Raiders Fall in Heartbreaker, 35-31

December 3, 2005 · MT Media Relations

MIAMI, Fla. - A'mod Ned's 20-yard run with less than two minutes to play gave Florida International the lead in a back-and-forth affair, and Middle Tennessee's final pass was out of the back of the end zone in a 35-31 FIU victory Saturday night at FIU Community Stadium.

- **Video:** Football Game Highlights

The two teams combined for 66 points and 961 yards of total offense, with the homestanding Golden Panthers overcoming an early 14-0 deficit to finish the season 5-6 in just their fourth year of existence and tie for fourth in the squad's first year of Sun Belt play.

The Blue Raiders lost the final game of coach Andy McCollum's tenure as head coach, ending the year 4-7 overall, 3-4 in the Sun Belt.

FIU took the lead on Ned's 20-yard dash through the middle with 1:19 remaining, giving the Golden Panthers a 35-31 advantage. But the Bluer Raiders quickly drove inside the FIU 20 with 35 seconds left, but a holding call pushed the ball back and left Middle Tennessee with two chances to win the game.

Clint Marks Hail Mary fell incomplete and after a timeout, his final throw to the back right corner of the endzone to Cleannord Saintil was just a bit long, forcing Saintil out of the field of play and giving FIU the victory in the first meeting ever between the two teams.

Marks finished the game 26-of-37 for a season-high 297 yards and two touchdowns in the air, while running and catching a TD as well in the contest. Ralph King carried a career-high 30 times for a personal-best 105 yards in the game, while Saintil caught eight balls for 133 yards, his third 100-game of the year.

The Blue Raiders marched down the field on the game's opening drive, capping the 80-yard drive with a 19-yard touchdown pass on a bit of trickery. Marks threw a lateral to Eugene

Gross and Gross tossed it back to the quarterback, and Marks ran it into the endzone behind a convoy for an early 7-0 lead.

FIU answered with an 11-play drive of its own, but the drive stalled after an illegal shift penalty and Adam Moss missed a 38-yard field goal.

The Blue Raiders drove right back down the field, with Marks hitting Saintil for a 41-yard TD pass and a 14-0 lead with 11 seconds left in the first quarter.

The Golden Panthers did not go away easily, scoring on their next possession with a four-play, 63-yard drive capped with a 17-yard TD pass from Josh Padrick to Cory McKinney.

FIU blocked Colby Smith's punt on the next Blue Raider drive and scored two plays later on Ned's 18-yard run, tying the game at 14 with 11 minutes to play in the half.

The home team had a chance to take the lead on its next possession, but again Moss was no good on the field goal, this time from 41 yards, keeping the game knotted at 14.

But the Golden Panthers took the lead on their next possession, driving 66 yards in six plays. Padrick hit McKinney on slant pattern and the senior turned outside, past cornerback Bradley Robinson who had slipped down, and beat another defender to the pylon, giving the home team a 21-14 edge with two minutes remaining before halftime.

Smith booted a 27-yard field goal on the final play of the first half for a 21-17 halftime lead for Florida International.

The Blue Raiders scored on their first possession of the second half, with Marks running it in from six yards out, capping a 65-yard drive and giving the visitors a 24-21 lead midway through the third period.

The seesaw affair continued with the Golden Panthers answering with its own TD drive. Padrick scored from a yard out on a quarterback sneak to give FIU a 28-24 advantage in the third period.

Middle Tennessee's offense struggled for much of the rest of the second half until taking over after a J.K. Sabb interception in the final period, his first pick of the season and the 13th by the defense this season.

Marks completed two fourth-down passes on the drive before Stephen Chicola made a one-handed grab in the back of the endzone for his first career TD with 5:17 to play, putting the Blue Raiders back ahead, 31-28.

The Golden Panthers moved onto Middle Tennessee's side of the field but Padrick tried to hit Andre Rollins down the right sideline. Robinson outmaneuvered the 6-foot, 5-inch receiver for the ball near the goal line, giving the Blue Raiders the ball with just over three minutes to play.

But FIU got the ball back with just less than two minutes remaining and drove 46 yards in only three plays, with Ned giving the home team the lead again after a 20-yard run through the middle for a 35-31 lead.

POSTGAME NOTES
MIDDLE TENNESSEE VS FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL
DECEMBER 3, 2005; FIU STADIUM

FIRSTS FOR MARKS AND GROSS: On Middle Tennessee's opening drive of the game, quarterback Clint Marks and running back Eugene Gross reversed roles and had a pair of career firsts. Gross came up with the first touchdown pass of his career when he hit Clint Marks on a 19-yard strike to put the Blue Raiders on the board. It was Marks' first touchdown reception of his career and the second catch all-time for the junior signal-caller (only other grab was against Idaho in 2004). Gross is now 3-for-5 as a passer in his career for 65 yards.

MARKS TIES QUINN: Middle Tennessee quarterback Clint Marks moved past Jonathan Quinn and tied Marvin Collier for sixth place with two touchdown passes in the game. Marks has 29 career TD passes after three seasons as the Blue Raider signal-caller.

SMITH TIES ARRINGTON: Colby Smith's 27-yard field goal as time expired in the first half moved him into a tie for sixth place on the career list with Archie Arrington. Smith, who has hit seven on the season, now has 22 for his career.

SMITH MOVES UP: Junior placekicker Colby Smith moved past Archie Arrington for sixth place on the all-time points scored by a kicker list. Smith had seven points tonight against FIU to run his career total to 124.

MARKS OVER 200: Quarterback Clint Marks topped the 200-yard passing mark for the fifth time this season with a season-high 297 yards against Florida International. Marks now has 14 for his career to rank second all-time at Middle Tennessee behind Wes Counts' 18.

KING HAS CAREER DAY: Running back Ralph King, who made his second start of the season tonight, turned in a career game for the Blue Raiders. King carried it a personal-best 30 times for a career-high 105 yards to pace the Blue Raiders. It was the third 100-yard rushing game of the year for Middle Tennessee.

CHICOLA FINDS ENDZONE: It took him 22 games, but tight end Stephen Chicola finally found the endzone. Following a J.K. Sabb interception, Chicola made a beautiful one-handed grab in the back of the endzone to put the Blue Raiders ahead, 31-24, with just over five minutes to play. Chicola's first career touchdown was the highlight in a strong season finish for the sophomore. The Jacksonville, Fla., native ended the season with 20 receptions in his last four games for 178 yards.

SAINTIL HAS ANOTHER BIG DAY: Senior receiver Cleannord Saintil had his third 100-yard receiving game of the season in the loss, catching eight balls for 133 yards and one touchdown. Saintil had a 41-yard TD catch in the first quarter and was just out of bounds on the final play of the game in the back of the endzone. He ended his career with 66 catches this season, the fifth most in Middle Tennessee in a single season.

QUICK HITTERS: WR Cleannord Saintil has now caught at least one pass in 22 straight games ... For the third time this season, Middle Tennessee scored a touchdown on its opening drive and the Blue Raiders also opened the second half with a TD ... Cleannord Saintil's 41-yard touchdown reception was the third of the season and the fourth for his two-year career ... Walt Bell made his first catch of the season and the second of his career when he hauled one in late in the second quarter ... The 21 points by FIU in the second quarter was the most points scored against the Blue Raiders this season in a single quarter ... LB J.K. Sabb came up with the first interception of his career in the fourth quarter and it was the 13th of the season for the Blue Raiders who added No. 14 when Bradley Robinson stopped a late FIU drive with his fifth pick of the year ... WR Taron Henry hauled in a personal-best five receptions for 66 yards.

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