



**James Sena (left) of Air21 and Sol Mercado of Meralco grapple for ball possession while their teammates look on in Sunday night's game at the MOA Arena. (Photo by Jun Mendoza)**

MANILA — The Meralco Bolts put behind them their harrowing experience last Wednesday, playing solid basketball in their return to the MOA Arena Sunday night with a resounding 85-72 victory over the Air21 Express go once more beyond the .500 mark in the PBA Philippine Cup.

The Bolts played good defense, limiting the Express to a league season-low output in chalking up their third win against two losses.

Meralco coach Ryan Gregorio pointed out later that they now also guarded their belongings with extra care to avoid a repeat of their sad experience last Wednesday where they lost valuables during the first half of their game against Globalport.

The Meralco management brought in their own security personnel to watch over the locker rooms, so Gregorio and his troops could concentrate on the business at hand.

Sol Mercado and Mark Cardona paced the team with 24 and 18 points, respectively, while Reynel Hugnatan ably filled in for a struggling Cliff Hodge with 10 points and the same number of rebounds.

Hugnatan earned a personal milestone in the third quarter, becoming the 45th PBA player to collar a 1,000th career offensive rebound.

“Our management guaranteed us all off-court scenarios will be taken care of, so we’re able to focus at the task at hand. It was such a relief, knowing everything would be okay,” said Gregorio, the biggest victim in last Wednesday’s heist where he lost, among others, his iPad and iPhone where valuable basketball and personal files are stored.

“They (the MOA Arena management) promised to return what we lost. But that’s material thing. They can’t bring back anymore the more important files (videos, photos) on the activities of my kids since birth,” Gregorio related.

“That’s sad but everything happens for a reason. We learned from the experience and we have to move on,” he added.

The Bolts did move on the playing court, turning to the Express to vent their frustration on their defeat last Wednesday.

The Express actually came into the game briefly in the third quarter before succumbing to Meralco's tough defense in the playoff period.

They absorbed their fourth loss in five games.

"We can compete on a certain level. Our problem is consistency," rued Air21 coach Franz Pumaren.

They were still close behind at 69-62 before Hugnatan and Mercado scored 10 unanswered points as the Bolts pulled away for good.

Joseph Yeo drove past LA Tenorio then Alex Cabagnot nailed a charity inside the final minute as Petron Blaze survived Barangay Ginebra's endgame onslaught for a tough 98-95 win in the second game.

"We're learning slowly from the coaches down to the players. *Natapat na malalakas agad ang nakalaban namin* , and it's so important that we won this game. It will bring back our confidence and help us down the line," said Petron coach Olsen Racela.