Football puts up strong fight early, falters in second half

Louisville fights from behind in 42-23 win

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. - Middle Tennessee showed fight against Louisville during a dandy first-half display but the Cardinals flexed their Big East muscle in the second half and pulled away for a 42-23 win here Saturday afternoon.

The Blue Raiders led 17-14 after a spirited first half but the second half belonged to Louisville as it made a statement and pulled away from Middle Tennessee's upset bid.

It started well enough for the Blue Raiders who jumped out to the early lead and maintained it throughout the first half. Middle Tennessee's first score was a compilation of every facet of the game. It began with an impressive opening drive as the offense picked up four first downs and drove 42 yards to the Louisville 34 before the drive stalled. Punter David DeFatta came on and booted a 33-yard punt that Jawan Carson downed inside the 1.

The early battle for field position paid off. After a minimal gain on a quarterback sneak on first down, Louisville tailback Brock Bolen was crushed by linebacker Danny Carmichael for no gain to set up third-and-8 at the 3. Cantwell's pass was intercepted by Jeremy Kellem and returned 14 yards for the touchdown to give Middle Tennessee a 7-0 lead, following Alan Gendreau's point after, with 9:27

remaining in the opening frame.

The Blue Raider defense got into the act once again on Louisville's next possession when Ted Riley hit Cantwell right as he was releasing the ball and Ivon Hickmon jumped the route to haul in his second interception of the season. His 15-yard return set the Blue Raiders up at the Cardinals 38 and Middle Tennessee offensive coordinator G.A. Mangus immediately reached into his bag of tricks.

On the first play from scrimmage receiver Patrick Honeycutt took the handoff from Joe Craddock and pulled up for a pass to a wide open tailback Phillip Tanner, who caught the ball at the 18 and went 39 yards for the touchdown to give the Blue Raiders a 14-0 lead with 6:46 remaining in the opening quarter.

Louisville answered when it drove 57 yards on nine plays and scored on Bolen's 2-yard run with 2:02 remaining in the first quarter but it was a stanza where Middle Tennessee dominated the action and quieted the crowd at Papa John's Cardinal Stadium.

The tide turned somewhat in the second quarter, particularly when Louisville running back Victor Anderson sprinted 88 yards to tie the game, 14-14, with 12:10 remaining in the first half.

Gendreau put Middle Tennessee back in the lead when he displayed his strong long with a booming 42-yard field goal with 2:11 remaining in the half to stake the Blue Raiders to a 17-14 advantage. The 42-yarder was a career long and marked the third time in as many attempts, dating to last week against FIU, that the freshman place-kicker had established a new career best.

The Big Blue stop squad bent but didn't break on Louisville's opening drive of the second half. The Cardinals moved to the Middle Tennessee 9 where they faced fourth-and-1 and opted to go for the first down instead of attempting a game-tying field goal. The ploy backfired when Carmichael and Hickmon teamed to stop Bolen for no gain and return possession to Middle Tennessee.

Unfortunately, for the Blue Raiders, the offense went three-and-out and the defense was back on a short field. This time Louisville took advantage, moving 31 yards on four plays to take its first lead, 21-17, Bolen powered in from the 1 with 5:25 remaining in the third quarter.

Middle Tennessee's defense continued to scratch and claw and kept the team in the game; however, the unit spent way too much time on the field in the second half, for the most part of the third quarter when the Blue Raiders' offense managed just six yards total offense and ran nine plays on three possessions while the Cardinals were on the field for 20 plays and piled up 116 yards total offense.

Still, it was a one possession game into the fourth quarter before the Cardinals finally provided the dagger when Bolen scored his third touchdown of the game, a 1-yard plunge to cap a six-play, 41-yard drive that gave Louisville a seemingly comfortable 28-17 lead with 12:46 remaining.

If Bolen's touchdown didn't seal the deal a blocked punt and recovery in the end zone on the tail end of Middle Tennessee's next drive did. After another three-and-out - DeFatta's punt was blocked by Keith Baker and recovered in the end zone by Johnny Patrick to give the Cardinals a 35-17 lead with 11:13 remaining.

The Cardinals tacked on a meaningless touchdown late and the Blue Raiders scored their final

touchdown when Craddock connected with Malcolm Beyah for a 16-yard scoring strike late in the final quarter to account for the final margin. Middle Tennessee returns to action when it travels to Mississippi State next Saturday.

GAME NOTES

CRADDOCK MOVES UP: Senior quarterback Joe Craddock tied Phil Ironside for 10th on the career touchdowns list when he connected with Malcolm Beyah for a 16-yard touchdown with 36 seconds remaining against Louisville. It was Craddock's eighth touchdown strike of the season.

KELLEM PICK SIX: Always known for being around the football, sophomore Jeremy Kellem came up with one of his biggest plays early in the first quarter against Louisville. Kellem stepped in front of a Hunter Cantwell pass and returned it 14 yards for his first career touchdown. It was Kellem's second interception of the season and the fifth of his career. It was the first interception return for a touchdown by Middle Tennessee since Bradley Robinson brought one back 88 yards against Arkansas State on Nov. 11, 2006.

HICKMON GETS SECOND: Senior linebacker Ivon Hickmon came up with his second interception of the season when he went with the tight end in the flat and nicely stepped in front of a Hunter Cantwell pass. The interception setup Middle Tennessee's second touchdown of the day.

TRICKY RAIDERS: Following an interception in the first quarter, the Blue Raiders used a little trickery to reach paydirt. Wide receiver Patrick Honeycutt took a backward pass then tossed it downfield to a wide open Phillip Tanner for a 39-yard touchdown pass. It was the first career completion in three attempts for Honeycutt and it was the first career touchdown reception for Tanner. Earlier this season against Maryland, Middle Tennessee punter David DeFatta completed his first career pass with a 28-yard strike to TE Alvin Ingle on fourth down to setup a Blue Raider score.

GENDREAU HITS CAREER LONG: True freshman Alan Gendreau, who struggled earlier in the year, connected on a career long 42-yard field just before the half to put MT ahead, 17-14. It was Gendreau's third straight made three-pointer and all three have set new career longs for the Maitland, Fla., native.

QUICK HITTERS: Middle Tennessee's 14 first quarter points were the most in the opening quarter for the Blue Raiders this season and the most overall since getting 14 against ASU last year ... DT Trevor Jenkins made his team-best 32nd straight start ... Middle Tennessee came out in black pants and white jerseys for their fifth uniform combination of the season (this marks first time the Blue Raiders have worn this particular combination) ... RB/DB Jawan Carson saw his first career snaps on offense today against Louisville and his first career carry went for 11 yards ... After not starting the previous three games, freshman Colin Boss got the start against Louisville at right guard ... TE Alvin Ingle caught his second pass of the season today against Louisville and his first from a quarterback this year (first reception came from punter David DeFatta) ... MT had just six yards of total offense in the third quarter ... The blocked punt for a touchdown was the first given up by the Blue Raiders since 2003 (FAU) ... MT fell to 10-3 under Stockstill when leading at the half.