

A tough loss for MTSU

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A football is shaped so that it can take crazy, unexplained bounces. A basketball, on the other hand, is round and thus more likely to take true bounces.

So when Belmont and Middle Tennessee State squared off last week at Curb Event Center, it promised to be one of the top pre-conference games of the early season.

Rick Byrd's Belmont team had only two losses and defeated Pac-12 member Stanford. Kermit Davis' MTSU team also had only two losses and was fresh off a victory over Ole Miss.

Byrd and Davis have lengthy, impressive resumes. They have been coaching for years and share a mutual respect for each other.

With the two schools some 30 miles apart, it's only natural that they play each other on an annual basis.

While Belmont came into the game having won five of the last six games, they have been competitive, down to the wire games for the most part. In the last six games, three were decided in overtime.

It is not a rivalry to be compared with Belmont-Lipscomb's Battle of the Boulevard, because those players know each other and often play pickup games in the off-season.

With MTSU, it's not a Battle of I-24. As one player explained, this is more of a series built on respect.

But while expectations for another nail-biter were high, it was not to be.

Belmont led 30-26 at halftime, thanks to a 3-point buzzer-beating dagger launched by the Bruins' J.J. Mann. While Davis knew his team was very much alive mathematically, he sensed this would not be a night to remember.

"I didn't think we were ever in sync," Davis said. "We didn't have any juice."

Belmont quickly stretched the lead in the second half as MTSU struggled to score. The Blue Raiders ended up shooting season low field goal (28.6) and 3-point (18.8) percentages.

The result was a comfortable 64-49 win for the Bruins.

"We missed shots. We couldn't finish around the rim. That's just us not playing with a physicalness and toughness," Davis said later, after apologizing to the Blue Raiders fans who made the trip from Murfreesboro only to witness a train wreck.

Davis had no answers, only praise for Belmont and the game the Bruins played. Byrd was somewhat surprised at how well his team played, calling it the best game the Bruins had played to this point.

His team had something to do with MTSU's anemic shooting percentages, but the Blue Raiders uncharacteristically shot themselves in the sneakers on frequent occasions.

Both teams have excellent shots at making the NCAA Tournament. Byrd's team is in its first season as an Ohio Valley Conference member and historically it has been a conference whose tournament champion is the only team to make the tournament.

Davis had one of his best teams a year ago, but lost in the Sun Belt Tournament and missed the tournament.

That's where non-conference schedules come into play in March.

The Belmont-MTSU game could mean the difference in getting a berth in the tournament or missing out.

"We all get disappointed with losing, but it was how we lost that bothered me," Davis said.

He admitted it was the first game he has coached when not a single player managed to score double figures.

It was a game he and his team have to put behind them. Sometimes it simply is not your night.

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