

# Top-seeded Blue Raiders advance to semifinals of SBC tournament with win over Louisiana

## MT extends nation's longest winning streak to 17 games

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**HOT SPRINGS, Ark.** - The top-seeded Middle Tennessee men's basketball team advanced to the semifinals of the Sun Belt tournament with an 81-66 win over Louisiana on Saturday night at Summit Arena. It marked the 17th straight win for the Blue Raiders, extending the nation's longest winning streak.

At 28-4 on the season, MT broke the school record for wins, topping last year's total of 27. MT will face No. 4 seed FIU on Sunday at 6:30 p.m. CT with the game airing on the Sun Belt Network.



Sun Belt Defensive Player of the Year Bruce Massey led MT with 15 points, one of three Blue Raiders to score double figures. Raymond Cintron added 12 points and James Gallman tallied 11 as 10 Blue Raiders had at least four points in the contest. The MT bench accounted for 43 points compared to six for the Ragin' Cajuns (13-20), including a 26-0 second-half margin.

The Blue Raiders once again answered the challenge at the free throw line, converting 31-of-39 free throws (79.5%). MT also owned a 36-27 advantage on the boards and finished the contest shooting 48.9 percent from the field.

The Cajuns only led by as many as one point and MT took the lead for good 2:18 into the contest on a pair of free throws from Massey. The Blue Raiders followed that up with a 10-2 run, capped by a Tweety Knight layup to make it 15-7 with 14:23 to go in the first stanza.

Although MT held a steady lead throughout the first half, the Cajuns kept it within single digits and trimmed the Blue Raiders' lead to three with 1:45 to go when Bryant Mbamalu hit a triple to make it

34-31. He would finish with 14 points, behind Alan-Michael Thompson with 17 and Elfird Payton with 15.

Gallman closed out the frame hitting all four of his free throws in the final 1:14 to give MT the six-point lead at halftime, 39-33.

The Cajuns worked the deficit down to three again in the opening minutes of the second stanza, but the Blue Raiders promptly responded with a 25-8 run over an eight-minute span to give MT its largest lead of the game at 20 points, 66-46, with 9:35 to go. Gallman nailed his only triple of the contest in transition after a block by Shawn Jones to spark the run.

MT maintained a double-figure lead the rest of the way, as the Cajuns would never get closer than 13 thanks in part to solid free throw shooting down the stretch. The Blue Raiders made 9-of-11 free throws over the final 6:26 to seal the 15-point win.

#### HEAD COACH KERMIT DAVIS

Opening statement...

"I really thought Louisiana played really, really well. A much better team than we played the first two times. They played hard. We got in foul trouble, and I was really proud of our bench. We were absorbing a lot of foul trouble. Just win and advance. It was a good one for us. Credit to Lafayette, they were a good team tonight."

On this year compared to last year...

"We didn't talk about last year, but it was always in the room for a year from about right now. We talked about it one time, and that was to start the season in September. But in the back of these guys' minds, they're very competitive. It was like the elephant in the room, and I'm glad it's out. Hopefully we'll play better tomorrow night."

On the big run in the second half...

"It's been the strength of our team. It's just the depth. To go 43-6 off the bench just typifies what we've done. It was good and fun to see."

On the wins record...

"I really hadn't thought a lot about it. To win 55 games (the past two years) and have the nation's longest winning streak going right now, that's a lot to be proud of. We have a lot of work to do here in Hot Springs, but when you think about it, it's pretty remarkable."

#### SENIOR GUARD BRUCE MASSEY

On bench performance this year vs. last year...

"It was one advantage. And I would say experience coming into the season. Last year for a lot of us it being our first time at the Sun Belt tournament, we didn't come out with the same edge and toughness that we had the whole conference last year. We knew this year every game was going to be a tough one. We came out with the same toughness and edge (tonight) and came out with the victory."

On getting past the first game of the tournament...

"Yes, I'm relieved. It was a big game and we knew that coming into it. Just trying to advance. We knew this was going to be a big game and that Louisiana is really talented. Our objective was to limit their buckets and slow them down, and we were successful tonight."

SENIOR GUARD JAMES GALLMAN

On his role tonight...

"I just had to play defense. If I played defense the rest of my game would play off that. I get a lot of energy off the bench."

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