Blue Raiders upset by FIU in Sun Belt semifinals

Knight records third career double-double

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HOT SPRINGS, Ark. - Marcos Knight posted a double-double with 13 points and 11 rebounds, but it was not enough as Middle Tennessee fell to FIU, 61-57, in the Sun Belt tournament semifinals on Sunday evening at Summit Arena.

The Blue Raiders (28-5, 19-1 SBC), who entered Sunday night's contest with the nation's longest winning streak at 17 games, rallied from an 11-point second-half deficit to pull within two, 57-55, on a couple of Knight free throws with 45.6 seconds to go, but FIU's Deric Hill responded with a layup to push the lead back to four. Knight, who scored 10 points in the second half, would drive to the opposite end for a layup to make it a two-point game again with 7.9 seconds remaining before Malik Smith's two free throws sealed the victory for the Panthers (18-13, 11-9 SBC).

Hill led FIU with 16 points, while MT's Shawn Jones tallied a game-high 17 points. Jones also added eight rebounds. Bruce Massey and Neiko Hunter had eight points and five rebounds apiece, and Massey dished out seven assists.

After shooting just 29.6 percent in the first half, the Blue Raiders hit 44.8 percent from the field in the second frame to finish the contest at 37.5 percent while limiting the Panthers to 33.3 percent shooting. MT's bench was quiet in the contest, producing only 10 points compared to FIU's 16. It marked just the second time this season MT's bench was outscored.

Trailing 7-4 at the 16:27 mark, the Panthers went on a 10-0 run sparked by a triple from Tymell Murphy to tie the contest. The Blue Raiders answered with an 8-0 run to regain the lead, 15-14, when Jones put back his own miss. It would be the last lead of the game for the Blue Raiders, as Hill made a pair of free throws to put the Panthers in front for good with 6:47 to go before halftime.

FIU used a 14-4 spurt to widen the margin to nine with just under four to go in the early frame and would take that lead into halftime, 33-24.

Hill made two more free throws to give FIU its largest lead of the game at 11 just 37 seconds into the second half, but MT responded with a 10-2 run to cut the deficit three five minutes into the half. Kerry Hammonds' triple kickstarted the run, followed by a steal from Massey and throw-ahead to Hunter for the layup to make it a six-point game. The duo would combine for another steal and bucket on the next possession, and two minutes later, Hammonds knocked down another 3-pointer to cut the deficit to three, 37-34.

But the Panthers answered with a triple of their own from Cameron Bell to push the margin back to six. Bell would go on to finish with 15 points.

MT would continue to claw its way back throughout the second, getting within three on back-to-back baskets from Massey and Jones with 10:28 to go, but again it was Bell with the answer on another trey.

The Panthers widened the margin back to nine with 6:15 to go on a 3-pointer from Smith, and Jones would trim it to four two minutes later with a three-point play.

MT trailed by six with three minutes to play and worked it down to two, but FIU managed to hold on for the victory.

The Blue Raiders now await their postseason destiny. MT has already clinched the NIT berth, but will await the announcement of the NCAA tournament field at 5 p.m. CT next Sunday.

Opening Statement from Head Coach Kermit Davis: "I thought FIU was terrific tonight. They played great the last time we played them, beat them on a tip-in. Richard's done a fantastic job at FIU, they've won five out of six and are playing at a real high level. They had us on our heels from the first two minutes. Tonight, Hill was the best player on the floor. He dominated the game at the point guard spot. He stayed in the paint all night. He made a great play at the end. We're very disappointed, but all I can do is just give a lot of credit to Richard and his staff and for them winning the game."

Question for Head Coach Davis: Do you think you're in?
"I do. I don't think there's any question about it. When you start looking over the body of work, I think you got to go back to the non-conference strength of schedule which is about ninth or tenth. We got the second most road wins in the country. The longest winning streak in the nation was broken tonight. I don't think there's any question about it. We can't do any more than we did to schedule the toughest non-conference schedule and we did it. We can't control sometimes the league, but we can control that. We had some great wins and disappointed tonight, but I don't think there's any question we'll be in on Sunday."

On what FIU did defensively in the first half...
"I just thought we went out of character, we shot it on one pass a lot. Our team lost its identity of getting the ball side to side. We couldn't finish balls around the goal. It's not like they're big, they play 6' 6" post guys. We just lost our patience offensively."

Question for Head Coach Richard Pitino: Do you feel like Middle Tennessee is an NCAA tournament

team? Do you think they will get in?
"Absolutely. I don't know how they couldn't get in. They are 28-5 and have a top 25 RPI with the second most wins in the country. They most absolutely should get in."

Question for Head Coach Richard Pitino: What were the keys to the game?
"We had to defend and we had to rebound. We held them to 29% in the first half and then not so great in the second half. But 37% overall is a good job. We didn't turn them over as much as we normally do, so for us to be able to do that was huge. We did some good things offensively and made free throws down the stretch. Hill and Smith made some big time shots. Deric Hill is a 5 foot 7 walk on who had 16 points, 4 rebounds, 6 assists, and 4 steals. "

Question for Head Coach Richard Pitino: What was the key defensively?
"We had to guard the three. We made a lot of crucial mistakes at our place. They are a great team. And again it is kind of a joke that they are even considered a bubble team. They have 28 wins and to be a bubble team is a shame. But we did a good job, not so much on the post with their size, but they are a heck of a team. In all honesty, Kermit Davis is up there with Billy Donovan and my dad. He's as good of a coach as I have gone against. I just got fortunate this game."

Question for Bruce Massey: You went through a similar situation last year, does this one hurt more?
"Yeah, it hurts a lot more, especially being 28-4 coming into the game. Give credit to FIU, they played great tonight. Hill dominated the game from the point guard spot. He controlled the game and outplayed me tonight."

Question for Marcos Knight: Do you like your chances of making the tournament?
"I think we're an NCAA team, but it's not up to us anymore. It's up to the NCAA committee, so we left it into their hands. We'll just have to see on Sunday whether we get in or not."

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