

Defense, special teams key Blue Raider road win

Football team continues late-season surge at North Texas

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DENTON, Texas - Defense and special teams keyed Middle Tennessee's pivotal 48-28 win against North Texas as the Blue Raiders remained in the thick of the Sun Belt Conference race in Denton, Texas Saturday.

The Blue Raiders (4-5, 3-1) won their third straight and moved into a tie for second in a tight league race heading into the home stretch. With Florida Atlantic being upset at home by Louisiana-Monroe Saturday the Blue Raiders control their destiny to at least share for the league title after the slow start.

Defense and special teams continued to be the story in the turn-around. The blue-clad defenders continued to exhibit spirited and stingy play with two safeties, four

interceptions, a fumble recover, one blocked punt and punter David DeFatta was a weapon with his foot. He had three of his punts downed at the 1 and two of those led to safeties.

Defensive stalwarts Erik Walden and Tavares Jones were particularly impressive, along with senior Damon Nickson. Walden had one interception, three tackles for loss and a safety. Jones was active with one interception, one safety and he forced a fumble. Nickson hauled in two interceptions. DeFatta continued to do what he has done so well all season. He had two punts of 50-plus yards with a long of 55 and he had four inside the 20, including three at the 1 not to mention converting a 39-yard field goal.

Senior tailback DeMarco McNair ran for two touchdowns and had one receiving to lead the Middle



Tennessee offense. McNair finished with 62 yards rushing. Senior receiver Taron Henry had six receptions for 103 yards and a touchdown. All the news was not good as heralded freshman quarterback Dwight Dasher suffered an injury late in the first half and did not return. Dasher completed 16-of-21 passes and had two touchdowns before leaving the game.

Middle Tennessee finished with 339 yards total offense, including 136 on the ground. Most importantly, the Blue Raiders did not have a turnover in the impressive road win. The North Texas offense finished with 383 yards total offense.

Jamario Thomas gave North Texas the early lead when he ripped off a 77-yard run midway through the first quarter but the Blue Raiders finally put together a sustained drive on the third possession and got on the scoreboard.

Middle Tennessee moved into North Texas on each of its first three possessions but managed just three points out of the early scoring chances and that came on the third try. The Blue Raiders moved to the Mean Green 44 on the first drive but the drive stalled and DeFatta came on to unload a 43-yard punt and pin the host inside the 1.

Nickson hauled in his sixth career interception on the Mean Green's first possession to give the offense possession at the North Texas 32 but the drive stalled when Dasher was stopped one yard short of a first down on a fourth-and-2 play at the 24.

Thomas followed with his long run but Middle Tennessee came back closed to within 7-3 on DeFatta's 39-yard field goal at the 4:33 mark of the first quarter.

Defense and special teams continued to be the story for Middle Tennessee when Michael Cannon blocked and recovered a North Texas punt on its next possession and the Blue Raiders regained possession at the 10.

McNair dove in from the 1 five plays later and Matt King's extra point gave the Blue Raiders a 10-7 lead with 1:55 remaining in the first quarter.

The trend continued on North Texas' next possession when Jones laid a crushing blow and forced a fumble that was recovered by Gary Tucker. Middle Tennessee regained possession at the Mean Green 33 and once again took advantage of the superlative defensive play.

Patrick Honeycutt hauled in a 7-yard scoring strike from Dasher for his first career touchdown to extend the Blue Raider lead to 16-7 after King missed the point after. The key play on the drive was Henry's 10-yard reception on a gutsy fourth-and-8 call from the Mean Green 31.

After the Middle Tennessee defense forced a punt the Blue Raider regained possession at their 49 and on the first play from scrimmage Dasher unloaded a 51-yard bomb to Henry for his ninth scoring pass this season. It was Henry's fourth touchdown reception this season and King's point after extended the lead to 23-7 with 12:49 remaining in the half.

The first half shootout continued as North Texas scored 14 unanswered points to cut the Blue Raider lead to 23-21 with 6:56 remaining before intermission but Middle Tennessee continued to show its maturity with one of the best drives of the season. Just when the home team had taken momentum the Blue Raiders grabbed it back with an impressive 13-play, 83-yard drive that culminated with Joe

Craddock's 4-yard pass to McNair to give Middle Tennessee a 30-21 lead with 40 seconds remaining in the half.

Craddock had just come to replace Dasher who was taken off the field with an undisclosed injury on the preceding play.

North Texas scored on quarterback Giovanni Vizza's 4-yard run at the 10:13 mark to cut the lead to 30-28 and the Mean Green were driving for the go-ahead points later in the third quarter when the Blue Raider defense struck once more.

The Mean Green had the ball near midfield when Jones hauled in an interception and rambled to the North Texas 5. Phillip Tanner scored on the first play of the drive and King's extra point extended the lead back to 37-28 with 3:43 remaining in the third quarter.

The Blue Raiders displayed the blueprint of defense and special teams combining to turn a game in a team's favor early in the fourth quarter. Walden hauled in an interception to give Middle Tennessee possession at the Mean Green 36. The interception did not lead to an offensive score as the Blue Raiders went three-and-out but it did lead to a later score thanks to dandy work by DeFatta.

The punter came on and delivered a 38 yard punt that Desmond Gee downed at the 1 to put the Mean Green in dangerous position. Three plays later Walden completed the impressive cycle of events with a safety to extend the lead to 39-28 with just under 14 minutes remaining.

The damage wasn't finished. DeFatta deposited another punt at the 1 and Jones came up with the Blue Raiders' second safety of the game to put them on top 41-28. Middle Tennessee put the dagger in North Texas' hopes when McNair ran 18 yards for his second touchdown. King's extra point was good and the Blue Raiders went on top 48-28 with 8:17 remaining.

Middle Tennessee will look to continue its late-season surge at Louisiana-Monroe Saturday.

Middle Tennessee Postgame Notes

CANNON GETS BLOCK: Junior wide receiver Michael Cannon registered the first blocked punt of his career when he got a rejection against North Texas in the first quarter. Cannon recovered the punt for his second punt block recovery of the year. It was the fifth blocked kick all-time against UNT. The block was the second of the season (vs FAU) and the third blocked kick under Rick Stockstill. Overall, the block went down as the 22nd of the I-A-FBS era with eight being punts, eight field goals and six extra points.

MCNAIR SCORES ... AGAIN: The Sun Belt Conference's leading scorer got on the board again with a 1-yard touchdown run in the first quarter against UNT and a reception in the second quarter. He would add another rushing touchdown later. It marked the eighth rushing touchdown of the season for McNair and the fourth receiving score to give him 12 on the year. McNair has now scored at least one touchdown in five of his last six games.

HONEYCUTT ON THE BOARD: Redshirt sophomore Patrick Honeycutt finally found the end zone when he scored in the second quarter against North Texas. Honeycutt hauled in a 17-yard strike from Dwight Dasher to give MT a 16-7 lead.

HENRY TOPS 100, SCORES: Middle Tennessee's leading receiver Taron Henry continued his hot

play against North Texas. Henry, who had his first multiple touchdown game of his career last week against ASU, recorded another score on a 51-yard grab from Dwight Dasher against the Mean Green and finished the game with six catches for a career-best 103 yards. Henry, who now has a career-best four touchdown receptions on the season, is the first Blue Raider receiver to top the 100-yard mark since Desmond Gee (109 yards) against Louisiana-Monroe last year.

CAREER SEASON FOR HENRY: With six receptions against North Texas, senior Taron Henry ran his season total to 25 catches. That total goes down as the most in a single-season for the Murfreesboro native and better his previous season-high total of 20 set in 2005.

TWO FOR DAMON: Senior Damon Nickson recorded the second multiple interception game of his career against North Texas. Nickson came up with his first two interceptions of the season and ran his career total to eight. Nickson recorded a school and conference record four interceptions last year on the road against Louisiana-Lafayette.

WALDEN GETS FIRST: Middle Tennessee's all-time leading sacker, Erik Walden, recorded his first sack of the season when he dropped North Texas' Giovanni Vizza in the third quarter. Walden moved his career total to 21.5 and now stands just one half sack from tying North Texas' Adrian Awason for second place all-time in Sun Belt history.

A RARITY: In one of the rarest feats in Blue Raider history, defensive ends Tavares Jones and Erik Walden both registered their first career interceptions and both came in the third quarter. Jones' pick was returned 44 yards and set up a Phillip Tanner touchdown and then a short time later Walden collected an interception but the Blue Raiders failed to capitalize.

DASHER OUT: Middle Tennessee quarterback Dwight Dasher left the game late in the second quarter with a leg injury and did not return. Dasher was on his way toward another strong game as he left having completed 16 of 21 passes for 159 yards and two touchdowns. The freshman also had 24 yards rushing on 10 attempts.

QUICK HITTERS: Over the last two games, MT's defense has forced nine turnovers (seven interceptions) ... With three tackles for loss against UNT, Erik Walden moved into second place on Middle Tennessee's all-time list surpassing Anthony Hicks who had 36 during his career ... Middle Tennessee recorded its second and third safeties of the season tonight against UNT on back-to-back possessions ... DE Gary Tucker recorded the first fumble recovery of his career tonight against UNT ... P/PK David DeFatta hit a career long 39-yard field goal against UNT and is now 2-for-4 on the season ... Freshman Jeremy Kellem recorded the first sack of his career against UNT in the second quarter ... The Blue Raiders moved to 9-2 in Sun Belt play under Rick Stockstill and 5-1 on the road with the victory over North Texas today ... OT Franklin Dunbar made his team-best 27th straight start today while DT Trevor Jenkins made his 22nd straight start ... Rick Stockstill is now 5-2 all-time in the month of October with the lone losses coming to No. 8 Louisville in 2006 and Virginia this year.

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