# Blue Raider comeback falls short at Motor City Bowl

## Middle Tennessee falls to Central Michigan 31-14 in front of record crowd

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**DETROIT** - Middle Tennessee put up a valiant effort in its first visit to a bowl game as a Division I-A member but an early 14-point deficit proved too much to overcome in a 31-14 setback to Central Michigan in front of 54,113 at the 10th annual Motor City Bowl at Detroit's Ford Field.

The 54,113 in attendance was a Motor City Bowl record and the fans were treated to competitive and exciting game with the outcome undecided into the final minutes. In the end; however, Middle Tennessee (7-6) was unable to complete a gallant comeback attempt against Mid-American Conference champion Central Michigan, which finished its impressive season with a 10-4 overall mark.

Middle Tennessee was led by the all-around performance of freshman standout Desmond Gee, who finished the game with 115 all-purpose yards. The offense was led by quarterback Clint Marks, who capped his Blue Raider career by going 25-of-37 for 251 yards. The talented tailback tandem of Eugene Gross and DeMarco McNair supplied Middle Tennessee's two touchdowns with one score each.

The Blue Raiders finished the game with 320 yards total offense. The defense held the Chippewas

to 311 yards total offense and the unit allowed just one touchdown in the final three quarters to give Middle Tennessee a realistic shot at coming back to win the game.

A tough start was the difference as Central Michigan scored 14 unanswered first-quarter points to establish itself from the start. The Chippewas took the opening kickoff and marched 69 yards in nine plays and capped the drive with Ontario Sneed's 1-yard plunge.

Middle Tennessee wasted a scoring opportunity on its first drive after driving to the opponent's 22; however, senior kicker Colby Smith misfired on a 39-yard field goal attempt, pulling it wide left.

The Chippewas took advantage by exploding for 78 yards in four plays and scored on Sneed's 29-yard run. Rick Albresski's point after extended the lead to 14-0 with 5:53 remaining in the first quarter.

Middle Tennessee would not quit and got back into the game with an impressive drive that covered 80 yards in 12 plays. Gross capped the drive with a 3-yard run and Smith's point after cut the Central Michigan lead to 14-7 with 10:57 remaining in the half. Marks' 18-yard pass to Gross on a third-and-7 play from the Chippewas' 34 was the key play in the drive.

The Blue Raiders tried to catch Central Michigan napping on the ensuing kickoff when they attempted an onside kick; however, the Chippewas pounced on the pigskin and started the drive at their 49. Three plays later quarterback Dan LeFevour ran in from 9 yards out and the point after extended the lead to 21-7.

Middle Tennessee's defense settled in and played well after the first two possessions of the game as the only other score it allowed followed the failed onside kick attempt. The Chippewas were able to extend their lead to 28-7 at the start of the third quarter with their defense on the field.

The Blue Raiders opened the second half with possession and were looking to get back into the game but Marks' pass intended for Desmond Gee was intercepted by linebacker Doug Kress, who returned the miscue 56 yards for a score. The 56-yard interception return was a Motor City Bowl record.

Down 28-7, Middle Tennessee would not buckle and the defense continued to provide superlative play by holding Central Michigan on its next three possessions. The Blue Raiders finally cashed in by turning field position when Desmond Gee returned a punt 39 yards to the 14. DeMarco McNair sprinted up the middle for a 4-yard touchdown run four plays later. Smith's point after cut the lead to 28-14 with 11:32 remaining and the Blue Raiders were back in business.

Things looked even more promising when Albreski missed a 33-yard field goal to the left on Central Michigan's next possession and the Blue Raiders took back over at the 20 with less than seven minutes remaining. The final attempt at a comeback win ended when McNair was stopped short of a first down on a fourth-and-1 attempt at the 29.

Central Michigan put the final touches on its bowl victory when Albreski came back with a 43-yard field goal with 3:22 remaining.

**POSTGAME NOTES**

**GROSS PASSES BAYLESS:** Eugene Gross went over the 4,000-yard mark and moved to number three on the all-time list in all-purpose yardage. The senior collected 61 all-purpose yards to run his career total to 4,029 and move past Kippy Bayless for third place on the all-time list.

**MARKS TIES COUNTS:** With 251 yards passing against Central Michigan, quarterback Clint Marks recorded the 18th 200-yard passing game of his career and the fourth of the season. The 18 200-yard games ties Marks with Wes Counts for the most in school history.

**GEE SETS CAREER MARK:** Freshman Desmond Gee, who was a first team all-conference pick as an all-purpose player, established a new career-high in receptions in the Motor City Bowl. Gee reeled in nine catches for 63 yards to pace the Blue Raiders. Gee's previous high in receptions was a six-catch, 109-yard effort against Louisiana-Monroe.

**WALDEN STRIKES:** Middle Tennessee's all-time sack leader, Erik Walden, struck again when he dropped Dan LeFevour on the last play of the first half and the first play of the fourth quarter. The two sacks give Walden 20.5 for his career and 11.5 on the season. Both totals are school records.

**GROSS SCORES AGAIN:** Senior Eugene Gross recorded Middle Tennessee's first touchdown of the I-A bowl era when he ran one in from three yards out in the second quarter. It marked the 42nd touchdown (fourth all-time) of his career and the 41st rushing score (third all-time). It went down as the 11th touchdown of the season for Gross.

**GAME 13:** Tonight's game against Central Michigan marked the 13th of the season for Middle Tennessee which goes down as the most in a single-season since 1992. In 1992, the Blue Raiders finished 10-3 and were crowned conference champions (OVC) while playing at the I-AA level. This marks the sixth time in school history Middle Tennessee has played 13 or more games in a single-season.

**FIRST AND 10TH:** Middle Tennessee assistant coach Art Kaufman has the unique distinction of coaching in the very first Motor City Bowl and the 10th annual Motor City Bowl. As an assistant at Mississippi, Kaufman was a member of the Rebels staff that won the inaugural game (Ole Miss 34, Marshall 31) and then tonight Kaufman coached against the Central Michigan Chippewas. "Everybody talks about that first game when there were two touchdowns in the games first three plays and one was an 80-yard pass to Marshall's Randy Moss," Kaufman added. "The one thing they forget is that Moss did not catch another pass the rest of the game."

**QUICK HITTERS:** The announced attendance of 54,113 was a new Motor City Bowl record ... Middle Tennessee fell to 2-5 all-time in domes ... For the first time in his career, quarterback Clint Marks wore a clear shield on his helmet during the Motor City Bowl. "It was my last game and I just wanted to do something different," Marks added ... The Motor City Bowl marked the first game for Middle Tennessee against a team from the state of Michigan ... QB Clint Marks made his 34th straight start tonight in the Motor City Bowl ... Rod Taylor's kickoff return to begin the game was the first of his career ... WR Michael Cannon made just his second reception of the season tonight against CMU late in the second quarter. It was Cannon's first reception since the third game of the year against Tennessee Tech ... MT played 47 players in the first half ... Middle Tennessee fell to 2-3 all-time in bowl games ... Tonight's game marked Middle Tennessee's first bowl game in the I-A era and the program's first since 1964 ... Desmond Gee's 39-yard punt return in the fourth quarter was the longest of his career ...

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