 run with a three-point play, taking a dish from Dendy and tossing in a layup then getting the roll on the free throw. James Gallman followed with a triple and Massey capped the run with his third bucket of the contest as MT build the lead to as many as 18 five minutes into the second stanza. Florida Atlantic responded with an 8-2 spurt, capitalizing on free throws to cut the deficit back to 12. Hammonds gave the Blue Raiders some momentum on the defensive end, translating a steal on an in-bounds pass into a three-point play to put MT back up by 17 with 10:39 left in the contest, but an 11-3 rally pulled the Owls within nine at the 7:33 mark. A 3-pointer for Mavin made it an eight-point game, but Dendy's alley-oop to Sulton and Massey's inside pass to Sulton for the finish and free throw quickly made it a 63-50 MT lead. The Owls worked it to 10 once again, but once again the Blue Raiders had the answer, this time coming in the form of two Sulton free throws and a breakaway jam for Knight. Massey's pass from midcourt to a streaking Dendy for the slam provided the exclamation point, as the Blue Raiders finished out the 13-point win. MT closes out the season with a pair of road games, beginning at ULM Thursday. The Blue Raiders and Warhawks square off at 7:30 p.m. CT. MT concludes the regular-season at WKU on Saturday with a 5 p.m. CT contest that will air on the Sun Belt Network.

Postgame Quotes

HEAD COACH KERMIT DAVIS: I told LaRon and Jimmy that I didn't know how anyone could have a better senior day than that, win a championship, play in front of an unbelievable crowd. I thought the fans were unbelievable. I'm glad they got to see that.

(On LaRon Dendy's play down the stretch): He's had really, really good practices, he's physical, he's focused, every part of his basketball is great. And I've always told him that his academic world is in great shape, and when that happens, usually you see it on the basketball floor. So he's got his life pretty simple right now, going in a great direction, and I'm proud of him.

We had a senior night last night at my house, we do it every year, and every player gets to talk about a couple of things, their best memories of LaRon and Jimmy (Oden). Jimmy was great also, but LaRon probably talked for seven or eight minutes in front of his team, and it was one of the best

ones that I have ever heard, from the heart, how much he's improved, how much he appreciates Middle Tennessee and his team, and he's playing just like that.

(On JT Sulton stepping up in second half): We need for him to play like that. He hasn't been as physical as we'd like for him to be, and when he does that, our team is so much better. In the second half, he made some great finishes around the goal, he physically rebounded the ball. That's what we've got to have from JT down the stretch.

(On carrying the momentum of this last homestand into the rest of the season and beyond): Three games ago, we talked about it being a five-game season, and we thought it was a very critical time for our team. Right now, we are 3-0, and we have to go to ULM on Thursday and WKU on Saturday. The regular-season championship and the No. 1 seed in the tournament have been wrapped up, and that's good, but we are playing for something out there that's bigger. We are right there in that conversation of teams, but we have to go on the road and win two tough games this week.

LARON DENDY (On his mother getting to see him play): That's the first time she has seen me play live since my last high school game, so it was real good for her to be here tonight.

(Did you feel like you had to play better because she was here?): I knew I had to play my normal game, and not come out forcing anything, but I did want to show her what she has been missing since high school. And we did a real god job out there tonight.

(On his talk to the team at Coach Davis's house): I talked about how I got here and what Coach Davis has done for me. I told Coach Davis that if I buy in, then I feel like the whole team is going to buy in, and we've been doing that so far, and we've had a successful season.

JT SULTON: It feels good, we haven't done something like this in a while. One thing that this team does is share the ball, and we don't care who gets the points. I think that has helped our team, and we are going to continue to play that way and see how far we can go.

(On his play in the second half): I felt like it was something that was needed at the time, but it's also just part of our offense. I got good looks, my teammates got me the ball, and I finished. Also, coach had told me that I needed to be more physical to impose my will, and it turned out that way.

DENDY: We always feed off of a big crowd. We love the fans. They knew it was out last home game, and they felt like they wanted to come out and support us. We had a very good team this year, and when we got down, they'd keep us up.

(On keeping the momentum going): I know we are going to come in Monday and practice like we still have something to prove, like we have a chip on our shoulder. We know that Monroe and Western Kentucky are not going to take us lightly, and we don't need to take them lightly. We have to go there and take care of our business like we need to, and get ready for the conference tournament.

(On only playing one year here): I'm glad that we've had a successful season, but I wish I had three more years. I wish I could have been here my freshman year, but it didn't happen that way, and this is my last year. I'm going to do whatever I can do to help this team achieve the highest heights.

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