Williams Complete Game, Taylor Homer Key 6-5 Triumph

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LAS CRUCES, N.M. - John Williams tossed a complete game, throwing more than 150 pitches, and Marcus Taylor's two-run homer in the eighth was the difference in a 6-5 Sun Belt Conference victory over New Mexico State here Saturday afternoon at Preslew Askew Field.

The game was back-and-forth from the first pitch to the last, with a pair of ties and two lead changes.

Williams (4-1) threw almost all fastballs in the last two innings to retire the heart of the Aggies order, including a doubleplay groundball against last year's SBC Player of the Year, Billy Becher, in the ninth.Williams struck out 14, giving up five runs, two earned, on six hits.

"I really used the fastball and changeup today. The curveball got a little flat, but I kept setting things up with fastballs in and change-ups away," Williams said.

"This is New Mexico State. You know it's going to be a high-scoring game. You know that coming in," Williams added. "They're going to score runs. You just can't get frustrated."

Williams knew the Blue Raiders had been struggling in almost every part of their game and wanted to help get the team going again with a good effort and a win.

"When [NMSU] took the lead, we didn't fold. We got the hits today when it mattered. We really needed a spark to get us going. I thought Marcus did that today and I thought I was able to use everyone defensively, the outfielders and getting some ground balls. We really needed a spark to get things going and I think we got that."

Middle Tennessee took a lead in the top of the first only to lose it in the bottom of the inning. They tied the contest in the second but fell behind by a run in the fifth. After tying the game for the second time with a run in the top of the seventh, New Mexico State again took the lead with a single run in the bottom of the frame.

The Blue Raiders finally took the lead for good with Taylor's two-run homer in the eighth, his sixth of the season and only hit of the game.

"Something we talked about after the game last night was coming out and playing better and smarter and taking care of our business," Blue Raider head coach Steve Peterson said.

"I really thought we embarrassed ourselves yesterday. But everything starts with pitching. I extended John as far as he could go. The last out was his last batter. He just kept battling and getting tougher.

"It was a tough day to pitch, with the gusting winds. You really expect a slugfest on a day like today," Peterson added. "But he's been in situations like this in high school and college and he's really a moneyball pitcher. He enjoys the battle and he's the guy you want on the mound."

The Blue Raiders (15-7, 1-1 SBC) got on the board with two runs in the first thanks to three hits. Eric McNamee led off the game with a double into deep rightcenter and Jeff Beachum followed with a bleeder that made it through the leftside, putting runners on the corners. McNamee scored on a balk before a double down the leftfield line by Derek Phillips drove home Beachum.

The first two batters of the game for New Mexico State (21-7-1, 1-1) struck out before a pair of walks by Williams, two of his six in the contest. Mark Aranda then chopped a grounder to first, where Blue Raider Josh Archer let it go right between his legs, allowing a run to score. Mark Ballesteros then doubled off the wall in leftfield, plating two runs for a 3-2 Aggie lead.

A solo homer for the Blue Raiders to leadoff the third by Shane Kemp, his sixth of the season, tied the game at three.

Neither team could muster many scoring chances until the fifth when a one-out double by Xardial Cotto, a wild pitch and a walk to Becher put runners on the corners. After a strikeout Ballesteros blooped a single off the end of the bat into short rightcenter, scoring Cotto for a 4-3 NMSU advantage.

Middle Tennessee finally got a scoring chance in the seventh, loading the bases on a walk to Taylor, a double by Kemp and hit batter by Troy Harp. Pinch-hitter Nate Jaggers struck out before a passed ball allowed Taylor to tie the game at four.

But the Blue Raiders were unable to plate any more runs in the inning, as Beachum popped out and Brett Carroll flied out to left, ending a golden opportunity with just one run.

The lead was short-lived, as Becher hit the first pitch of the bottom of the seventh over the wall in centerfield, as the Aggies regained the lead, 5-4.

But Williams never flinched, a trait he displayed all game long, retiring three of the next four hitters to end the inning without any more damage.

But another lead change was in order, and this time it was the Blue Raiders coming through with the big hit.

Derek Phillips chopped a single into center to leadoff the eighth inning. One batter later Taylor got one into the jet stream toward dead centerfield and it cleared the wall with ease, a two-run blast to give Middle Tennessee a 6-5 edge.

Williams retired the side in order in the eighth before walking Cotto, the Sun Belt's leader in hits, to leadoff the ninth. But Becher hit a sharp grounder to McNamee, who hung with a tough hop and started a 4-6-3 twin-killing. Aranda then lined a ball into leftcenter, where Chase Eakes made a nice sliding catch for the final out to end a four-game losing streak.

Phillips and Kemp both had a pair of hits for the Blue Raiders, while Taylor scored twice and drove in two runs.

Peterson said his club did much better and posted a victory, but can continue to get better.

"This was as big a win as we've had all year, but we still didn't play our best ball," the skipper said. "We have a few guys scuffling at the plate and really have to keep battling and working and make good decisions at the plate and in the field."

The Blue Raiders will send junior Steve Kline (1-1, 2.81 ERA) to the mound in Sunday rubber game of the series, set for 2 p.m. CT. Middle Tennessee renews its rivalry with former OVC foe Tennessee Tech this week, playing a home-and-home with the Golden Eagles starting Tuesday at 7 p.m. at Reese Smith Field.

GAME NOTES

Eric McNamee extended his hitting streak to five games with a double in the first. The junior has hit safely in 18 of the 22 games this season and reached base in all but one game ... Troy Harp extended his hitting streak to six games with a double in the eighth ... The win was the second of John Williams career against New Mexico State and a career-high in strikeouts against the Aggies. The Murfreesboro, Tenn., senior recorded 13 strikeouts against NMSU two years ago in Las Cruces and now has 46 career strikeouts in four outings ... The complete game was the first for Williams this season and the sixth of his career ... The Blue Raiders allowed nine unearned runs in the first 17 games of the season but have given up 16 in the last five outings.

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