Raiders rally in fourth quarter to down WKU

Stockstill moves to 4-0 in one-point games

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BOWLING GREEN, Kentucky - Middle Tennessee spotted Western Kentucky an early lead less than five minutes into the game, saw the Hilltoppers build it to 26-13 in the second half, then rallied in the fourth quarter to take a thrilling 27-26 win in Bowling Green on Saturday afternoon.

The win keeps alive the Blue Raiders hopes for a possible bowl bid if they can win their last two games against FAU and FIU. Huge defensive plays in the fourth quarter sparked the comeback. The first one came on a 99-yard fumble return by Rod Issac that kept Western from increasing their lead to three touchdowns, and instead put the Blue Raiders within six points of the lead.

The second big play came on Western's attempt to seal the victory with 2:32 to go on a Casey Tinius FG attempt. Big Jarrett Crittenton, jumped up and blocked the attempt, and the Blue Raiders managed to hold on for the win.

Western's Bobby Rainey had a record-setting day for the Hilltoppers, rushing for 248 yards, 40 more than the entire Blue Raider offense.

Middle Tennessee took the opening kickoff, but went three and out on first possession. Nathaniel Toulson's punt was blocked by Xavius Boyd and recovered on the Blue Raider 24. Kawaun Jakes pass to Rainey was good for a 1st down on the 14, then Jakes hit Rainey again, good for another

first down on the two yard line. Rainey carried three straight times, going in from the one for a touchdown. The extra point was good, and the Hilltoppers took the lead, 7-0.

Eric Russell then returned the ensuing kickoff 97 yards for a Blue Raider touchdown, Gendreau's extra point was good and Middle Tennessee tied the game 7-7 with 9:21 left in the first quarter.

Middle forced a punt on the ensuing possession, and took over on their own 22. After another three and out, Josh Davis' punt was also blocked by Western's Boyd, his second of the day, and Derrius Brooks fell on this one in the end zone to give WKU a 13-7 lead. The extra point was blocked by Jamari Lattimore.

Middle Tennessee then picked up their first 1st down of the game on a run by Phillip Tanner, to the Western 48, but Middle Tennessee could not move the ball and Davis punted to the WKU 18. With Rainey and Antonio Andrews carrying the ball, the Hilltoppers drove 60 yards in 14 plays, culminated by Tinius' 38 yard field goal to give Western a 16-7 lead at the 14:02 mark of the second quarter.

Dasher passes to Andrews and Sancho McDonald picked up first downs to the WK 44. A Dasher keeper and two penalties against WKU put the ball on the six with a first down. Three plays netted nothing, and Gendreau kicked a 23 yard FG. The Blue Raider drive was 63 yards in 13 plays to make the score 16-10.

After an exchange of punts, Western took over on their own 40, could not move the ball and punted it dead on the MTSU 10 yard line. Two completed passes lost three yards, and MT punted to WKU on the Blue Raider 44 with 2:43 left in the half.

A Hilltopper pass gave them a 1st down on the 29, then Rainey picked up another 1st down on the 14. After holding and false start penalties put the ball back on the 29, Kawaun Jakes hit Rainey with a 19 yard pass to the Blue Raider five with 12 seconds left in the half. After two incomplete passes into the end zone, Tinius kicked a 22 yard FG on the last play of the half to increase Western's lead to 19-10.

To open the second half, Western took the ball 53 yards into MTSU territory, but missed on a 46-yard field goal attempt. Once again the Blue Raiders went three-and-out, and punted to Western. On the first play, Rainey broke thru the Blue Raider line and zipped 39 yards to the MT 37. Three plays later, WKU went for it on 4th and 1, and Rainey got it by inches. After another Rainey burst of 18 yards gave WKU a first down on the three yard line, he scored two plays later. Tinius kick extended Western's lead to 26-10 with 5:04 left in the third quarter. Russell again had a fine kickoff return to the 44, and at that point Tanner and D. D. Kyles led a ground attack that netted two first downs, but two incomplete passes forced a 40 yard field goal by Gendreau that was good. That made the score 26-13 with three minutes left in the third.

After a WKU punt was downed on the MTSU two yard line, the Raiders picked up one first down, but can't move any farther, and Davis' punt went out of bounds on the WKU 38. On the first play, Rainey burst up the middle for 16 yards to the MT47. A pass interference penalty gave the Toppers another first down and Rainey ripped off 16 yards to the Middle Tennessee six. But on 4th and goal on the one, Rod Issac grabbed the ball away from Jakes and raced 99 yards for a Blue Raider touchdown. Gendreau's extra point kick was good, and the Blue Raiders had new life with 10:27 left in the game, trailing only 26-20.

Jamari Lattimore's sack on the next series forced a Hilltopper punt, and MT took over on their own 23 yard line. On third down Dasher's pass to Shane Blissard for 24 yards gave MT another first down. Cunningham and Tanner picked up another first down. On 4th and l on the 17, Beyah carried to the six on a flanker reverse.

Cunningham scored on the next play from six yards out to cap a ten-play, 77 yard drive, and Gendreau's extra point kick game the Blue Raiders a 27-26 lead with 4:38 to go in the game.

Western returned the KO to the 22, but on the first play, Rainey ripped off 45 yards up the middle to the MTSU 33. Rainey carried three more times to the 17, from where Tinius' fourth down field goal was blocked. The Blue Raiders took over on their own 20, but two losses pushed the ball back to the 14. On third down (and 16), Dasher was dropped for no gain, and Davis punted to the WKU 47.

With no timeouts left, the Hilltoppers had to pass, and Jakes first attempt was incomplete. A seven yard pass, and another incompletion brought up 4th and three. Jakes threw across the middle, but the pass was incomplete, and the Blue Raiders ran out the clock to gain a thrilling 27-26 victory.

The win gives Middle Tennessee a 4-6 record and evens their Sun Belt slate at 3-3. They will host FAU next Saturday at 2:30 pm.

GAME NOTES

RUSSELL TO THE HOUSE: Junior Eric Russell recorded his first career touchdown when he brought back a kickoff return in the first quarter against WKU to tie the score. Russell's return covered 97 yards to tie the third longest in school history with Reuben Justice who had a 97 yarder in 1969 against Morehead State. Russell's return was the first by the Blue Raiders since Phillip Tanner had a 92-yard return against North Texas in 2008 and is the longest in the FBS era surpassing Damon Nickson's 94 yarder in 2006 (FAU).

LATTIMORE, CRITTENTON GET BLOCKS: Senior Jamari Lattimore blocked his second kick of the season when he rejected a WKU PAT attempt in the first quarter and Jarrett Crittenton blocked a potential game-winning field goal for his first career block. Lattimore also blocked a field goal earlier this year against Troy. It marked the fourth and fifth blocked kicks of the season for the Blue Raiders and the 18th and 19th under Rick Stockstill.

CHASING GARTH: PK Alan Gendreau connected on two field goals against WKU to give him 37 for his career. That total leaves him just one back of Garth Petrilli (1991-94) on the all-time list for third place. Gendreau is also in reach of second place Brian Kelly (2000-03) who owns 40 career three-pointers.

ISSAC GOES 99: Senior Rod Issac came up with perhaps the biggest play of his career when he returned a fumble 99 yards for a touchdown in the fourth quarter. The return matched the longest in school history with Ray Neal's 1964 99-yard fumble return against Muskingum in the Grantland Rice Bowl. The touchdown was the third of Issac's career and the second this season. He also had a 70-yard interception return for a score against ULM.

LATTIMORE GETS CLOSER: Jamari Lattimore, who leads the SBC in sacks, was credited with one against WKU to give him 10.5 for the season. Lattimore is now just one sack shy of sharing the single-season Middle Tennessee record with Erik Walden. Lattimore now has 19.5 for his career and is 4.5 shy of tying Walden's all-time Sun Belt Conference mark of 24.0.

QUICK HITTERS: MT is now 4-0 under Rick Stockstill in one-point games ... Senior Jarrett Crittenton recorded his first career sack when he dropped WKU's QB early in the third quarter to force a 46-yard FG attempt that was missed ... DT Dwight Smith wore jersey number 40 in the second half because his normal 47 was torn in the first half ... MT lost the coin toss for the 10th straight time today ... S Jeremy Kellem played in his team-high 47h career game today ... Benny Cunningham's fourth quarter TD was the third of the season ... MT's 208 yards of total offense was the second lowest output of the season ... Jeremy Kellem was credited with 11 tackles to give him five straight games with double digit stops.

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