

Blue Raiders edged in overtime thriller at Akron

Cintron scores career-high 22 points

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AKRON, Ohio - Raymond Cintron scored a career-high 22 points, but the Middle Tennessee men's basketball team fell short to the Akron Zips, 82-77 in overtime, on Sunday evening at Rhodes Arena.

Cintron's 6-for-6 performance at the line was crucial, as he sank three consecutive free throws with 14 seconds remaining to tie the game at 70 and send it to overtime. The San Juan, Puerto Rico, native scored 11 of his points in the first half, hitting a trio of 3-pointers in the early stanza.



Marcos Knight matched his career-high of 21 points, scoring 18 of his points in the second half. M. Knight went on a tear out of the break, reeling off the Blue Raiders' (5-2) first 12 points of the latter frame. M. Knight scored 10 unanswered over the first five minutes of the half to give MT its largest lead of the game at 43-36.

The two teams battled back and forth throughout the contest, combining for 14 ties and 14 lead changes. Akron (4-2) took its largest lead in the early going, jumping out to a 10-2 advantage before the Blue Raiders responded with an 8-0 run to knot things at 10 with 12:23 to play in the half.

The Blue Raiders pulled ahead by four points late in the first after a Cintron triple and Shawn Jones layup, but the Zips rallied back for a five-point advantage with 1:26 to go in the half. Four consecutive free throws from M. Knight and Bruce Massey would cut MT's deficit to one at the break, 34-33. Those free throws proved to be M. Knight's only points of the first half.

Akron managed to get the first bucket of the second half before M. Knight's onslaught made it a seven-point MT lead. Chauncey Gilliam ended the streak with a shot from long range for three of his 13 points. He was one of five Zips to score double figures, led by Alex Abreu's 19.

The Zips managed to go up by seven when Brian Walsh sank a triple with 8:43 to go, but a quick 15-foot jumper from Kerry Hammonds, another Cintron trey and two free throws from M. Knight knotted things at 54.

The two teams tied three more times over the next five minutes before a Zeke Marshall free throw and Abreu layup gave the Zips a three-point lead with 1:53 remaining. Two M. Knight free throws cut it to one, but another layup for Abreu gave Akron a 70-67 lead with 42 seconds to go.

That's when Cintron shot a 3-pointer from the corner and was fouled on the play. He sank two free throws before Akron called a timeout in an attempt to ice him on the final toss, but Cintron was un-phased as he delivered the game-tying free throw.

Neiko Hunter opened the overtime period with a pair of free throws to give MT a two-point advantage, but a dunk from Marshall and trey by Jake Kretzer gave Akron the lead for good. The Blue Raiders cut the deficit to one twice in the final two minutes, each time the Zips managed to respond at the other end for the overtime win.

Marshall finished the contest with 14 points and Brian Walsh added 12.

The Blue Raiders out-rebounded their seventh straight opponent with a 34-27 advantage over the Zips.

MT finished the contest shooting 47.3 percent from the field, including a 40 percent clip from 3-point range. Akron shot 51.7 percent and 35 percent from 3-point range.

The Blue Raiders return home for the next two contests, beginning with UAB on Wednesday. Tipoff is slated for 7 p.m. at Murphy Center.

HEAD COACH KERMIT DAVIS

On the back-and-forth contest...

"You've got to give Akron a lot of credit. Keith (Dambrot) has a really, really good team. Our teams are kind of a mirror of each other. It's two physical teams that have a lot of depth. Late in the second half we just didn't execute. We had the game in hand, but we had too many turnovers against a good team on the road. We'll be better because of it. That was the kind of game we expected."

On getting behind early...

"We came out soft. We couldn't handle the ball, so we just got five new guys in. I don't want to do that to start the game, but it's something we had to do to get the game back on track, which we did. There were some really good spots. Marcos and Raymond had good games, but I've got to get a four-man to play a little more physical."

On Raymond Cintron...

"He played a little more complete game today. He handled the ball and drove it to the rim. We ran that set play for him at the end of regulation and that guy had to foul. He stepped up and made three big free throws. He took the ball to the rim and that's where his biggest gains have been. I'm proud of Raymond."

SENIOR GUARD RAYMOND CINTRON

On the battle against Akron...

"They (Akron) have a great team, no doubt. They hadn't played in two weeks, so they had fresh legs. We know they have a tough team and the game was going to be like this. They executed in the game when we couldn't."

On the free throws at the end of regulation...

"I have confidence in myself. I know I can hit free throws."

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