Blue Raiders down WKU for seventh-straight win

MT 10-1 in Sun Belt play

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Box Score (PDF)

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - In front of a season-high crowd of 10,105 fans, Middle Tennessee used a second-half run of 14 unanswered points en route to a 72-53 win over the WKU Hilltoppers at Murphy Center on Saturday evening.

Marcos Knight had a team-high 15 points and also added five assists. Bruce Massey scored 10 points, all in the second half, and collected seven rebounds, six assists and four steals in the game. Neiko Hunter also cracked double-figure scoring with 13 points thanks in part to 7-for-11 free throw shooting.

MT (18-4, 10-1 SBC) hit 48.1 percent from the field and limited WKU (11-11, 5-6 SBC) to 39 percent.

MT held WKU scoreless for the first 3:50 while scoring eight in a row behind Kerry Hammonds' pair of 3-pointers en route to a 15-4 game-opening run. WKU scored four quick points to pull within seven, but MT answered with a 7-1 run that lasted three minutes, putting the Blue Raiders ahead, 22-9, with just under eight to go in the frame.

Raymond Cintron's layup with 22 seconds remaining gave the Blue Raiders a seven-point lead at the break, 30-23.

WKU pulled within six at the 14:01 mark, trailing 42-36, but Sulton's jumper sparked a 19-4 run over the next 7:35. That was as close as the Hilltoppers would get the rest of the way, as MT led the entire game and widened the margin to double figures for good with 11:26 remaining in the contest.

MT finished the game with 17 assists on 25 baskets and held WKU to just four assists while also out-rebounding the Hilltoppers, 33-27.

The Blue Raiders are back in action on Jan. 31 when they travel to FIU before heading to Florida Atlantic on Feb. 2. They return home on Feb. 7 to take on Arkansas State at 7 p.m.

First half
• Hammonds hits two 3-pointers within two minutes and scored six of MT's first eight points.
• WKU held scoreless for opening 3:50; Blue Raiders start with 8-0 run, part of a larger 15-4 run that lasted 7:51.
• Leading 15-8, MT went on a 7-1 run 3:31 (from 11:29 to 7:58).
• Ray Cintron's layup with 22 seconds remaining broke an MT scoring drought that lasted nearly 2 minutes.

Second Half
• Marcos Knight scored eight points in a 4:01 span.
• WKU pulls within six points at 14:01, but MT went on a 19-4 run to pull away for good. That run included a spurt of 14 unanswered points from 11:53 to 6:26.
• MT shot 51.9 percent from the field in the second half.

HEAD COACH KERMIT DAVIS
"I'd like to just commend the crowd. I mean what a great environment for college basketball. To see the progress of our program, we're not near there yet, but to do what we're doing, it's a good sign. Our players really appreciated it. I thought that was a big part of how we played in the second half against a real determined Western Kentucky team who really, really competed. In the second half I thought we got more back to more of our identity. We were first on the floor for a ton of loose balls and out-rebounding them. A really good win on national TV for us."

On second half 14-0 run...
"It was just defensive pressure. James Gallman gave us a big lift of just defending. His energy in the game was great for ball pressure. Bruce Massey was unbelievable. I mean just some of the 50/50 balls he got or offensive rebounds. We had a couple plays where there was a loose ball and blue shirts, a couple of them, we're right on top of it to save possessions. That was a big part of creating that lead."

On if this was a statement game...
"This was nothing about a statement; it was just trying to get better. There is a good feeling when I got here eleven years ago and we hadn't beaten Western in a long time. We have a lot of respect for their program, but for us to have won six out of seven in a series that has been so lopsided in years and years for hundreds of years past, so it's good. It's not a statement, but it sure is a good feeling that we're playing well."

On Bruce Massey...
"He just had unorthodox plays. He even made one where he was trying to lob to JT, but I think you deserve that play after as many 50/50 balls as he came up with. It was Bruce's night. He gives us such great leadership; just his ball pressure, his leadership, a point guard that can go in there and offensive rebound. And we allow him to do that because he is one of our best at it. He brings us a ton of intangibles."

On junior college players...
"I played junior college basketball and was a junior college coach. It's getting the right ones. We do so much work on in their family life that we understand academically, they're going to be committed. We're getting really, really good people. Then I don't think it matters if you're (John) Calipari and you take a one year guy or you're a junior college guy if the character is right. And I think that is why

they've succeeded, because of their character."

Bruce Massey on getting up for the big rivalry game...
"We knew it was a big game coming in to it. We know regardless of the record, when Western and Middle Tennessee play, it's going to be a hard-fought game so we just wanted to out-tough them."

Bruce on how the run in the second half changed the game...
"We took a time out and talked about how we had to keep pushing. We have been a bad second half team all season and we wanted to come out in the first few minutes and make a push."

Marcos Knight on making a statement win...
"No matter what the record is, we treat every conference game the same, but we love winning, so that's why we play so hard.

Bruce Massey on having the crowd, at home, and national television exposure...
"The crowd was great, our students came out and supported us with the community but we couldn't have done any of this without our crowd, so they played a big part in our win tonight."

Bruce Massey on the defense setting the tone...
"Our guards are the key to the defense. Getting steals and getting into transition and getting layups and dunks are our strongpoint, and that is what we did tonight a couple of times."

Bruce Massey on that being the offensive weapon as well...
"We talk about it every timeout. We need to get steals and get transition points, get the ball to our big men and Marcos and our guards and the rim will get bigger for them, and if we can find Ray in transition the rim gets bigger for him."

Marcos on re-energizing the wheels to get ready for the conference tournament...
"One thing about it you want to start playing your best basketball about this time, but we have to continue to get better every day in practice. You want to continue playing your best ball about this time. We are going to take it one game at a time and continue to get better."

Marcos on this year's team being better at this time than last year's team was...
"To me we are about the same. We still have Bruce here and we added Tweety. Coach Davis tells us we have to go out and recreate our identity each game. We must be tough and we hang our hats on this."

Bruce on having a long way to go and still having to play these guys again...
"We still have a long way to go.We didn't look at it as payback from last year. We remember some of the comments their coach said after last year that we hung our hats on and when we went to the NIT, so we know we have to play them again and the next game at Western will be a really tough one."

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