Phillips, Williams Lead 8-5 Win

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Senior Day turned into just that for Derek Phillips and John Williams, who combined to help Middle Tennessee defeat Western Kentucky, 8-5, Saturday afternoon at Reese Smith Field and even the best-of-three series at one game apiece. Sunday's rubber game starts at 1 p.m.

Phillips went 3-for-4 with two home runs, a double and a career-high five RBIs. The Knoxville, Tenn., native hit a pair of solo home runs and had a bases-clearing double in the fourth to give the Blue Raiders a 6-1 advantage.

Williams (5-3) pitched one of his best games of the season when the Raiders needed it most, going seven-plus innings and striking out six before leaving the game in the hands of the bullpen.

But the bullpen faltered again for Middle Tennessee (28-17, 9-8 SBC) and almost let the Hilltoppers tie the contest, as WKU scored four runs in the eighth to cut the game to 6-5. Middle Tennessee added two insurance runs in their half of the eighth before Steve Kline got the final three outs for his fourth save of the season.

Brett Carroll added three hits for Middle Tennessee, while another senior, Chuck Akers had two hits, including a run-scoring triple in the eighth. Jeff Beachum also had two hits for the winners.

The Blue Raiders erased some bad thoughts after Friday night's demoralizing 15-3 loss with two early runs before a four-run fourth opened a big lead for Williams.

Phillips hit solo shots in the first and third, his fourth and fifth of the season and fourth in the last dozen contests. The Hilltoppers (23-21, 6-8) got a run in the third on a sacrifice fly from Tim Grogan.

Middle Tennessee got a big inning in the fourth with four hits against WKU starter Daniel Faulkner.

Marcus Taylor walked with one out and moved to second on a wild pitch. Troy Harp then blooped a two-out single into short rightfield, scoring Taylor for a 3-1 lead.

Eric McNamee walked and Akers singled, loading the bases for Phillips. The Halls High School product laced a double into leftcenter, over the head of WKU's Dennis Winn, clearing the bases for a 6-1 Blue Raider advantage.

Williams got into very little trouble and allowed just the one run until the eighth. Matt Ransdell doubled to start the inning before a one-out walk to Grogan forced Blue Raider head coach Steve Peterson into the bullpen after more than 120 pitches.

Danny Borne came on and did not fare well, allowing a three-run homer to Matt Gunning to cut the lead to 6-4. A hit batter turned into another run thanks to a two-out throwing error by Jeff Beachum, making it 6-5 Blue Raiders.

Taylor helped the home team in the bottom of the eighth, belting the first pitch from reliever Greg Durr over the wall in rightcenter. Beachum singled later in the frame and scored on the triple from Akers for the 8-5 advantage.

Middle Tennessee's Eric Blevins hit Ransdell to start the ninth, but Kline came on to get a doubleplay and a strikeout to end the contest.

Sunday is Little League Day at the ballpark, with teams from the Optimist Little League in Murfreesboro parading onto Reese Smith Field in a presentation before the game. The parade begins at approximately 12:40 p.m.

GAME NOTES

Senior Derek Phillips tied his career high with three hits in the contest and set new career-highs in home runs (2) and RBIs (5) ... Phillips has five home runs this season, more than his total from his first three seasons combined, and he took over the batting average lead after Saturday's game with a .395 mark ... Phillips has hit four home runs in the past 12 games after one round-tripper in his first 24 outings ... Marcus Taylor's homer in the eighth was his seventh of the season and first in 19 games, dating to March 27 at New Mexico State ... The Blue Raiders will play their fifth rubber game of the year in Sun Belt action, standing 3-1 currently on Sunday with three straight wins.

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