Blue Raiders secure stirring 43-40 win to keep title hopes alive

Robinson's return keys fourth straight win

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MONROE, La. - Quarterback Joe Craddock was the star of the night but it was Bradley Robinson's special teams play that kept Middle Tennessee's Sun Belt Conference title hopes alive.

Robinson returned the kickoff 89 yards for a touchdown with 45 seconds remaining to lift Middle Tennessee to a riveting 43-40 win against UL-Monroe at Malone Stadium Saturday night. The return came after the Warhawks had scored from the 6 to take a 40-37 lead with 57 seconds to play in the high-intensity game that featured 10 lead changes and one tie.

Middle Tennessee (5-5, 4-1) won its fourth straight to remain in the thick of the Sun Belt title chase, one game behind Troy. The Blue Raiders improved to 10-2 against Sun Belt opponents under second-year coach Rick Stockstill, including a sterling 6-1 mark on the road.

Making his first start since the LSU game in place of injured starter Dwight Dasher, Craddock not only enjoyed a career game but he put together one of the best games by a Blue Raider quarterback in school history.

In a conference road game with title implications, Craddock was a warrior as he completed 22-of-29 passes for 401 yards and four touchdowns, while also rushing for 70 yards on 11 carries and one

touchdown. His sneak from the 1 had given Middle Tennessee a 37-33 lead with 2:36 remaining.

His 401 yards passing are third most in school history and the highest passing total since Clint Marks passed for 447 against Arkansas State, Oct. 9, 2004. The four passing touchdowns are third most in school history and all of the marks established new standards for Craddock, whose 471 yards total offense set a new school record.

Desmond Gee and Jonathan Grigsby also surpassed the 100-yard receiving mark, becoming the first Middle Tennessee tandem to do so since Kerry Wright and Chris Henry in 2004.

Gee, who hauled in four catches for 139 yards, had touchdown receptions of 42 and 66 yards, while Grigsby had two catches for 109 yards and a 94-yard touchdown catch. Redshirt freshman Alvin Ingle had an 11-yard scoring catch.

The Blue Raiders piled up 499 yards total offense, gaining 401 through the air and 98 on the ground. The Middle Tennessee defense gave up yardage - 624 to be exact - but it also came up big at key times. The defense forced three turnovers as Robinson and Alex Suber had interceptions and Derek Shropshire had a fumble recovery.

After giving up 26 first-half points, Middle Tennessee held ULM to two touchdowns in the pivotal second half.

David DeFatta staked Middle Tennessee to the early 3-0 lead when he capped an 11-play, 50-yard drive with a season-long 47-yard field goal on the Blue Raiders' opening drive; however, the lead would be short-lived as the Warhawks answered on their first possession.

ULM running back Calvin Dawson scored on a 17-yard scamper to cap an eight-play, 90-yard drive. The point after provided the Warhawks a 7-3 lead with 6:46 remaining in the opening quarter.

It didn't take Middle Tennessee long to regain the advantage as Craddock continued his strong play under center but it was a stellar defensive play by Erik Walden that returned the football to the Blue Raiders after the Warhawks were limited to three-and-out. Walden threw Dawson for a 4-yard loss on a third-and-1 play from the ULM 35 to force the punt.

Craddock then engineered an impressive five-play, 61-yard drive that culminated in a touchdown when the junior signal-caller connected with Gee for a 42-yard scoring strike and Matt King's point after gave the Blue Raiders a 10-7 lead with 28 seconds remaining in the opening quarter.

An overturned call on an official review proved beneficial for ULM on its next possession. Kinsmon Lancaster's pass to Darrell McNeal was originally ruled incomplete on third-and-8; however, the play was overturned for an 18-yard reception. Instead of fourth-and-8 from the Blue Raider 47 the Warhawks maintained possession at the Middle Tennessee 29. Dawson rushed in from the 7 three plays later as ULM regained the lead, 14-10.

The offensive fireworks continued as Middle Tennessee quickly regained the lead as Craddock once again zipped through the ULM defense with relative ease. He connected with Ingle for an 11-yard touchdown pass on Middle Tennessee's next possession and King's point after once again put the Blue Raiders in the lead, 17-14, with 9:32 remaining in the half.

In a half that featured few defensive stops Middle Tennessee did come up with a key play when Trevor Jenkins deflected a pass attempt on third-and-goal at the 3 to force Wilson to come on for a 20-yard field goal attempt. His successful try evened the score, 17-17, with 3:53 remaining before halftime.

The offensive flair was far from complete and Craddock continued his first-half precision on the Blue Raiders' next possession, this time connecting with Gee for a 61-yard touchdown pass as Middle Tennessee went back on top 24-17 with 2:14 remaining in the first half. The drive went four yards and covered 91 yards as Gee hauled in his third reception for 114 yards and two scores in the opening half. Craddock was 12-of-14 for 216 yards in the first half.

Alex Suber denied ULM on its next drive when he made a remarkable over the shoulder, diving interception at the Blue Raider 10 - the first interception of his career - to return possession to the Blue Raider offense with 1:33 remaining before intermission.

The half did not end on that positive note, though, as ULM came up with a safety with 1:14 remaining in the half to cut the lead to 24-19 and then the Warhawks returned the free kick 54 yards to move into scoring possession with time to operate. It took just three plays for ULM to go 27 yards and score when Lancaster connected with LaGregory Sapp for a 4-yard touchdown and the Warhawks had stormed from behind to take a 26-24 lead into the half.

The stoppage for halftime did nothing to slow the Middle Tennessee offensive onslaught. ULM pinned the Blue Raiders at the 1 after a punt on its first possession of the second half. After a 5-yard penalty against the Warhawks, Craddock hooked up with Grigsby for a 94-yard touchdown pass - the longest touchdown pass in Malone Stadium history - as Middle Tennessee went ahead 30-26 early in the third quarter.

The see-saw affair continued when Dawson ripped off a 62-yard touchdown run that put ULM in front 33-30 just one possession later. Middle Tennessee was stopped on its next possession and ULM was driving deep into Blue Raider territory when Derek Shropshire pounced on a Warhawk fumble at the 12 with time running down in the third quarter.

Middle Tennessee was forced to punt and once again with the Warhawks driving the defense rose to the occasion when Bradley Robinson hauled in his 13th career interception to return possession to the Blue Raiders at their 24 early in the final period. The Blue Raiders once again were unable to take advantage of the turnover and were forced to punt.

The defense held the Warhawks once again and the Blue Raiders regained possession at the 18 following a 35-yard punt. Craddock drove the Blue Raiders down the field in 10 plays and scored from the 1 on a fourth-and-1 call with 2:36 remaining.

ULM wouldn't go quietly and took the lead, 40-37, when Lancaster connected with Zeek Zacharie for a 6-yard touchdown pass with 1:00 remaining.

Robinson came back with his stunning 89-yard kickoff return to provide the winning margin.

MIDDLE TENNESSEE POSTGAME NOTES

NICE RETURN: Junior Joe Craddock, who earned the start tonight following the injury to Dwight Dasher in last week's win over North Texas, was solid in his first start since the LSU game. The

Birmingham, Ala., native threw for a career-high 401 yards and a personal-best four touchdowns, including 229 yards in the first half while also rushing for a career-best 70 yards. Craddock's 401 passing yards went down as the third most for a single-game in school history.

LONG PLAY: Middle Tennessee's 94-yard touchdown pass from Joe Craddock to Jonathan Grigsby went down as the longest reception in Malone Stadium history and was the third longest pass completion in Blue Raider history and the longest in the I-A era. The longest pass completion in school history is 98 yards.

TWO OVER 100: For the first time under Rick Stockstill and the first time since 2004, Middle Tennessee had two players register more than 100 yards receiving. Desmond Gee collected 139 receiving yards while Jonathan Grigsby added a career-best 109 yards. The duo is the first to accomplish this feat since Kerry Wright and Chris Henry against Arkansas State on Oct. 9, 2004.

NUMBER 13: Senior Bradley Robinson, who entered tonight's game ranked ninth among active players in interceptions, came up with his fourth pick of the year in the fourth quarter. Robinson's 13th career interception moved him into a tie for third place on the all-time list with Ray Oldham and Don Griffin and he needs one more to tie Cedric Stegall for second place. Robinson also ranks third all-time in Sun Belt Conference history with his 13 interceptions and is just one shy of equaling the all-time mark.

JONES TIES FOR FOURTH: Senior Tavares Jones moved up the career sack list tonight when he dropped Kinsmon Lancaster in the third quarter. The sack was Jones' 11th of his career and ties him with Bryan Faulkner and Anthony Hicks for fourth place on the all-time list. Jones now leads the Blue Raiders this season with 5.5 sacks which matches his career-high set last season.

CAREER-HIGH FOR GEE: Sophomore Desmond Gee turned in his second career 100-yard receiving game in the contest against ULM. Gee hauled in four passes for a personal-best 139 yards to go along with two touchdowns. Gee's previous best receiving game also came against ULM when he grabbed six passes for 109 yards in the 2006 game. The 100-yard receiving game went down as just the third under Rick Stockstill and the second this season.

BIG NIGHT FOR WALDEN: Senior defensive end Erik Walden, who was named the SBC Defensive Player of the Week last week, continued his impressive play at ULM. Walden collected a career-high 12 tackles. Walden's previous high in tackles was seven set last year against Arkansas State.

SUBER IS SUPER: Alex Suber also came up big on defense with a career-high 11 tackles and he also had an interception.

INGLE FOR SIX: Redshirt freshman Alvin Ingle, who came into the ULM game with four career receptions, had his first collegiate touchdown grab in the second quarter. Ingle hauled in a 11-yard pass from Joe Craddock to put the Blue Raiders ahead, 17-14. Ingle is the first tight end to record a touchdown pass this season.

QUICK HITTERS: Middle Tennessee improved to 10-2 against Sun Belt Conference opponents under Rick Stockstill, including a 6-1 mark on the road ... Alex Suber's diving interception in the second quarter went down as the first of his career ... Sophomore David DeFatta connected on a career long 47-yard field goal in the first quarter to give the Blue Raiders an early lead ... QB Joe Craddock made his first start tonight since the LSU game earlier this year ... OT Franklin Dunbar

made his team-best 28th straight start today while DT Trevor Jenkins made his 23rd straight start ... David Price made his first start of the season at right tackle in place of Mark Fisher ... Desmond Gee's 42-yard TD reception was his longest catch of the season and it was his sixth TD grab of his career.

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