MT tops WKU in regular-season finale, earns 16th-straight win

Sulton surpasses 1,000 career points

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Sun Belt Tournament Bracket

BOWLING GREEN, Ky. - Middle Tennessee's 16-5 run in the closing minutes propelled the Blue Raiders to a 70-62 win over the WKU Hilltoppers on Saturday evening at E. A. Diddle Arena. It marked MT's 16th-straight win and gave the Blue Raiders their 27th win of the season, tying the school record set last year.

With a 19-1 Sun Belt record, MT (27-4) also set the conference's record for most league wins in a season, topping the 18 wins of New Orleans set in 1992-93.

JT Sulton's season-high 17 points led MT, 11 of which came in the second half. Entering the contest with 990 career points, Sulton became the 30th Blue Raider to crack 1,000 career points, finishing the day with 1,007. He also grabbed a game-best seven rebounds as MT knocked off WKU for the seventh time in the last eight meetings.

Free throws proved crucial down the stretch, and the Blue Raiders were up to the challenge, going a perfect 13-for-13 in the second stanza and finishing the game 18-for-19 from the line (94.7%). In all, the Blue Raiders made their last 16 free throws in the contest. Shawn Jones and Neiko Hunter were both 4-for-4 from the line, knocking down two apiece in the final 12 seconds when MT was up, 66-62, to seal the victory.

Jones finished the game with 10 points, while Bruce Massey tallied 11 to go along with three assists and two steals. Marcos Knight scored seven and dished out a game-high four assists with two blocks.

The Blue Raiders took a 31-26 lead into halftime after leading by as many as nine with 2:05 to go.

Kerry Hammonds knocked down back-to-back triples to widen the margin to 27-18, but WKU (16-15, 10-10 SBC) responded with a three-point play from George Fant and bucket from Jamal Crook to trim the lead to four.

Fant led all scorers with 18 points and Crook finished with 10, behind T.J. Price with 14.

A Price 3-pointer cut it down to three in the waning minutes of the early frame, but a last second jumper from Massey gave the Blue Raiders a five-point cushion at the break.

The Blue Raiders widened the lead to nine in the early minutes of the second half on a three-point play from Sulton, but WKU answered with a 15-4 run over a six-minute span to take the lead, 48-46, with 9:40 to play. It marked the first lead for the Hilltoppers since 13:10 to go in the first half.

WKU took its largest lead of the game with 8:26 remaining at 52-48. That's when the Blue Raiders took over, going on a 22-10 run to close out the game. A jumper from Neiko Hunter kickstarted the run, and he would score all eight of his points during that span.

MT took the lead again on a Knight jumper at the 4:11 mark, making it 58-57, but the Hilltoppers tied the contest for the fourth time at 62 when Brandon Harris nailed a 3-pointer with 1:54 to play. But that would be WKU's final basket of the game, as MT went on an 8-0 run to end the contest. Jones' tip-in on a Knight miss gave MT the 64-62 advantage, and he would combined with Hunter for all eight points of the final run.

The Blue Raiders will be the No. 1 seed for the upcoming Sun Belt tournament and will play Saturday, March 9 at 6:30 p.m. in Hot Springs, Ark. MT will face the winner of the North Texas-Louisiana game.

HEAD COACH KERMIT DAVIS
Opening statement...
"I thought (WKU) played with a great edge. It was a terrific college basketball game, and we had to play with some mental toughness at the end to win. Sometimes this league takes some knocks, but it's a really good basketball league. People got to watch two hard-playing college teams play physical and in a really good atmosphere."

On the final minutes...
"It just typifies our team. It typifies the toughness that guys like Bruce Massey plays with. We got a great lift from Neiko Hunter and got some stops. We couldn't get any stops for awhile. They beat us to a lot of 50-50 balls. Then in the last few minutes we became a little tougher. I was proud of our players."

On if MT deserves to get in the NCAA tournament...
"Yes, no question. 27 games and ninth best non-conference schedule in college basketball. Third-longest winning streak in college ball, second-most wins. You win 19 games in this league and win on the road. I definitely think we have. Now, our mindset going into the tournament is that we're going to go with an absolute passion to win the tournament. We can't take anything for granted."

SENIOR FORWARD JT SULTON
"We take our hats off to WKU because we know they are a good team. But we never stopped playing, and we knew we couldn't quit if we wanted to beat that team."

"This is a rivalry game, and I think Western played hard all day. We played with a real physicality, and that's what you have to do to beat your rival."

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