

Blue Raiders unable to overcome turnovers in loss to Red Wolves

Middle Tennessee scores majority of points in first half

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JONESBORO, Ark. - Seven turnovers, including four interceptions, limited offensive efficiency by Middle Tennessee Tuesday night, as it dropped a 51-24 decision at Arkansas State in front of 13,589 at ASU Stadium live on ESPN2 in Jonesboro, Ark.

Middle Tennessee could not convert on its opening possession, as Dwight Dasher threw an interception on the Blue Raiders' third play. It did not take the Red Wolves long to turn the miscue into points, as they marched the remaining 21 yards on just four plays for the game's first score. Ryan Aplin sprinted four yards on a quarterback keeper to put Arkansas State (4-5, 4-2 Sun Belt) ahead, 6-0. The ensuing point-after touchdown kick by Bobby Zalud was blocked by Emmanuel Perez, keeping Middle Tennessee within a half-dozen points at 12:21 of the first period.



The Red Wolves continued to pour in points early, as they covered 71 yards on just five plays in a little over a minute with Jermaine Robertson punching the ball across the plane from seven yards out at 8:20 for a 13-0 advantage. Aplin was 3-of-4 through the air for 59 yards during the drive, as the quick-strike offense again stung the Middle Tennessee defense.

The Blue Raiders decided to take a chance on their next possession. After being stopped just short on a third-down play, Middle Tennessee (3-5, 2-2 Sun Belt) faked a punt attempt and got the first

down. Dasher then located Garrett Andrews along the visitor sideline on the next play for a 33-yard completion, putting the Blue Raiders in the red zone for the first time.

Despite the short field after the long completion, Middle Tennessee settled for a 27-yard Alan Gendreau field goal with 4:27 left in the stanza to pull within 10, 13-3. The Blue Raiders held the ball longer during the possession, 3:46, than the first two ASU drives combined, while consuming 64 yards on a dozen plays.

Middle Tennessee attempted a short kick next and David Jones came out of the pile with the ball, returning the ball to the Blue Raiders at the ASU 39. On another fourth-and-short situation, Dasher kept the ball and gave MT another first down on a seven-yard rush.

The momentum stayed with Middle Tennessee as Benjamin Cunningham found pay dirt on a four-yard carry before the quarter expired, pulling the Blue Raiders within 13-10 as 52 seconds remained in the period. Middle Tennessee needed 10 plays to cover the 39 yards, taking 3:31 off the clock and neither team would score again before the quarter ended.

The first play of the second quarter put the Red Wolves back on top by 10, 20-10, as Aplin hit Taylor Stockemer in stride between a pair of defensive backs on a 37-yard strike at 14:54 of the second frame. The drive covered 47 yards on just four plays and just 58 seconds off the clock, bookending both quarters of the first half.

Middle Tennessee, however, would not be denied. After an extended delay to attend to injuries, Dasher sprinted untouched around the left end for a 29-yard score with 9:24 to go in the second quarter and close the gap to 20-17. The Blue Raiders chipped 5:30 off the clock on the 14-play, 80-yard possession.

Arkansas State then tried to counter the touchdown with one of their own but once the Red Wolves crossed the 10-yard line, they could not advance any further. Zalud lined up for a 27-yard field goal attempt with 4:35 remaining in the half, but he pushed the kick wide right and kept MT within three, 20-17. The Blue Raiders were unable to capitalize on the opportunity and returned the ball back to ASU after a 53-yard punt by Josh Davis.

Despite having just over two minutes left in the half, Arkansas State made short work on its next score that lasted 2:16 on nine plays and 77 yards. Aplin linked up with Dwayne Frampton for a 48-yard gain along the left sideline before being pushed out-of-bounds by Arness Ikner. However, the Middle Tennessee defense held firm and forced a 22-yard field goal by Brian Davis pushed the intermission lead to 23-17 with the trey with just 13 seconds to play in the half.

The Red Wolves took the opening kickoff of the second half and quickly moved into Blue Raider territory, following a six-yard completion from Aplin to Derek Lawson and a 22-yard Aplin toss to Frampton across the middle. However, three plays later, Davis missed a 37-yard field goal try and Middle Tennessee remained down just six, 23-17, with 10:53 left in the third quarter.

The Blue Raiders again could not use the missed field goal to their advantage. Dasher was intercepted on the drive's third play by Demario Davis, returning the ball to Arkansas State with only 33 yards to work. On the first play of the following possession, with Frampton lined up in the Wildcat formation, he took the snap, pitched it to Phillip Butterfield, ASU's backup signal-caller, and Butterfield hit a wide-open Frampton for a 33-yard touchdown pass to give the Red Wolves a 30-17

lead with 9:24 left in the third quarter.

Faced with a third-and-long the next time it had the ball, Middle Tennessee again threw an interception as Kelcie McCray picked off Dasher at midfield for the third turnover of the game. Jeremy Kellem returned the favor, stepping in front of an Aplin pass just three plays later, keeping the Blue Raider hopes alive.

As Middle Tennessee began to drive deep into Arkansas State territory, Bryan Hill stripped Malcolm Beyah of the ball and ASU's Javon McKinnon recovered for the fourth MT turnover with 5:19 left in the third period.

The Blue Raider defense appeared to stop the Red Wolves from scoring, but a pass interference call on a third-and-long kept the drive alive. Lawson then advanced 25 yards on a run up the middle, then Aplin hit a wide-open Jeff Blake on a five-yard pass to increase the lead to 20, 37-17, with 2:24 remaining in the quarter. Arkansas State went 72 yards on eight plays during the possession and took just under three minutes off the clock.

Middle Tennessee could not gain any advantage when it had the ball, seeming to lose it each time it had possession. The Blue Raiders took the ball down inside the Red Wolf red zone, but Marquette Williams forced and recovered a Phillip Tanner fumble on the ASU 12, giving the ball back to Arkansas State early in the fourth quarter.

The teams traded turns with the ball but after the Red Wolves punted for the first time all night, Dasher tossed his fourth interception of the game, this time to Darryl Feemster. Lawson then bowled his way down the near sideline and into the endzone at 9:35 of the fourth quarter, giving Arkansas State a 44-17 lead, on a 17-yard carry on the drive's only play.

Middle Tennessee did not quit during the final period. The Blue Raiders got on the scoreboard one last time at 7:21 when Andrews hauled in a Dasher 14-yard touchdown pass to make it a 20-point deficit, 44-14. MT needed eight plays to cover the 26 yards during the drive and exactly two minutes off the clock.

After the Red Wolves recovered the onside kick attempt, they tacked another touchdown on the board with 4:48 left as Robertson added a six-yard score to end a five-play, 40-yard possession.

Middle Tennessee had one more turnover, a Dasher fumble, before Arkansas State ran out the clock to end the game.

The Blue Raiders will return to action at 2:30 p.m. Saturday, November 13, when they play host to North Texas at Floyd Stadium.

Middle Tennessee Postgame Notes:

GROUND ATTACK:

Middle Tennessee rushed the ball 60 times on Tuesday against Arkansas State to move into fourth place all-time. The 60 attempts are the most in a single-game since 61 against Austin Peay earlier this season.

KELLEM IN TOP 10:

Senior Jeremy Kellem recorded his second interception of the season and the 10th of his career against ASU. Kellem's 10 picks ties him with five other Blue Raiders for seventh on the all-time list and he needs one more to tie Jimbo Pearson for sixth. Kellem has now been responsible for 25 turnovers in 45 career games played.

TURNOVER PROBLEM CONTINUES:

Middle Tennessee entered the ASU game ranked last nationally in turnover margin and its misfortunes continued with seven turnovers Tuesday night. The Blue Raiders have now turned the ball over 28 times after having just 21 miscues all of last season. The 28 turnovers this year ranks as the most in the nation (ahead of Central Michigan's 24). The seven turnovers are the most by a Middle Tennessee squad in its FBS (I-A) era, since 1999.

THIRD BLOCK:

Middle Tennessee registered its third blocked kick of the season when it rejected Arkansas State's PAT on its opening touchdown. Dwight Smith was credited with the block which was the second of his career. It goes down as the 17th blocked kick in the Rick Stockstill era and just the second PAT.

GRISHAM GETS FIRST START:

Redshirt freshman Jesse Grisham received his first career start in the game against Arkansas State at left tackle. Grisham started in place of regular starter Mike Williams who had to serve a two-quarter suspension for throwing a punch in the previous game against ULM. Williams had started 32 straight games.

QUICK HITTERS:

QB Dwight Dasher's interception on the opening possession marked the second time in three games the Blue Raiders have suffered an interception on the opening drive ... S Jeremy Kellem played in his team-high 45h career game tonight ... OT Mark Fisher started his 42nd career game tonight against ASU ... Kevin Brown, Rod Issac, and Jeremy Kellem started together in the secondary against ASU for the 26th straight game ... Alan Gendreau's first quarter FG was the 34th of his career and puts him one shy of tying for fourth on the all-time list ... Ben Cunningham recorded his second career rushing touchdown in the first quarter against ASU ... The 23 first half points by ASU tonight is the most given up by the Blue Raiders in the first 30 minutes all season ... Dwight Dasher equaled his career-high with four interceptions and now has 30 for his career which ranks as the sixth most in MT history.

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