

# Raiders Begin Stockstill Era with Victory

August 31, 2006 · Chuck Morris

## **MURFREESBORO, Tenn. -**

Middle Tennessee relied on a bend-but-don't-break defense to defeat Florida International, 7-6, to kick off the Rick Stockstill era Thursday night at Floyd Stadium.

The Blue Raiders (1-0, 1-0) allowed a 17-play, 80-yard drive on the opening series of the game, but kept the Golden Panthers (0-1, 0-1) off the scoreboard the rest of the night.

Julian Reams, who rushed for a game-high 80 yards, capped the drive with a 12-yard touchdown run with 7:12 left in the first quarter. But Chris Patullo missed the extra point attempt, which proved to be the difference in the contest.

Middle Tennessee scored with one minute remaining in the first half to take a 7-6 lead it would not relinquish.

Eugene Gross dashed 33 yards for a touchdown to cap a 10-play, 82-yard drive. Colby Smith kicked the PAT, the game-winning points.

The Blue Raiders forced one turnover defensively, but could not take advantage of the miscue. Smith missed a 40-yard field goal attempt early in the second quarter.

The missed field goal came one play after an 18-yard touchdown pass from Clint Marks to Taron Henry was overturned by instant replay.

Perhaps the turning point of the game came on special teams.

With 6:31 remaining in the fourth quarter, Smith boomed a 79-yard punt with the Blue Raiders backed up on their own 5-yard line, changing field position. John Houston Whiddon was not able to field Smith's punt, which hit around the FIU 45 and rolled dead at the FIU 16.



The Blue Raiders defensively allowed 247 yards to Florida International, 97 yards on the ground and 150 through the air.

Middle Tennessee gained 175 yards offensively, rushing for 92 and passing for 83.

The Blue Raiders will visit Maryland on Sept. 9 for a 5 p.m. (CDT) kickoff.

## **POSTGAME NOTES**

### **MIDDLE TENNESSEE VS FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL**

**AUG. 31, 2006; FLOYD STADIUM**

**FIRST TIME STARTERS:** In tonight's season opener against FIU, Middle Tennessee had seven players make their first career starts. Defensively, Trevor Jenkins, Jonathan Presley, Reggie Doucet and Marcus Brandon all made their first starts, while Jonathan Grigsby, Mark Thompson and Paul Cantrell had starts on the offensive side.

**FIRSTS UNDER STOCKSTILL:** First TD: Eugene Gross 33-yard run; First Play: 1-yard run by Eugene Gross; First Catch: Hunter Birtsch; First Tackle: Marcus Brandon and Jonathan Harris; First Rush: Eugene Gross; First Sack: Erik Walden; First TFL: Trevor Jenkins; First Forced Fumble: Justin Rainey; First Recovered Fumble: Erik Walden; First Replay: Overturned by the booth (would have been a TD by Taron Henry); First First Down: DeMarco McNair; First Missed Field Goal: Colby Smith; First Penalty: Justin Rainey (pass interference); First Lead: Came with 1:00 left in first half (7-6); First Interception: Clint Marks.

**MARKS IN SECOND:** With 10 completions tonight against FIU, senior Clint Marks moved to second on the all-time pass completions list. Marks, who took over second place from Kelly Holcomb, now has 507 career completions but is still a long way from all-time leader Wes Counts (706).

**GROSS PASSES YOUNG:** With his 33-yard touchdown run just before halftime, senior Eugene Gross surpassed Bobby Young for eighth place on the all-time scoring list at Middle Tennessee. Gross now has 192 career points and now has his sites set on seventh-place Keegan Ray, who tallied 214 points during his career (1996-99). The touchdown run was the 31st rushing touchdown of his career and his 32nd overall touchdown. Both figures rank fourth on the all-time list for the Blue Raiders.

**DEFENSE KEEPS PANTHERS IN CHECK:** Middle Tennessee's defense got off to an inauspicious start, allowing a 17-play, 80-yard drive to start the game. But the young unit settled down the rest of the game, giving up just 247 total yards for the game, including only 132 to FIU quarterback Josh Padrick. Padrick threw for 314 yards and two touchdowns in FIU's win last season.

**SMITH BOOMS ONE:** Senior Colby Smith saved the best punt of his career for the right time on Thursday night. Smith, punting from deep in his own endzone, boomed a 79-yarder to help turn the field position for the Blue Raiders. It was the longest of Smith's career and the second longest in school history behind Sid Corban's 80-yarder in 1956 against Vanderbilt.

**TIDBITS:** Middle Tennessee officially began its 92nd season of football with today's season opener ... TE Clinton Corder made his first start since the 2003 season ... DE Erik Walden recovered the first fumble of his career when he fell on one in the second quarter ... OT Germayle Franklin made his

29th consecutive start ... Taron Henry has now caught at least one pass in seven straight games ... RB Eugene Gross ran his streak to 13 straight games with at least one catch ... QB Joe Craddock played in his first career game and picked up his first career completion late in the third quarter ... The Blue Raiders won their home opener for the first time in 2001 and improved to 34-5-1 all-time when opening at Floyd Stadium ... Middle Tennessee improved to 3-2 all-time on Thursday night ... With 18 carries in the contest, Eugene Gross surpassed Marvin Collier (1985-88) for seventh on the all-time rushing attempts list ... Middle Tennessee moves to 13-6 all-time at home in Sun Belt play and 19-16 in the five-plus years of SBC action ... Rick Stockstill became the eighth Blue Raider head coach to win the first game in which he coached. The last coach to do so was Bill Peck against UT Martin in 1970.

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