Raiders Work Deep into the Night for 11-8 Triumph

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MIAMI, Fla. - Middle Tennessee scored nine runs combined in the third and fourth innings, and Eric Blevins tossed four innings of relief, in an 11-8 victory very late Thursday night at University Park in the second round of the Sun Belt Championships. The game was originally set to begin at 6:30 p.m. ET, but because of long games and two rain delays in the middle of the day, the contest did not start until 10:56 local time and ended at 2:07 a.m.

Nathan Hines led Middle Tennessee's 14-hit attack with four hits, while Michael McKenry had three hits. Todd Martin and Marcus Taylor both hit two-run homers in the victory, while Eric McNamee scored three times.

Blue Raider starter Jeff Kasser lasted only 2.1 innings, allowing five runs on seven hits. But Blevins came on to toss four innings, giving up two runs with five strikeouts. Josh Anderson got four outs, as did Allan Woodward, to close out the team's 12th win in the last 16 games.

WKU starter Daniel Faulker 6-8) gave up six runs on six hits in three-plus innings, walking three, to take the loss. Reliever Kenny Griffin worked one inning, allowing four runs on four hits. The most effective Hilltopper pitcher was Garrett Stembridge, who allowed one run on four hits, striking out six, in five innings.

The Blue Raiders (31-22) scored in the first inning for the eighth straight contest, with McNamee leading off the game with a single to right. The senior moved to second on a wild pitch and scored on McKenry's two-out single to left for a 1-0 lead after a half inning.

But the Hilltoppers came right back with two runs in their half of the first, starting with a one-out single to center from Matt Ransdell. Tim Grogan then drilled a low fastball over the wall in rightcenter for a 2-1 WKU advantage.

In the third McNamee was hit to leadoff and moved to second on a groundout. A chopper through the middle from Jaggers made it into the outfield, plating McNamee. Hines reached on an infield hit with two outs before Jeff Beachum laced a single down the third base line, scoring Jaggers. A walk to Taylor loaded the bases before Adam Warren blooped a single that hit the leftfield chalk, plating two runs for a 5-2 lead.

WKU tied the game again in the bottom of the frame, chasing Kasser from the contest.

Grogan led off with a double and Jordan Newton followed with an infield single. Antone Towns was hit with one out, loading the bases for Casey Hamilton, who plated one run with a single to center. Michael Wilhite scored two more runs with a single to right against Blevins, tying the game at five.

McNamee started another big inning for the Blue Raiders with a leadoff walk in the fourth. Martin followed with a blast over the centerfield wall, his seventh of the season. Jaggers then singled and Hines singled with one out to put runners on the corners.

A fielder's choice from Beachum scored Jaggers before Taylor hit a towering drive over the wall in rightfield, also his seventh of the year, for a 10-5 Middle Tennessee advantage.

The 'Toppers got one run back in the bottom of the inning, with Corteze Armstrong leading off with a bloop double. A wild pitch moved the runner to third, and Grogan's liner to center scored Armstrong.

Blevins hit two batters later in the frame, but worked out of the jam with a strikeout and a fly out.

WKU added another run in the seventh when Towns singled with one out and Hamilton followed with a double. A grounder from Wilhite plated a run, but Anderson got the final out with a pop-up, preserving an 11-7 Middle Tennessee advantage.

The Hilltoppers added an unearned run in the eighth, with Armstrong reaching on a throwing error to start the inning. He stole second, moved to third on a wild pitch, and scored on another throwing error to cut the deficit to three.

Middle Tennessee will play the late game again Friday, waiting for the winner of the Western Kentucky-Louisiana-Lafayette game that will take place at 12:30 p.m. ET Friday.

GAME NOTES

Eric McNamee singled to leadoff the contest, reaching for the 33rd time in 53 contests this season in the first inning. McNamee's single also extended his hitting streak to a career-best 13 games ... McNamee later scored in the first, extended Middle Tennessee's streak to eight straight outings scoring in the first inning ... Nate Jaggers' single in the third extended his hitting streak to eight games ... Jeff Beachum's single in the third extended his hitting streak to 10 games, his second double-digit hitting streak this season ... Beachum left the game in the sixth inning with a muscle strain.

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