Nickson the Star in Loss to Louisville

Sets school record for kick return yards, takes one 88 yards for a score in 44-17 defeat

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. - Louisville's Hunter Cantwell threw for a career-high 340 yards and three touchdowns and the eighth-ranked Cardinals piled up 526 yards of total offense, defeating Middle Tennessee, 44-17, Friday night at LP Field. UL receiver had four catches for 134 yards and two touchdowns, including scoring catches of 68 and 25 yards. Urrutia's 25-yard TD catch in the final minute of the first half gave UL a 23-10 halftime lead. Cantwell was 17-for-32 for the game with no interceptions, completing passes to seven different receivers in the contest. Middle Tennessee's defense forced three first-half field goals before giving up the score to Urrutia in the final minute. Louisville controlled the ball for just 25:24, with all five of its touchdown drives taking six plays or less. Senior Eugene Gross rushes for 50 yards and had 45 yards in receptions, more than a third of Middle Tennessee's total offense of 263 yards. The big star of the game for the Blue Raiders was safety Damon Nickson, who tallied 187 kick return yards, setting a new school record and falling just two yards short of the Sun Belt record. Nickson also had his first interception of the season and second of his career, one of two turnovers by the Middle Tennessee defense. Louisville took the opening drive of the game 59 yards on 10 plays, but the Blue Raider defense stiffened, forcing a 31-yard field goal from Art Carmody. Nickson returned the ensuing kickoff 88 yards for a touchdown, splitting two defenders at the 30-yard line and pulling away from UL's Richard Raglin at the Cardinals 45 en route to the score. It was the first kickoff return for a touchdown since 2001 and the first opening kickoff returned for six points since 1985. The Blue Raiders added a 23-yard field goal from Colby Smith to

take a 10-3 lead with 6:03 remaining in the first period. Smith hit the left upright from 47 yards later in the period, giving the Cardinals the ball at the Blue Raider 31-yard line. Louisville took advantage and scored on the second-to-last play of the first quarter, a 68-yard catch-and-run from Cantwell to Urrutia, tying the contest at 10 at the end of the first period. The Cardinals drove 11 plays and 84 yards in the second quarter but again the Middle Tennessee defense toughened in the red zone, forcing a 24-yard field goal from Carmody. On its next possession Louisville drove inside the red zone again, and for the third time in the contest Carmody was true with a field goal, this one from 20 yards for a 16-10 UL lead. The Blue Raiders could not run out the clock and Louisville again took advantage, driving 80 yards in just 1:12 at the end of the half, capped by a 25-yard strike to Urrutia in the back of the endzone for a 23-10 UL advantage at halftime. A turning point in the game may have come with 5:38 remaining in the third quarter when the Blue Raiders went on 4th-and-6 from the UL 31-yard line. Clint Marks' pass to Bobby Williams was on target and enough for the first down, but Williams dropped it, giving the visitors the ball. The Cardinals used just five plays to drive the field, with Cantwell hitting Scott Kuhn for a 15-yard TD, giving UL a 30-10 advantage. The Blue Raiders were driving in the fourth quarter when a bit of trickery backfired. A double reverse pass was intercepted by Jon Russell, who returned the ball 43 yards. Louisville scored four plays later, with Kolby Smith scoring from 10 yards out for a 37-10 lead. Middle Tennessee scored their final points of the game on a seven-yard TD pass from Marks to Stephen Chicola, capping a 13-play drive with 3:22 remaining in the contest. Louisville's Anthony Allen punched in the final points of the game with a 16-yard run in the final minute. Middle Tennessee has an open date next week and returns to action on October 21 at Louisiana-Monroe. **Middle Tennessee vs. Louisville**

Game Notes

NEW ATTENDANCE MARK: Tonight's announced crowd of 32,797 is a new home attendance record for Middle Tennessee. The previous mark was 27, 568 established against Tennessee State on Sept. 5, 1998 at Floyd Stadium. It also marks the first time in school history the Blue Raiders have topped the 20,000 mark in attendance for three straight home games. **NICKSON BRINGS ONE BACK:** Junior Damon Nickson recorded his first career kickoff return for a touchdown when he followed a Louisville field goal with an 88-yard return to put the Blue Raiders a head 7-3. It was the first kickoff return of Nickson's career. It marked the first time the Blue Raiders have returned their opening kickoff of the game for a score since Sept. 7, 1985 when Robert Alford brought one back against Lenoir-Ryne. It was also the first kickoff return for a touchdown overall since Kerry Wright returned one 86 yards against Connecticut on November 17, 2001. **NICKSON SETS SCHOOL RECORD:** In his first game as a returner, junior Damon Nickson broke the school record for kickoff return yards with 187 and fell just two yards shy of equaling the Sun Belt Conference record. Nickson broke the previous mark of 166 yards set by Demetric Mostiller against Jacksonville State on Oct. 5, 1996. **FACING THE BEST:** Tonight's game against Louisville was the 25th game by the Blue Raiders against a team from either the ACC, Big East, SEC, Big 10, Big 12 or Pac-10 since joining the I-A ranks in 1999. The Blue Raiders face a total of four teams from those leagues in 2006 and have tallied at least three games against those conference foes each year since 1999 except for 2004 when they had just one on the slate. The Blue Raiders' record in those games is now 3-22. **GROSS PASSES GREEN:** Senior Eugene Gross rushes 13 times for 50 yards in the contest, passing Kelverrick Green (2,150, 1996-99) for ninth on the all-time list at Middle Tennessee. Gross now has 2,174 yards and needs 77 yards to pass Brigham Lyons (2,250, 1951-53). Gross added a season-high three receptions for 45 yards and now has 90 career receptions. He needs nine more catches to tie for 10th on the all-time list. **MARKS TIES CORWIN:** QB Clint Marks tossed his 33rd touchdown pass of his career to tie Mickey Corwin for fourth place on the all-time list. Marks, who has four this season, needs three more to tie Kelly Holcomb for third place. **CHICOLA ON THE**

BOARD: Junior tight end Stephen Chicola caught one pass in the contest for a seven-yard touchdown, his first TD of the season and second of his career. Chicola entered the game with just two receptions this season. He also had another catch in the game nullified because of a penalty.
QUICK HITTERS: Middle Tennessee's 7-3 lead in the first quarter marked just the second time all year the Cardinals have been behind in a game (Miami led 7-0) ... DE Tavares Jones recorded his team-high fourth sack of the season during the first drive tonight against UL ... Colby Smith's first quarter 23-yard field goal was the 25th of his career ... WR Jay Robinson, playing in his first career game tonight, caught his first collegiate pass during Middle Tennessee's opening offensive drive ... QB Clint Marks has now started under center for 27 straight games ... Jonathan Harris recorded his second fumble recovery in as many weeks when he registered one in the first quarter against UL ... Middle Tennessee fell to 0-11 against ranked opponents as a I-A member ... Damon Nickson recorded the second interception of his career and his first since the 2004 season when he picked off a Hunter Cantwell pass in the third quarter ... Desmond Gee had his first career receptions in the contests, catching two passes for 15 yards.

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