

Blue Raiders secure impressive 21-10 road win at WKU

Keep bowl hopes alive with strong showing in all facets of game

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BOWLING GREEN, Ky. -

Middle Tennessee will return home seeking three straight wins and has put itself back in strong position to become bowl eligible following an impressive 21-10 win against Western Kentucky here Saturday afternoon.

Senior quarterback Joe Craddock completed 19-of-29 passes for 212 yards and threw two touchdowns with no interceptions to key a 212-yard passing attack; however, it was great balance and play-calling that kept WKU on its heels. The Blue Raiders ran for 101 yards and rode the strong back of junior Phillip Tanner in a smash-mouth type approach. Tanner responded with a season-high 92 yards that included a 29-yard touchdown. Middle Tennessee's offense finished with 313 total yards.



Outstanding freshmen

receivers Sancho McDonald and Malcom Beyah were on the receiving end of Craddock's touchdown passes. McDonald finished with four receptions for 56 yards, including a 33-yard scoring pass that essentially sealed the deal. Beyah finished with three catches for 55 yards and the game's first touchdown.

The defense also was impressive, keeping WKU out of the end zone until midway through the fourth

quarter. The defensive superlatives included an inspiring goal-line stand keyed back Ivon Hickmon in the first half, an interception by Rod Issac to halt one drive and freshman Derrick Crumpton's fumble recovery that all but assured the road win that provided the Blue Raiders (4-6) with consecutive wins.

Tanner's tough running between the tackles keyed one of the most consistent ground games of the season and Craddock meticulously picked apart WKU with an array of underneath routes combined with shots down the middle of the field as the senior signal-caller continued to climb the career charts.

The first half was a defensive struggle until Tanner broke loose for his fifth touchdown in five games to stake the Blue Raiders to a 14-3 lead with 1:23 remaining in the first half. The Blue Raiders faced fourth-and-1 on the WKU 29 and opted to go for the first down with the score 7-3.

They got more.

Tanner took the handoff, bounced to the left, used a massive block by lineman Mark Fisher to break two tackles and outrun defenders to the end zone for his eighth rushing touchdown of the season. Gendreau's extra point provided a 14-3 cushion and gave the Blue Raiders momentum.

Prior to Tanner's heroics offensive superlatives were few in the first half, although the Blue Raiders had success moving the ball before seeing drives stall. Middle Tennessee took the lead on its second offensive possession when Craddock connected with freshman standout Malcolm Beyah for 9-yard touchdown pass. Craddock and Beyah also hooked up for a crucial 33-yard pass play on a third-and-11 near midfield to keep the drive alive.

From there, Middle Tennessee's defense controlled the line of scrimmage and the game. Middle Tennessee's linebackers were active with Hickmon and Danny Carmichael combining for 19 tackles. Hickmon led the way with 10 stops, and Carmichael had nine tackles and made a statement on the game's first play when he sacked WKU quarterback David Wolke for a 12-yard loss.

Issac collected his first interception of the season in a first half that saw the Blue Raiders clamp down and hold WKU to 125 yards total offense. The Toppers were limited to 1.8 yards per carry against the Blue Raiders' defensive front.

Issac's interception early in the second quarter gave Middle Tennessee possession at the WKU 37 and appeared to put them in great possession to build on the lead, especially after Craddock found Eldred King down the middle for a 26-yard completion to the 15. Four plays later the Blue Raiders were lining up for an apparent 33-yard field goal but a bad snap created havoc. Holder Patrick Honeycutt scooped up the wet pigskin and attempted to throw the ball away but his pass was intercepted by Mark Santoro and returned to the WKU 37.

Wolke immediately zeroed in on Wenquel Graves for a big pass play that almost went the distance but Issac's hustle play demonstrated why coaches preach the philosophy of making teams snap it again. Issac ran Graves down at the Blue Raider 5 and three plays later WKU had to settle for Tanner Siewert's 22-yard field goal to cut the lead to 7-3 with 5:02 remaining.

The Blue Raiders answered with an impressive 11-play, 74-yard drive featuring Tanner's hard-nosed running. The junior tailback capped the drive with his 29-yard jaunt on the clutch 4-and-1 call to propel Middle Tennessee into the locker room with a 14-3 edge.

After a scoreless third quarter in which the Middle Tennessee defense stifled WKU and held the home team to just 61 yards the Blue Raiders appeared to be pulling away during an impressive nine-play, 88-yard drive that culminated early in the fourth quarter. Craddock was big-time on two third-down plays during the drive, the first coming when he rifled a strike to Honeycutt for 22 yards on third-and-10 at the 48. Three plays later Craddock continued his dazzling day when he lofted a beautiful fade against a blustery wind that quarterback-turned-receiver McDonald tipped and caught at the front pylon for a 33-yard touchdown. The perfectly-executed play on both ends staked Middle Tennessee to a 21-3 lead with 13:59 remaining.

WKU wouldn't go quietly. The Hilltoppers answered with their only touchdown to close to within 21-10 midway through the quarter, but freshman safety Crumpton pounced on a fumble one possession later to end WKU's comeback hopes.

With back-to-back wins in hand, Middle Tennessee returns home to face North Texas in the home finale Saturday at 2 p.m. It will also be "Salute to Veterans" at Floyd Stadium.

MIDDLE TENNESSEE POSTGAME NOTES

TANNER COMES UP BIG: Junior Phillip Tanner had the Blue Raiders' longest run of the year at the most important time. On fourth-and-1, Tanner bounced outside, shed a tackler, and went 29 yards for a touchdown to send MT into the half with a 14-3 lead. It was Tanner's team-leading 8th rushing touchdown of the season and the 12th of his career. Tanner went on to finish the day with a season-high 92 rushing yards.

PICK FOR ROD: Sophomore Rod Issac came up with his first interception of the season when he picked off a David Wolke pass in the second quarter. It went down as the second of Issac's career after recording one against ULL in 2007. It went down as the 11th interception for the Blue Raiders in 2008 and the fourth by a cornerback.

3 WITH 30: Middle Tennessee now has three receivers with at least 30 receptions for the first time since 2004 when Kerry Wright, Chris Henry and Cleannord Saintil accomplished the feat. This year's 30-catch crew is Eldred King with 41, Patrick Honeycutt with 43, and Malcolm Beyah with 31.

CRADDOCK MOVES TO NINTH: With 212 yards passing against WKU, senior Joe Craddock moved past Andrico Hines for ninth place on the all-time passing yardage list and topped the 200-yard mark in a game for the 10th time. Craddock, who has done virtually all of his work in two years, now has 3,518 career passing yards Craddock is now chasing Phil Ironside for eighth place (3,533 yards from 1988 to 1990).

BEYAH STRIKES: True freshman receiver Malcolm Beyah hauled in his first touchdown pass since the Louisville game when he grabbed one from Joe Craddock in the first quarter. Beyah now has six touchdown receptions on the season to lead the Blue Raiders, which is the most by a Blue Raider since Kerry Wright recorded 11 in 2004.

CRADDOCK PASSES HALLUM: Senior quarterback Joe Craddock tossed his 23rd and 24th career touchdowns when he hit Malcolm Beyah on a 9-yard pass in the first quarter and Sancho McDonald from 33 yards out in the fourth. The 24 TDs breaks Craddock from a tie for ninth place on the all-time list with Bob Hallum. Craddock now has 12 touchdown passes on the season and all 24 career scoring strikes have come in the last 22 games.

RED ZONE STREAK ENDS: Middle Tennessee saw its red zone scoring streak come to an end in the second quarter against WKU. The Blue Raiders had scored in 14 straight trips inside the 20-yard line before a botched snap and hold of a field goal attempt broke the streak.

QUICK HITTERS: Middle Tennessee finished its non-conference season with a 2-3 record which is the first time they have had two non-league wins since 2002 ... DT Trevor Jenkins made his team-best 35th straight start ... David DeFatta's 71-yard punt in the third quarter was the longest of his career and bettered his previous mark of 70 set against Troy in 2007 ... The 87-yard scoring drive in the fourth quarter was the second longest of the season behind the 91-yard drive at Louisville ... Joe Craddock's 19 completions ran his season total to 196 which is fourth on the single-season list and just one shy of third place.

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