Blue Raiders open with 27-14 road setback

FAU wins season, SBC opener

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FT. LAUDERDALE, Fla. - Middle Tennessee made it interesting late but a 24-0 deficit proved too much to overcome as the Blue Raiders suffered a 27-14 loss to Florida Atlantic in the season opener for both teams at Lockhart Stadium Saturday afternoon.

The Middle Tennessee offense was limited to just 217 total yards, including only 18 on the ground, while the defense yielded 412 yards total offense to the Owls.

Quarterback Joe Craddock, making his first collegiate start, completed 20-of-32 passes for 199 yards, but he also threw two interceptions. The ground game was led by Demarco McNair and Phillip Tanner with 16 and 15 yards, respectively.

Trailing 24-0 in the fourth quarter, Middle Tennessee avoided the shutout when Craddock connected with Desmond Gee for a 27-yard score. Matt King's point after cut the deficit to 24-7 with 12:01 remaining.

Special teams also factored into the scoring when freshman Jeremy Kellem blocked an Owls' punt and Michael Cannon scooped up the pigskin and raced 32 yards to make the score 24-14 with 12:01 remaining; however, it was too little, too late as the Owls already had established themselves on the scoreboard and on the field.

The Sun Belt Conference opener was all Florida Atlantic as the host dealt Middle Tennessee its first league road setback in five tries for second-year coach Rick Stockstill.

Florida Atlantic took advantage of two Middle Tennessee turnovers in the first half to stake claim to a 10-0 halftime lead. The first miscue occurred after the Blue Raider defense had forced a punt on the Owls' initial drive; however, the errant punt bounced off the leg of Kevin Brown and Florida Atlantic recovered at the Blue Raider 35.

Nine plays later Charles Pierre ran in from the 1 to cap a 9-play, 35-yard drive and give the Owls a 7-0 lead with 8:55 remaining. The game remained 7-0 until late in the first half when Craddock was intercepted by Corey Small at the 20 with 49 seconds remaining before the intermission.

Again, the Owls made the turnover hurt when Warley Leroy connected for a 30-yard field goal with 23 seconds remaining to give Florida Atlantic a 10-0 lead entering the half.

Despite trailing 10-0 at the break, Middle Tennessee's defense actually performed well considering the amount of time it was on the field and the fact that all 10 Florida Atlantic points came off turnovers.

Given the offensive troubles plaguing Middle Tennessee throughout the contest, the Owls made it even more difficult when tight end Jason Harmon hauled in a short pass from quarterback Rusty Smith and rambled 42 yards down the sideline. The extra point gave the Owls a 17-0 lead with 2:36 remaining.

Florida Atlantic tacked on another score at the start of the fourth quarter when Smith connected with Cortez Gent for a 14-yard score and the Owls went ahead 24-0 with 14:05 remaining.

After Middle Tennessee had cut the lead to 24-14, Florida Atlantic answered back with a long drive to go on top 27-14 on Leroy's 27-yard field goal with 4:55 remaining.

The Blue Raiders return to action when they travel to No. 10-ranked Louisville Thursday.

POSTGAME NOTES

FIRST TIME STARTERS: A total of three players made their first collegiate starts today against Florida Atlantic in the 2007 season opener. The first time starters were: QB Joe Craddock, LB Danny Carmichael, and LB Derek Shropshire.

FIRST ACTION: Middle Tennessee had 14 players make their collegiate playing debuts at FAU on Saturday. They were: Kevin Brown, Dwight Dasher, David DeFatta, Mark Fisher, Josh Gregory, Andrew Harrington, Ivon Hickmon, Rod Issac, Jeremy Kellem, Jamal Lewis, Jacob Longoria, Ted Riley, Gary Tucker, and Adam Wade.

KELLEM GETS BLOCK: True freshman Jeremy Kellem from nearby North Lauderdale, Fla., came up big when he blocked a punt midway through the fourth quarter that Michael Cannon returned for a touchdown. It marked the second blocked kick under Rick Stockstill (first punt) and the first punt block by the Blue Raiders since Sean Mosley recorded one against Troy in 2005. Overall in the FBS (I-A) era, MT has blocked a total of 21 kicks in 93 games.

HONEYCUTT, CANNON HAVE CAREER DAYS: Receivers Patrick Honeycutt and Michael Cannon turned in career performances in the season opener against FAU. Honeycutt, playing in his first collegiate game, hauled in six receptions for 41 yards, while Cannon added three catches for 34 yards. Cannon came into the FAU game with just three career receptions.

RARE PENALTIES: The most penalties Middle Tennessee had in a game all of 2006 were 10, which occurred twice; however, the Blue Raiders were penalized 10 times for 81 yards in the season opener against Florida Atlantic.

SEASON OPENERS: The loss to FAU dropped Middle Tennessee's record to 3-4 in Sun Belt Conference openers and dropped its overall record in season openers to 56-33-2.

CRADDOCK DEBUT: Junior quarterback Joe Craddock made his first collegiate start at FAU and completed a personal-best 20 passes on 32 attempts. Craddock, who also had a career-best 199 passing yards, entered the FAU contest with just nine career completions. He had his first career touchdown pass in the fourth quarter when he shuffled a short toss to Desmond Gee for a 27-yard score.

QUICK HITTERS: In honor of the 32 victims killed on the Virginia Tech campus in April, Middle Tennessee wore a VT sticker on the back of its helmets ... Last year in conference road games the Blue Raiders allowed just 17 total points and they gave up 17 today against FAU ... OT Franklin Dunbar made his team-best 19th straight start today ... MT did not have its first offensive snap until 7:24 remaining in the first quarter ... Phillip Tanner's first career rush went for 14 yards in the second quarter ... Jamal Lewis started the second half at left guard in place of Richard Bortner ... Desmond Gee now has at least one touchdown in seven of the last eight games ... Matt King made his first career PAT when he connected in the fourth quarter ... MT lost its first SBC road game under Rick Stockstill with the loss to FAU ... WR Michael Cannon scored his first collegiate touchdown when he returned a blocked punt 32 yards in the fourth quarter ... MT fell to 10-31 in the I-A era on natural grass.

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