Blue Raiders clinch Sun Belt title with 35-point win over South Alabama

MT reels off 13th-straight win

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Box Score (PDF)

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Five Blue Raiders hit double figures as Middle Tennessee clinched the Sun Belt regular season title and knocked off South Alabama, 85-50, on Thursday night at the Murphy Center. MT earned the No. 1 seed for the upcoming league tournament, which will take place March 8-11 in Hot Springs, Ark.

The Blue Raiders (24-4, 16-1 SBC) started the game on a 13-0 run and never looked back as they took down the Jaguars (15-10, 12-5 SBC) for their 13th-straight victory, tying the second-longest in program history.

In a bruising contest where called fouls out-numbered made field goals, MT hit 78.8 percent (26-of-33) from the charity stripe. Those 26 made free throws are a season-best mark for the squad. USA, who is currently in second place in the league, it just 19 free throws.

Shawn Jones dominated much of the first half, racking up five rebounds and four blocks in the opening 20 minutes. He finished the game with 10 points, seven rebounds, and a career-high six blocks. His previous mark was four, set against FIU earlier this season.

Bruce Massey had a team-high 12 points to go along with three steals and three assists. Both Marcos Knight and Neiko Hunter added 11. Hunter also led the team with four steals off the bench. MT's bench out-scored USA bench, 40-15.

Kerry Hammonds hit all four of his free throws and was 2-for-3 from beyond the arc to finish with 10 points.

After the opening run, USA was able to pull within five with just over 13 minutes remaining. MT,

however, would slowly stretch their lead to as many as 13 over the next ten minutes.

With 3:35 to go in the half, the Blue Raiders busted out on a quick 8-0 run that set them up for a 15-point halftime advantage. MT led 41-26 at intermission.

Out of the break, the Blue Raiders traded baskets with USA until the score sat at 47-31. At the 17:11 mark, MT started a 14-2 scoring spree to pull ahead by 26 and put the game out of reach.

Raymond Cintron failed to score in the first half, but rattled off three 3-pointers in less than four minutes to help MT go up 36 with 7:24 to go. The Blue Raiders would stretch their lead to as many as 38 with 1:58 to play before earning the 35-point win.

Middle Tennessee will play its final regular season home game of the season on Saturday against ULM. Tip-off is scheduled for 5 p.m., with senior day festivities happening prior to the game.

FIRST HALF

- MT opened game up on a 13-0 run that lasted 5:30, and forced five USA turnovers during that span.
- Fast break alley-oop from Kerry Hammonds to Shawn Jones at the 9:08 mark put MT up 15, 26-11.
- With 3:35 to go, the Blue Raiders started an 8-0 run to bring them to the final minute of the half.
- MT shot 17-of-22 (77.3 percent) from the charity stripe in the first half.
- MT racked up seven steals and forced 14 USA turnovers in the opening frame.
- At half, there were more fouls called than field goals made (31 to 17)
- Shawn Jones had four blocks at the half, tying his career-high set against FIU this season. He also had 10 points and five rebounds.
- Both teams reached the double-bonus with over 12 minutes to go, with 30 combined fouls at the break

SECOND HALF

- With the score at 47-31, MT broke out on a 14-2 run over 5:56, pushing its lead to 61-33.
- After not scoring in the first half, Raymond Cintron hit two 3-pointers within a minute, pushing MT's lead to 30. He hit three total 3-pointers in the half.
- USA's Mychal Ammons fouled out with over seven minutes remaining. He led the team with 13 points at the time.
- 11 players saw double-digit minutes, with four seeing at least 20 in the game.
- After being out-rebounded 19-17 in the first half, MT finished the game with a 38-37 advantage.
- MT hit seven 3-pointers as a team in the second half, shooting 63.6 percent.
- Gavin Gibson's 3-pointer inside two minutes was the first of his career, and broke his career-scoring record.

POSTGAME NOTES

- MT is now 24-4 and 16-1 in Sun Belt play.
- MT has won 13 straight games, tying the second-longest streak in program history, and 17 of

its last 18.

- Kermit Davis registered his 114th Sun Belt win as league's all-time winningest coach.
- MT is now 15-0 at home this season, matching the second-most home wins in program history, and 29-2 over the past two years in Murphy Center.
- MT has won 27 straight regular-season home games.MT's 15-game home winning streak is the fourth-longest in program history.
- MT has held seven of its last 10 opponents to 60 points or less and 14 of the last 18.
- This marks only the third time MT has had five players score double-figures (UCF on Nov. 20 and Troy on Feb. 9).
- MT has beaten five of its last seven opponents by double-figures.
- Shawn Jones scored 10 points, marking his 10th double-figure scoring performance of the season and 23rd of his career. He also had a career-high six blocks.
- Bruce Massey scored 12 points, marking his seventh double-figure scoring performance of the season and 13th of his career.
- Neiko Hunter scored 11 points, marking his ninth double-figure scoring performance of the season.
- Marcos Knight scored 11 points, markings his 23rd double-figure scoring performance of the season and 47th of his career.

HEAD COACH KERMIT DAVIS

On the overall performance...
"It was one of our more complete games. We've been very good at home. It's a good offensive team we played and we held them to twenty-seven percent. Our pressure, our physicalness and our depth kind of took over. Both teams got in foul trouble, and I think we have a longer bench. It was a long game for the fans, but we sure appreciate the fans. Almost six thousand people there. It was just a really complete win. We shared the ball, played hard, rebounded so I'm proud of the win."

On the 35-point win...
"(The coaching staff) and I were talking on the bench that we never in our wildest dreams thought this game would end like that. They've won seven out of eight and are playing well. It shows the capabilities of our team when we're right and at home in front of a really good crowd."

On clenching the Sun Belt regular season title...
"We're the first team in college basketball to clinch outright. That is a good feeling, and it's hard to do with three games to go. This is our third one we've won (in four years). We won one at Florida Atlantic and didn't cut the nets down. We didn't cut them down last year, and I want our fans and I want our players to experience it. I think it's good. Hopefully we'll have mental images for more good things to come. But I think our team is mature enough where we understand what we have in front of us and what's at stake, even on Saturday."

Bruce Massey on whether the margin of victory surprises him against the second-place team:
"It surprises me a little bit. Both teams are playing for first place. They knew if they won that game they would have chance at getting in first place. We played so hard tonight and so tough. We started on a 13-0 run and they never got the lead and they didn't get back into the game."

Massey on what it meant to be cutting down the net in February after not cutting down the net last year:
"It feels good, but we know it is just a little tease. Cutting down the nets tonight was a tease to try

and get the feeling to keep winning and win in Hot Springs. It would feel better to win in Hot Springs because then you know you are going to the NCAA Tournament. It felt good to cut down the net in front of our home fans."

Raymond Cintron on what his expectations were when he got here:
"When we got here, I remember in June or July, coach grabbed me, Bruce, and Marcos who were the new guys and said he was looking for toughness from us. He said he was looking for leaders and toughness. We like to compete and if you compete, and give your 100 percent, then there is no doubt you can win games."

Shawn Jones on how important it was to come out strong against a good team like South Alabama:
"It was very important. I wanted to come out and throw the first punch and set the tone for the game and let them know it wasn't going to be easy, that they would have to work for it. As a team, they were going to have to work for points and rebounds."

Massey on the mindset of getting out ahead in the beginning of the game:
"When you put up pressure like that, and they can't get in their offense, then it makes us play a lot harder and they know if I am pressuring the ball, then they don't want to miss an opportunity. We knew South Alabama wasn't going to be an easy game. We knew we would have to work to get shots and be able to score tonight."

Shawn Jones on what it means to be an underclassman and see the seniors go out with two regular season titles:
"For me, I am glad they were able to come here and win back-to-back conference titles. I feel good knowing they came here and did their job."

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