Blue Raiders Fall, 9-8

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Jacksonville State erased an eight-run deficit after two innings, capped by Winston Pearson's two-run homer in the eighth, to defeat Middle Tennessee, 9-8, Saturday afternoon at Reese Smith Field. The homestanding Blue Raiders scored seven runs in the first inning and added another in the second to take a commanding 8-0 advantage. But the Gamecocks began to chip away, scoring once in the third and three times in the fifth. JSU added a single run in the sixth before touching the Middle Tennessee bullpen for two runs in both the seventh and eighth innings to get its second win in the series and sixth win in the last eight meetings between the two clubs. The Gamecock bullpen tossed 8.1 innings of relief, allowing just one run on six hits. Clark Jinks (2-0), the third of four JSU pitchers, got the win, tossing 3.2 scoreless innings while giving up three hits. Lee Drinkard picked up his first save, getting the final four outs. Blue Raider starter Eric Blevins struck out a career-high seven batters in six innings, giving up five runs on six hits with two walks. Blevins faced just 15 batters in the first four innings before running into trouble in the fifth. Josh Anderson (1-1) took the loss, allowing two runs on three hits in one inning. The Blue Raiders scored seven runs on seven hits in the first with the aid of two JSU errors, chasing starter Jon Clements from the game. Eric McNamee singled up the middle to start the game and Doug Birkofer reached on a fielding error by Clements. The next five batters reached, including a bases-clearing double from Marcus Taylor and a double by Michael McKenry. Nathan Hines plated two runs with a single through the middle, with Josh Archer and Birkofer driving in runs later in the frame with singles to left. Middle Tennessee added a run in the second after a double from Taylor and a single by McKenry. A groundout from Jeff Beachum made it 8-0 after two innings. The Gamecocks got on the board on a groundout by Pearson in the third and tallied three runs in the fifth. A leadoff walk started the trouble for Blevins in the fifth. After a strikeout three straight hits, singles from Cory Tucker and Pearson and a double by Clint Carroll, pushed across two runs. A walk loaded the bases before Austin Stein's groundout cut the deficit to 8-4. Brian Piazza's solo homer to right in the sixth made it 8-5 Middle Tennessee. Kyler Wetherington came in and got two quick outs before giving up three straight hits to JSU, the last a run-scoring double from Richard Turner to cut the deficit to 8-6. Anderson came on and uncorked a

wild pitch, allowing a run to score. He did get a glove on a ball heading for centerfield off the bat of Piazza, slowing it down enough for McNamee to make a play and end the inning with the Blue Raiders clinging to a one-run lead. The Gamecocks made the comeback complete in the eighth inning, thanks to a one-out double from pinch-hitter Brian Haskins and Pearson's two-run homer to right, giving JSU a 9-8 lead. The Blue Raiders threatened to tie the game in the bottom of the inning, with McNamee singling with two outs and Birkofer fighting off four pitches to draw a nine-pitch walk. But Drinkard, a side-armer, came in to strikeout Nate Jaggers for the final out of the inning. In the ninth McKenry drew a walk and Hines collected his third hit of the game. But Matt Campbell's chopper over the mound was the final out of the contest. Clements gave up seven runs, four earned, on seven hits in just two-thirds of an inning. Matthew Darwin came in and did more than an admirable job, working 3.1 innings and allowing one run on two hits. The series concludes Sunday at 1 p.m. at Reese Smith Field. The Blue Raiders finish their five-game homestand Tuesday and Wednesday versus Southern Illinois. **GAME NOTES**
Freshman Doug Birkofer made his first start of the season and Chase Eakes returned to the lineup as the designated hitter after missing six games because of minor knee surgery ... Redshirt sophomore Matt Campbell made his first appearance as a Blue Raider, pinch-running in the fifth inning ... Starting pitcher Eric Blevins struck out a career-high seven batters in the game in six innings ... Nathan Hines recorded a career-high three hits in the contest.

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