

Blue Raiders riding high atop SBC standings

Middle Tennessee earns third straight road win in 34-20 win vs. Cajuns

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LAFAYETTE, La. - Middle Tennessee is coming home atop the Sun Belt Conference standings after registering a sweep of Louisiana and achieving team and individual superlatives in the 34-20 win.

The Blue Raiders (5-3, 4-0) moved into sole possession of first place in the standings after winning three SBC road games for the first time in school history, including an impressive back-to-back road wins against the two members from Louisiana to return home riding high.

As for riding high, Damon Nickson achieved what no player in school history has when he recorded four interceptions against the Ragin' Cajuns, including returning one for a touchdown. Only two players in school history ever had recorded as many as three interceptions in a game. Nickson's final two interceptions came in the final four minutes of the game and sealed the third straight Sun Belt road win for the Blue Raiders.



His performance led a six-turnover showing for the defense against a Cajun offense that came into the game with seven turnovers all season. Clint Marks spearheaded the offensive attack with 244 yards through the air, throwing one touchdown and running for another. He completed 19-of-26 passes.

The game started slow for Middle Tennessee but one early mistake would not set a bad tone for what was to come. Middle Tennessee's offense not only squandered a golden scoring opportunity right off the bat after Justin Rainey forced a fumble and Wes Hofacker recovered it at the Ragin' Cajun 38 on the home team's first possession, but it gave Louisiana-Lafayette points when Marks was intercepted by Michael Adams at the 21. Adams returned the errant pass 79 yards to give the Ragin' Cajuns an early 7-0 lead.

The opportunistic Blue Raider defense came up large once again as the Cajuns were at midfield on their second offensive possession. They were driving until Damon Nickson hauled in his second interception of the season to give the Blue Raiders their second takeaway in as many possessions and provide the offense with possession at its 35.

Marks led Middle Tennessee on an impressive game-tying drive capped with a 22-yard strike to freshman standout Desmond Gee with 2:37 remaining in the first quarter. Marks was 4-of-6 on the drive for 53 yards, including a huge 12-yard pass to Taron Henry on a third-and-5 at midfield to keep the drive alive. By the time it was complete, Middle Tennessee had turned in its 14th scoring drive of 60 yards or longer by going 65 yards in 10 plays, converting a pair of key third-down conversions along the way.

The heralded Blue Raider defense continued to take control when it stepped back on the field. Jerry Babb completed a pass to Derrick Smith at midfield but Nickson met him on impact and forced a fumble. Tavares Jones pounced on the loose pigskin to give the Blue Raiders their second fumble recovery and third turnover of the quarter.

Colby Smith converted the turnover into points for the second straight possession when he capped a seven-play, 32-yard drive with a 31-yard field goal to give Middle Tennessee a 10-7 lead with 13:25 remaining in the half.

Louisiana-Lafayette came back to tie the game, 10-10, on the next possession but it didn't take long for the Blue Raiders to seize control for good and this time it was special teams play helping the cause after Nickson returned the kickoff 37 yards to the 39 to give Middle Tennessee good field position.

It wouldn't go to waste as Middle Tennessee turned in an eight-play, 61-yard drive that saw Marks cap it by calling his own number on a sneak from inside the 1 on a fourth-down call to put the Blue Raiders on top 17-10. The combination of Marks to Taron Henry was quality on the drive. Marks was 4-for-5 for 62 yards during the impressive march downfield, and Henry hauled in two of the passes for 50 yards, including a crucial grab on third-and-8 from the Cajun 29.

Middle Tennessee's defense had already forced three turnovers and set up two scores. Its next time on the field the blue-clad unit joined in the scoring frenzy when Nickson stepped in front of a Babb pass and returned it 28 yards for the touchdown. Colby Smith's point after staked Middle Tennessee to a 24-10 lead with 5:08 remaining. It was Nickson's second interception of the game and the fourth turnover of the half forced by the Blue Raider defense. The Blue Raiders scored 17 of their 24 first-half points off those turnovers.

The second half in contrast to the first as the scoring drastically decreased. The Blue Raider defense bent but wouldn't break on Louisiana-Lafayette's first drive of the second half after the Cajun defense had forced a punt on Middle Tennessee's opening drive.

The Cajuns drove from their 7 to the Blue Raider 7 but the defense held and forced Drew Edmiston to kick a 25-yard field goal at the end of a 13-play, 86-yard drive to pull to within 24-13 with 4:50 remaining.

After a series of punts, Middle Tennessee was able to get the three points back and milk the clock early in the fourth quarter. The Blue Raiders put together a 10-play drive that covered 45 yards and ate five minutes off the clock. The drive culminated with Smith's 23-yard field goal to extend the lead to 27-13 with 9:30 remaining.

The Blue Raider defense forced a turnover on downs on the Cajuns next series and Middle Tennessee retained possession at the 41. The Blue Raiders provided the final blow in the form of its ground game as Eugene Gross carried three straight times and finished the drive strong when he powered through from six yards out to build the lead to 34-13 with 5:53 remaining.

Louisiana-Lafayette answered with a score to pull to within 34-20 at the 4:07 mark, and that's when things got a bit interesting. The Cajuns attempted the onside kick and recovered it at the Blue Raider 47 with 4:03 remaining.

However, Nickson reeled in his third interception to end that threat and official sealed the win with his record-breaking fourth pick one possession later.

Middle Tennessee will face Florida Atlantic on Homecoming next Saturday at Floyd Stadium.

MIDDLE TENNESSEE NOTES

ROAD WARRIORS: Middle Tennessee has officially earned the title of Road Warriors after winning its third straight conference road game for the first time as members of the Sun Belt Conference to remain undefeated in league play. The Blue Raiders have won three SBC conference road games for the first time in school history.

SABB MOVES UP: Senior J.K. Sabb picked up his fourth sack of the season when he dropped ULL's Jerry Babb in the second quarter. It went down as the sixth sack of Sabb's career and also moved him past Mike McCullough for eighth place on the all-time tackles for loss list. Sabb now has 24.5 tackles for loss during his career and a team-leading 11.5 on the season.

MARKS TIES HOLCOMB: Quarterback Clint Marks, who got off to a shaky start against the Ragin' Cajuns, bounced back quickly with a 22-yard touchdown pass in the first quarter to Desmond Gee. It was the seventh touchdown pass of the season for Marks and the 36th of his career. His 36 career TDs are tied with Kelly Holcomb for third place all-time at MT.

NICKSON BREAKS SCHOOL RECORD: Damon Nickson became the first player in school history to register four interceptions in a game when he accomplished the rare feat in a 34-20 win against Louisiana-Lafayette Saturday. No Blue Raider had as many as three in a game in the last 21 years. Nickson surpassed Don Griffin (vs. Akron, 11/16/1985) and Mike Matheny (vs. Pensacola Navy, 09/16/67) who were the only two players to record as many as three. His second resulted in a touchdown when he stepped in front of a Jerry Babb pass and returned it 28 yards for a touchdown. His third interception was as crucial as it ended Louisiana-Lafayette's last-ditch effort after the Cajuns had recovered an onside kick in a 34-20 game with under three minutes remaining. His fourth pick officially sealed the win. Middle Tennessee now has 10 interceptions on the season and

the secondary is responsible for each one.

OH HENRY: Taron Henry turned in a big game against the Cajuns, matching his career high of five receptions and establishing a new career high of 85 yards. Two of Henry's five receptions came on third-down conversion attempts.

CAREER-HIGH FOR MCNAIR: Junior DeMarco McNair reeled in a personal-best four receptions against ULL for 45 yards. McNair's previous high in the receptions department was three earlier this year at Maryland.

MARKS INCHES CLOSER TO COUNTS: For the second straight game and the third time this season, quarterback Clint Marks went over the 200-yard passing mark with 244 yards against ULL. The Fort Myers, Fla., native now has 17 for his career which is just one shy of the all-time record set by former great Wes Counts.

QUICK HITTERS: QB Clint Marks made his 29th straight start under center today against ULL ... WR Pierre Ingram played in his first game of the season as he saw action on the kickoff return team ... WR Taron Henry's first quarter reception on third down to keep a drive alive was his first catch since the Louisville game ... Tavares Jones recorded his second fumble recovery of the season when he pounced on a loose ball late in the first quarter ... QB Clint Marks recorded his first rushing touchdown of the season and the fifth of his career when he plunged in from 1-yard out in the second quarter ... FB Hunter Birtsch turned in his fourth career reception when he hauled in one for 15 yards on MT's first possession of the third quarter ... Junior Dana Stewart recorded his first career sack when he dropped Jerry Babb at the end of the third quarter ... Damon Nickson had his first career punt return in the fourth quarter and it went for 14 yards.

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