Balanced attack leads Blue Raiders to victory over Marshall in NIT opener

MT will travel to Tennessee for NIT second round

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - LaRon Dendy posted his seventh double-double of the season with 18 points and 13 rebounds to lead the Middle Tennessee men's basketball team to an 86-78 victory over the Marshall Thundering Herd in the opening round of the National Invitation Tournament (NIT) on Tuesday night at Murphy Center. Three additional Blue Raiders scored in double-figures, as fourth-seeded MT improved to 26-6 on the season and will travel to top-seeded Tennessee in the next round of the NIT. The postseason win marked the first for MT since 1989 when the Blue Raiders earned a 97-83 win over Florida State in the NCAA tournament. The last time MT won an NIT game was in 1988 against Georgia in the tournament's second round, a game that also took place in Murfreesboro. Ironically, the team the Blue Raiders defeated in the first round of the 1988 NIT was Tennessee. JT Sulton scored 16 points, Shawn Jones matched his career-high with 15 and Raymond Cintron tacked on 12. Bruce Massey produced a solid all-around performance, grabbing a career-best nine rebounds in addition to tallying seven assists and seven points. Jimmy Oden was one of the key reasons MT tallied 23 assists on 32 baskets, collecting a career-high eight assists in the contest. The

Blue Raiders finished the game shooting 52.5 percent and out-rebounded the Herd, 38-36. It also marked the second-straight game MT has had less than 10 turnovers, giving it up just nine times on the night. MT set the tone in the paint as well, scoring the first eight points in the paint and finishing with a 50-36 advantage. The Blue Raider bench also was effective, scoring 25 points compared to Marshall's 16. The Herd finishes the season 21-14, led in Tuesday's contest by Damier Pitts' 19 points. Dennis Tinnon served up a double-double with 18 points and 11 rebounds, while DeAndre Kane scored 13, with seven of them coming off free throws. Shaquille Johnson tallied 11 and Nigel Spikes chipped in 10. Marcos Knight's putback on the opening basket gave MT a lead the Blue Raiders would never relinquish, as they started the game on an 8-0 run. The Herd worked the deficit back to three with a 7-2 run, but that's as close as Marshall would get the rest of the way. Jones pushed the first-half margin to as many as 13 with a hookshot at the 4:39 mark and the Blue Raiders would take a 39-30 lead into the break after Sulton sank two free throws to close the early stanza. Marshall cut MT's lead to five early in the second frame as Spikes hit back-to-back baskets, but Cintron's triple made it a double-digit margin once again three minutes into the half. Up by seven with just under 16 minutes to play, the Blue Raiders went on a 17-4 run over the next four minutes, capped by another rousing Jones dunk, to make it a 68-48 MT lead. James Gallman got in on the three-point action as well, knocking down a trey at the 8:31 mark to give the Blue Raiders their biggest lead of the game at 75-54. The Herd refused to go quietly, though, battling back with a 21-5 spurt to pull within five with just under two minutes remaining. Sulton responded with a jam on a pass from Knight, then Knight knocked down a pair of free throws to stretch the lead back to nine. Pitts sank a 3-pointer with 22 seconds to play to make it a six-point game, but Oden's free throws with 17 seconds to go sealed the victory. MT will face UT in the second round of the NIT after the Vols' 65-51 win over Savannah State. The date and time of the contest are TBA. **Postgame Quotes**
HEAD COACH KERMIT DAVIS (Opening Comments): We had a lot of respect for Marshall going in. Their RPI was the best of any team not in the NCAA. For 33 or 34 minutes, we played about as good as we've played all year. We rebounded the ball well. They are a really good offensive team, they competed their tail off, and made some tough shots down the stretch. But I am proud of our players. The rebounding was the key. We out-rebounded them by two, and they are a great rebounding team. It was a really, really big win over a quality team.

(On the crowd and the atmosphere): It was terrific. I thought that crowd was electric from the start, and we needed them the whole way. They have been like that all year, and were a big part of us finishing 15-1 at home.

It feels good to be a part of the first team to win in the post-season since 1989. It was good to be here, and to get a win, especially in front of that enthusiastic crowd.

I got asked a lot about the mood of our team this week. Last Monday, we were hurting. We watched the tape while we were still in Hot Springs, so it started there. On Tuesday, the staff did a good job of uplifting them. Tuesday and Wednesday there was a lot of skill development, then we got into our physical practices, and they were good. It started with LaRon Dendy. His leadership was fantastic, and JT Sulton was a much better practice player this week, and it showed.

(On UT next): We are looking forward to it. They are playing really well, they've been a great home team this year. They have wins over a lot of quality opponents. I know our team will be looking forward to playing a tough-minded, well-coached Tennessee team.

(On 23 assists on 32 buckets): We are third or fourth in the country in offensive field goal

percentage, and in the top five in assists to baskets made. And that has been our identity all year. It's fun to coach and as a fan, it's fun to watch. Jimmy Oden and Bruce Massey were outstanding, 15 assists and one turnover between them. Bruce had nine rebounds, seven points. But Jimmy coming off the bench and LaRon having the game he did, I was proud for those two seniors. They really competed tonight.

LARON DENDY: It was a big win for us. We practiced hard every day, and it showed in the game. We went hard. Marshall is one of the top offensive rebounding teams in the country. I think we did a really good job today.

Coach Davis told me I had to get more physical, that I was shooting too many jump shots. I felt like he was right because he always is, so I just took it down low, and it worked out for me, and helped our team out.

JT SULTON (On his dunk that stopped Marshall's momentum when they had cut the margin to five points): It started when we go back on defense. We knew we had to get a stop because they were making some tough shots. My teammates just saw me open. I ran the floor like I always do, and I just dunked the ball.

(On opening the game strong after losing last two games): We just try to leave our past in the past and move forward. Our motto is one step at a time, and I think we did that. We had some good practices this week, and it showed up in the game.

(On the emotion of playing in the post-season): You could say it was kind of tough. It's good to be a Blue Raider, it feels good to be here, this coaching staff does a good job, and we just try to do our job as players.

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