Raiders Hang on for 31-24 Victory

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AKRON, Ohio - Running back Eugene Gross scored his third touchdown of the game in the final five minutes and the Blue Raider defense made a last stand at the end of the game to preserve a 31-24 season-opening win here Saturday night over the Akron Zips.

The Blue Raiders jumped out on top early behind two forced fumbles and a blocked field goal. After recovering a fumble at the Akron 4-yard line, it took the Blue Raiders just one play to score their first touchdown of the year when Gross ran it in. Following a blocked field goal by Jerry Vanderpool, Josh Harris connected on a 36-yard pass to Pedro Holiday that went to the Akron 2-yard line and Gross took it in from there.

In the second quarter, the Zips picked off a Harris pass in the endzone and promptly responded by going 80 yards to make the score 14-7. WR Kerry Wright then took a punt 75 yards for a score to push the Blue Raider lead back to 14 at 21-7. Following a Cleannord Saintil fumble on a nice Blue Raider drive, the Zips marched down the field in the closing seconds of the half and connected on a field goal with no time left to make the score 21-10 at the break.

The Zips stopped the Blue Raiders' opening drive of the second half and forced the Blue Raiders to punt from deep inside their own territory. The Zips later reached the endzone when QB Charlie Frye ran it in on 4th-and-1. A key play in the drive occurred when Middle Tennessee's Jonathan Harris recovered a fumble but the Blue Raiders were penalized for roughing the passer, which continued the Zip drive.

Akron grabbed their first lead of the game following another Blue Raider turnover when Frye hit Dan Basch for an eight-yard touchdown. The Zips rang up 17 unanswered points to get the lead.

But Middle Tennessee tied the contest in the fourth quarter on a Colby Smith field goal, his first career try as a Blue Raider. Then Gross added his third score of the contest with a little less than five minutes to play.

Akron drove down the field in the final minutes and got inside the 20, but QB Charlie Frye's final toss fell incomplete in the back of the endzone after time had expired.

The Blue Raiders open the home schedule next Saturday against Florida Atlantic at 2 p.m. CT at Floyd Stadium.

POSTGAME NOTES
MIDDLE TENNESSEE AT AKRON
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WRIGHT GETS TD ON PR: WR Kerry Wright, who is usually seen scoring touchdowns after making a catch, came up with his first score from a punt return when he brought one back 75 yards in the second quarter against the Zips. It marked the first punt return for a touchdown by a Blue Raider player since Sulecio Sanford brought one back 85 yards against Chattanooga on Nov. 13, 1997 - a span of 76 games. It also marked the longest punt return ever under Andy McCollum.

WRIGHT CLIMBS CAREER LISTS: WR Kerry Wright had nine catches for 93 yards in the contest, giving him 1,634 career receiving yards. Wright moved past Vince Parks (1,558 yds, 1988-92) into fifth place on the all-time list. Wright also moved past Matt Lowe (99, 1995-98) and into seventh on the all-time receptions list with 100.

HENRY SETS CAREER MARK: Junior wide receiver Chris Henry recorded a career-best 10 receptions for 80 yards against the Zips. Henry's previous best was a five-catch game in an overtime win at Idaho in 2003. Henry's double-digit reception game is only the 10th in Blue Raider history and first since Kerry Wright's 10 catches versus North Texas in 2003.

GROSS MAKES 'EM COUNT: Running back Eugene Gross had only 12 carries in the contest, but the sophomore made the most of his limited chances. Gross rushed for three touchdowns, accounting for all of Middle Tennessee's offensive scores in the contest (the other was on a punt return). Gross ended the contest with 37 yards rushing.

TWENTY A MAGIC NUMBER: Middle Tennessee improved to 26-13 under Andy McCollum when scoring more than 20 points. On the other end of the spectrum, the Blue Raiders are 0-18 when scoring less than 20 points under McCollum.

RAIDERS AT HOME IN THE RUBBER BOWL: Middle Tennessee upped its all-time mark against Akron to 7-1, including staying undefeated in the Rubber Bowl. The Blue Raiders last played in Akron in 1986.

BLOCKED KICKS: Middle Tennessee blocked its 13th kick in the Andy McCollum era when Jerry Vanderpool swatted away an Akron field goal attempt late in the first quarter. It marked the first blocked field goal by the Blue Raiders since Vanderpool rejected one against Tennessee in 2002. Overall, the Blue Raiders have blocked four punts, three field goals, and six extra points in the McCollum era.

FIRST STARTS: The following players made their first collegiate starts in the season opener against Akron: DE Sean Mosley, DB Bradley Robinson, FS Jonathan Harris, OL Joe Evilsizer, OL Quinton Staton and C Marcus Gates.

SPECIAL TEAMS PLAY WELL: One bright spot for the Blue Raiders in the season opener was the play of the special teams. The Blue Raiders returned a punt for a touchdown, blocked a field goal and had three of five kickoffs go into the endzone. Punter/place kicker Colby Smith also made all four extra points and his first career field goal try.

YOUTH IS SERVED: With only eight seniors on the team, Middle Tennessee has a very young football squad. In tonight's season opener the Blue Raiders played a total of 11 freshmen against the Zips. Five of the young guns were true freshmen. The complete list of first year players to see the field tonight were: Damon Nickson, DeMarco McNair, Bradley Robinson, Roy Polite, Tavares Jones, Dana Stewart, Anthony Glover, Erik Walden, Sean Mosley, Antoine Owens, and Stephen Chicola.

TIDBITS: Middle Tennessee kicked off its 89th season of college football tonight against the University of Akron ... WR Cleannord Saintil made his first collegiate reception in tonight's game, as did WR/RB Lee Baker ... LB Jonathan Bonner recorded his third collegiate sack today in the first quarter ... Thomas Johnson registered his seventh and eighth career sacks in the second quarter, which ties him for fourth all-time at MT ... WR Kerry Wright has caught at least two passes in 13 straight games ... QB Josh Harris completed his first 10 passes before tossing an interception in the endzone to end his streak ... FB Nick McAfee recorded his seventh career reception when he picked up a big first down in the fourth quarter ... CB Danny Tolbert registered his second career interception late in the fourth quarter, setting up the game-winning touchdown ... The Blue Raiders opened the season with a victory for the first time since 2001 (Vanderbilt) and improved to 55-31-2 all-time in season openers MT improved to 10-9 all-time against MAC opponents. The Vandy contest was also the last road season-opening win for Middle Tennessee ... The victory was the first road win against a non-conference foe since defeating Vanderbilt in 2002 ... The 31 points scored in the contest are the most on the road for Middle Tennessee since posting 40 last season at Missouri.

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