

Defense turns in another gem in pivotal league win vs. Arkansas State

Unit turns in nine sacks, forces four turnovers in 24-7 triumph

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. -

Defense was the story of the afternoon as Middle Tennessee stayed alive in the Sun Belt Conference race with a crucial 24-7 win against Arkansas State at Floyd Stadium Saturday.

The Blue Raiders (3-5, 2-1) continued their recent dominant play on the defensive side of the ball and set the tone early against the Indians (3-4, 1-2) and kept alive their hopes of a second straight conference championship and bowl bid.

The defensive gem, complimented by a revamped offense, came against an Arkansas State offense that entered the game ranked 19th nationally and leading the Sun Belt in total offense as well as 14th nationally in rushing offense.

Those numbers took a hit against the Blue Raiders as Arkansas State was held to a season-low 138 yards total offense. The Indians, who were averaging 210 yards on the ground, managed just 22 against the Blue Raiders staunch defensive front and they were held to 318 yards below their season average for total offense.

Arkansas State quarterback Corey Leonard was under duress throughout as the Blue Raider defense got to him for a school-record nine sacks. The nine sacks bested the mark of eight registered against Connecticut in 2001.



It gets better.

The defense also forced four turnovers (three interceptions and one fumble), converted one of the miscues into a touchdown and the other two Blue Raider touchdowns were also set up by interceptions.

While the defense shined it also is hard to overlook another effective offensive showing. The Blue Raiders amassed 384 yards total offense with senior receiver Taron Henry hauling in two touchdown passes. Henry had three receptions for 71 yards.

Freshman quarterback Dwight Dasher rushed for 96 yards on 20 carries and he completed 9-of-20 passes for 118 yards as he accounted for 214 of the Blue Raiders' 384 yards total offense.

Tailback DeMarco McNair had 75 yards on 19 carries as the Blue Raiders finished with 205 yards on the ground.

The Blue Raider defense set the tone early and scored the game's first points. Arkansas State's Leonard had completed a pass to Kevin Jones on the third play of the game and Alex Suber immediately laid the hit and forced a fumble at the Indians' 42. Blue Raider corner Rod Issac scooped up the loose ball and went 42 yards for the score. Ray King's extra point provided Middle Tennessee a 7-0 lead with 13:32 remaining in the first quarter.

Dasher threw an interception on Middle Tennessee's first offensive possession but the defense was at it again just when Arkansas State thought it had something going. The Indians moved the ball to the Blue Raider 14 where they faced second-and-5 but consecutive sacks by Derek Shropshire and Trevor Jenkins moved the visitors to the 31 and on fourth-and-22 Leonard was intercepted by freshman Jeremy Kellem in the end zone.

The defensive stop paid dividends when Middle Tennessee capped an 11-play, 80-yard drive with Dasher's 17-yard touchdown pass to Taron Henry on a third-and-7 play to give the Blue Raiders a 14-0 advantage with 2:32 remaining.

Middle Tennessee's defense forced a three-and-out on Arkansas State's next possession and the offense once again made it count, this time converting for a field goal when David DeFatta connected from 38 yards out to extend the lead to 17-0 with 14:38 remaining in the first half.

The Indians got on the board when quarterback Corey Leonard hit fullback Danny McNeal for a 6-yard touchdown at the 12:22 mark of the second quarter to make the score 17-7.

Middle Tennessee returned the favor on its next possession but this time with quarterback Joe Craddock doing the damage. Craddock, who had been on the field in different formations, moved to quarterback when Dasher went down during the drive and three plays later he connected with Henry for a 52-yard scoring strike to give the Blue Raiders a 24-7 advantage with 9:06 remaining in the first half.

As good as the half was for Middle Tennessee there was more to come. The defense came up with its third turnover of the first 30 minutes when Kellem hauled in his second interception of the game. Kellem picked off Leonard on a third-and-10 play at the Blue Raider 45.

Middle Tennessee misfired on two field goal attempts in the second half, misfiring from 32 and 38 yards, respectively, but it didn't matter because the defense wouldn't budge and shut the Indians out in the second half.

The Blue Raiders look for a three-game win streak when they travel to North Texas next Saturday.

Middle Tennessee Postgame Notes

DEFENSE SHINES: The Middle Tennessee defense came into today's game on a roll and continued its impressive play by shutting down Arkansas State's high powered offense. ASU came into the game averaging 456 yards of total offense to rank 19th nationally and 210.5 yards on the ground to rank 14th but the Blue Raiders held the Indians to just 138 total yards and 22 yards on the ground. The unit picked up a school-record nine quarterback sacks, forced four turnovers and scored a touchdown to help down ASU.

100 AND COUNTING: Today's game marked the 100th Division I-A-FBS game in school history for the Blue Raiders. Middle Tennessee moved to college football's highest level in 1999.

ISSAC HAS FIRST SCORE: Freshman Rod Issac recorded his first collegiate touchdown against Arkansas State to put the Blue Raiders on top of ASU 7-0 early in the game. Issac picked up a fumble and returned it 42 yards for his first score. It marked the fourth defensive TD under Rick Stockstill with three of the four being fumble returns.

KELLEM STRIKES AGAIN AND AGAIN: Freshman Jeremy Kellem continued his knack for making big plays this season when he stopped an early Arkansas State drive with his second interception of the season and later picked up his third in the second quarter to end another Indian threat. On his first pick, Kellem leaped high in the back of the end zone to thwart an ASU drive and then dove for his second. For the year, Kellem owns three picks, five pass breakups, a blocked punt, two forced fumbles, and a fumble recovery.

DEFATTA FOR THREE: Sophomore David DeFatta made the first field goal of his Blue Raider career and the second of his collegiate career when he connected on a 38-yarder in the second quarter. A transfer from Marshall, DeFatta made 1 of 3 attempts for the Thundering Herd as a freshman. It went down as the first made field goal for Middle Tennessee since Matt King hit a 39-yarder against FIU.

OH, HENRY: Senior Taron Henry recorded his first multiple touchdown game of his career today against Arkansas State. Henry, who entered his final season with just one touchdown grab, now has three for the season. Henry reeled in a 17-yard catch from Dwight Dasher in the first quarter then had a 52-yarder from Joe Craddock in the second quarter. The 52-yard grab was the longest catch of Henry's career.

SCHOOL RECORD FOR DEFENSE: The Middle Tennessee defense established a new school record today with nine quarterback sacks, including five in the first half. The previous record of eight sacks was set by the 2001 team against Connecticut.

QUICK HITTERS: The Blue Raiders moved to 8-2 in Sun Belt play under Rick Stockstill with the victory over ASUf today ... With his first quarter TD pass to Taron Henry, Dwight Dasher has now thrown a scoring pass in the opening quarter for four straight games ... Michael Cannon's 49-yard reception went down as the longest of his career ... Senior Derek Shropshire recorded the first sack

of his career when he dropped ASU's Corey Leonard in the first quarter ... OT Franklin Dunbar made his team-best 26th straight start today while DT Trevor Jenkins made his 21st straight start ... Rick Stockstill is now 4-2 all-time in the month of October with the lone losses coming to No. 8 Louisville in 2006 and Virginia this year ... Under Rick Stockstill, the Blue Raiders are now 8-1 when leading at the half ... CB Bradley Robinson came up with the 12th interception of his career and his third of the season today against ASU ... MT is now 8-1 all-time against Arkansas State ... With two sacks today, senior Tavares Jones moved into a tie for sixth place on the all-time list with Thomas Johnson (Jones now has 10 career sacks) ... P David DeFatta placed three punts inside the 20-yard line today and now has 10 over his last three games.

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