Second-half surge gives WKU edge over Middle Tennessee

Top-seeded Blue Raiders begin Sun Belt tournament March 4

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BOWLING GREEN, Ky. - LaRon Dendy scored a game-high 18 points, but WKU's second-half rally propelled the Hilltoppers to a 73-67 win over the Middle Tennessee men's basketball team on Saturday evening in front of 7,326 fans at E.A. Diddle Arena. The Blue Raiders close out the regular-season with a 25-5 overall and 14-2 Sun Belt record, both the best marks in school history. In addition to Dendy, Raymond Cintron and Marcos Knight reached double-figures, with 15 and 13, respectively. Dendy also pulled down a game-high seven rebounds to go along with four assists, a block and a steal. Kerry Hammonds recorded a career-high seven assists, nearly half of the Blue Raiders 16 helps. MT finished the contest shooting 54 percent compared to 44.2 percent for WKU (11-18, 7-9 SBC), but it was free throw shooting that proved to be the difference. The Blue Raiders finished 9-of-18 from the line, while the HIlltoppers were 21-of-24 for 87.5 percent. Although MT owned a 23-6 advantage in fastbreak points, WKU capitalized on 19 Blue Raider turnovers for 34 points. MT scored just 14 points off 15 WKU turnovers. The Hilltoppers also edged the Blue Raiders on the boards, 31-29. Four Hilltoppers scored double-figures, paced by T.J. Price with 13. Teeng Akol had 12, Derrick Gordon scored 11, nine of them on free throws, and Kahlil McDonald added 10. Jamal Crook served as the offensive facilitator with a game-high eight assists. Dendy made his presence known early, opening the game with a triple to spark a 10-0 run then collecting two assists on back-to-back dishes

to Hammonds. The Blue Raiders forced the Hilltoppers to miss their first six shots and held them without a field goal for nearly five and half minutes to begin the contest. After WKU scored its first basket, Cintron answered with a 3-pointer to give MT what would be its largest lead of the game at 11 points six minutes into the contest. The Hilltoppers quickly closed the gap with an 11-2 spurt to make it a 15-13 game midway through the first frame. MT worked the lead back to eight, then rode four straight buckets from Dendy to keep it a six-point contest with 4:21 to go in the half. Dendy would finish the half with 11 points. Free throws in the final minutes of the stanza pulled the Hilltoppers within two, as they hit four consecutive freebies to cut the deficit to 27-25 with just under three minutes remaining before the break. Jason Jones answered with a three-point play and Cintron tacked on another trey for the 33-25 advantage, but Price scored the final five points of the frame with a jumper and 3-pointer to make it 33-30 at the break. WKU mirrored MT's first-half start in the second stanza, opening the frame with a 10-0 run on baskets from four different Hilltoppers. Knight put a stop to the run with a jumper at the 16:11 mark and would tie the game with a three-point play one minute later. Bruce Massey's layup gave MT the lead again at 42-40 with 14:46 to play. The two teams would seesaw back and forth over the next seven minutes, finishing the contest with six ties and three lead changes. Tied at 46 with 11:55 remaining, Cintron and Knight hit back-to-back baskets for the four-point MT advantage, but another trey from Price once again knotted things up. The two teams engaged in the final tie at 53 all with 7:09 to go when George Fant hit his only field goal of the contest, giving WKU the lead for good. The Hilltoppers went on an 11-0 run to take a 64-53 lead with just under five minutes to go in the game. MT would cut the deficit back to two on a 14-5 run, capped by another Cintron triple with 22 seconds to go, but Gordon sank a pair of free throws to seal the WKU victory. The Blue Raiders now turn their attention to the Sun Belt tournament, which will run March 3-6 in Hot Springs, Ark. MT is locked in as the No. 1 seed and will face the winner of the matchup between the No. 8 and No. 9 seeds on Sunday, March 4 at 6 p.m. CT.

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. Fans can purchase tickets by calling 1-888-YES-MTSU or visiting GoBlueRaiders.com.

Postgame Quotes

Head coach Kermit Davis

On the frustration of the second half

"The game didn't have much flow to it, but I will say the toughest team in the gym won today. Western Kentucky out-toughed us. We had been such a tough, hard-nosed team, tough offensively in the second half. To have them score 34 points off our turnovers is really bad. Give them credit. Their pressure pushed us out and we kind of panicked."

On different factors that led to the loss

"I thought they beat us to a number of 50-50 balls. We just didn't defend the way we needed to today and we got in all kinds of foul trouble. LaRon, who has played so well for us, just wasn't typical today."

On bench play

"Their bench out-played our bench today. T.J. Price played really well for them off the bench. We had decent play off the bench, but we've just got to get some guys better." **Senior forward LaRon Dendy**

On the tough loss

"It was a tough day. They out-toughed us going down the stretch. They out-rebounded us, stopped

us from getting into our offense and got more 50-50 balls than we did."

On how WKU forced 19 turnovers
"They were getting into our offense and making us turn the ball over. They just played tougher than us today."

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