Phillips Leads Blue Raiders to 7-3 Win

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Derek Phillips went 3-for-3 with three RBIs and belted a two-run homer in the eighth to give Middle Tennessee some insurance in a 7-3 victory over 28th-ranked and Sun Belt Conference co-leader South Alabama Friday night at Reese Smith Field.

The Blue Raiders (19-19, 6-7 SBC) got three runs in the fourth and two in the sixth and held a 5-3 lead heading into the eighth before Chad Cooper singled and Phillips blasted the first pitch from Jaguar reliever Bert Heath over the wall in centerfield for his second home run in two games, his first two round-trippers of the season.

The runs would come in handy, as the Jaguars loaded the bases in the ninth before cleanup hitter Ryan Mulhern popped out to end the contest and give the Blue Raiders their sixth win in seven games and three of the last four in conference play.

Middle Tennessee starter Steve Kline (5-2) worked into the seventh to get the win, allowing three runs on five hits. Kline struck out two and walked three. Chase Swing worked the final three innings to get his fourth save of the year and third in his last four appearances, though the sophomore righthander worked out of jams in all three innings.

USA starter Clark Girardeau (3-2) took the loss, allowing five runs, four earned, on six hits in five-plus innings. Girardeau walked four and struck out four.

Both teams had chances in the early innings to get on the board but could not get the two-out hit with a runner in scoring position, as both squads left three runners on base in the first three frames.

The Blue Raiders finally broke through against Girardeau in the fourth, with Josh Archer lining a 1-0 pitch just over the leftfield wall to leadoff the inning. Brett Carroll then walked and scored on Chad Cooper's double just inside the third base bag for a 2-0 Middle Tennessee lead.

Cooper went to third on the play when USA shortstop Brett Parker's throw short-hopped the catcher and went to the backstop. Phillips followed with a single up the middle, giving the Blue Raiders a 3-0 edge.

Jerry Knox followed with a walk and Shane Kemp tried to bunt the runners over but popped up the bunt to the catcher. Both runners were going on the play, and Tim Land fired to Parker, who tagged the bag for the second out and then tagged Knox for a triple play.

The Jaguars (25-12, 6-4) cut into the lead in the fifth with a run and it could have been more if not for a doubleplay.

T.J. Touchstone led off the inning with a double down the leftfield line. Cole Craig followed with bunt single to put runners on the corners with no one out. But Jansen Rayborn helped the Blue Raiders by grounding into a 6-4-3 twinkilling, though the run scored on the play.

Rayborn helped because Mulhern doubled with two outs, a ball that would have scored another run in the inning, but Josh Touchstone flied out to right to end the inning.

Middle Tennessee got the run back plus another in the bottom of the inning. Carroll and Cooper both walked to leadoff, chasing Girardeau from the contest. Phillips moved both runners up a base with a bunt, and pinch-hitter Chris LeGuenec singled in both runners for a 5-1 Blue Raider advantage.

South Alabama would continue to fight, scoring twice in the seventh inning and if not for a wonderful diving stop at shortstop by Jeff Beachum, it would have been more.

Adam Lind doubled to leftcenter and Land followed with a walk, chasing Kline from the contest. Swing entered the game and Kevin Sytko promptly laid down a perfect bunt down the third base line, loading the bases with nobody out.

Parker singled through the leftside, plating Lind. T.J. Touchstone then grounded sharply up the middle, where Beachum made a diving stop, flipped to Nate Jaggers at second for the force, and Jaggers completed the doubleplay. South Alabama scored on the ground ball but it would likely have been a pair of runs had the ball gotten through. Swing got a strikeout of Craig to end the inning with the Blue Raiders holding a 5-3 lead.

The Jaguars threatened again in the eighth, as pinch-hitter Kevin Laird was hit and Mulhern followed with a single to center. Josh Touchstone grounded into a fielder's choice, forcing the runner at third. Jaggers then made a diving stop of a hard grounder off the bat of Lind for the second out, and pinch-hitter Ryan Fillingim popped out to end the inning.

Two walks and a single loaded the bases in the ninth for Mulhern, South Alabama's all-time leading home run hitter. Swing fell behind 2-0 before throwing a strike. Mulhern then swung and missed a breaking ball to even the count before popping out to Jaggers to end the contest.

Cooper was 2-for-3 with a walk and three runs scored, as well as running over the fence in the visiting bullpen going after a foul ball in the eighth. Cole, Mulhern and Parker all had a pair of hits for the Jaguars in the loss.

The two teams continue their three-game series Saturday at 2 p.m. at Reese Smith Field, with the series concluding Sunday at 1 p.m.

GAME NOTES

The Blue Raiders used their 32nd different batting order in 38 games Friday night ... Derek Phillips extended his hitting streak to nine games with a single in the second ... Josh Archer's home run in the fourth was his 10th of the season and seventh in the month of April. It also marks his career-high for homers in a season, as the sophomore hit nine last season ... Chuck Akers extended his hitting streak to seven games with a single in the fifth ... The win for Middle Tennessee snapped a five-game losing streak dating to May 13, 2001. It also improved the Blue Raiders to 3-1 all-time against South Alabama in Murfreesboro.

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