Dasher leads Blue Raiders to key win over FIU on the road

Blue Raiders to find out bowl destination at 5:30 PM Sunday

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MIAMI, Fla. – Back-to-Back.

Middle Tennessee is going to back-to-back bowl games for the first time in its FBS history following a gutsy, 28-27, win over Sun Belt champion FIU Saturday night at FIU Stadium. A crowd of 16,628 was left stunned after a late review was upheld in favor of the visitors.

FIU was putting together an apparent game-winning drive before linebacker Corey Carmichael forced a fumble on a pass play and recovered his own force. The play went under a lengthy review but it was upheld and the Blue Raiders took over at the 27-yard line.

Middle Tennessee (6-6; 5-3) only had to run out the clock but that would not be easy. Two running plays netted just 3 yards and the Blue Raiders were faced with 3rd-and-7 from its 30-yard line. MT took a timeout with 1:35 to play and then Dwight Dasher sealed the victory with a clutch 47-yard run to send the Blue Raiders to the postseason.

Dasher led the Blue Raider offense by completing 14 of 23 passes for a season-high 244 yards and a touchdown to go with 57 rushing yards. Phillip Tanner scored two touchdowns and led the Raiders with 62 yards on 14 carries.

Tavarres Jefferson and Sancho McDonald each had three receptions to pace the receiving corps.

Defensively, the Blue Raiders came up with 11 tackles for loss, 3.0 sacks, and forced three fumbles. DE Jamari Lattimore had seven tackles, a sack, a TFL, and a forced fumble to lead the charge, while Jarrett Crittenton continued his strong play with five tackles and 2.5 TFLs.

FIU (6-6; 6-2) struck first after the opening kickoff was returned to the Blue Raiders' 33-yard line. FIU quickly went 33 yards in just four plays to take a 7-0 lead just two minutes into the game. It marked the third straight game an MT opponent has scored a touchdown on its opening drive and the seventh time this season.

The Blue Raiders went three-and-out on its first offensive possession and punted it to the Golden Panthers at its 9-yard line. FIU calmly went 91 yards in 11 plays with 74 yards coming on the ground to take a 14-0 lead with just over five minutes left in the first quarter.

After the offense stalled again, it was the Blue Raiders' defense that came up with a big play. Jamari Lattimore sacked FIU's Wesley Carroll on third down to set up a punt by the Golden Panthers that was shanked and went out of bounds at the FIU 45-yard line. Lattimore's sack tied him with Erik Walden for the MT single-season record with 11.5.

Dwight Dasher then went to work by throwing a 32-yard completion to Tavarres Jefferson to the 13-yard line before Benjamin Cunningham scored four plays later from two yards out. The Blue Raiders made the score 14-7 as time ran out in the first quarter.

The Blue Raiders had another strong defensive series early in the second quarter and got the ball back for the offense at its own 44-yard line.

Dasher took the visitors 56 yards in eight plays and was capped by a 6-yard run by Phillip Tanner to knot the score at 14-14 with 8:00 minutes left in the first half. On the drive, Dasher completed all three of his attempts for 41 yards, including a 3rd-and-8 and a 3rd-and-13.

FIU grabbed the momentum back from the Blue Raiders at the end of the first half on an unprobable field goal. After a couple of nice defensive plays by MT it appeared the Panthers would be out of field goal range but a key third down pass took FIU to the Blue Raider 33-yard line with :03 second remaining. Place-kicker James Griffin nailed a 50-yard field goal as time expired to give FIU a 17-14 advantage after 30 minutes. Griffin's career long kick was the second longest in FIU history.

Momentum did not last long.

The Blue Raiders stormed out of the locker room and put together a 69-yard scoring drive to take their first lead of the game just 2:19 into the second half. Dasher went 3-for-3 for 53 yards passing on the drive and capped it off with a 14-yard strike to Tavarres Jefferson.

The defenses then took over with each getting two stops before FIU got a 23-yard field goal at the 2:01 mark of the third quarter to make the score 21-20 in favor of the Blue Raiders.

Lattimore forced a fumble that was recovered by Norman Washington at the FIU 49 and Dasher hit Malcolm Beyah on a 41-yard pass where he was tackled at the 8-yard line. Beyah could have scored but looked back for the defender which slowed his momentum. Two plays later, Dasher was picked

off in the endzone.

FIU took advantage of the turnover and drove 79 yards in seven plays to take a 27-21 lead on Darriet Perry's six-yard run.

Dasher and the Blue Raiders answered back with an impressive drive of their own. After a 2-yard pass to Tyler Mason, Dasher hit Jefferson on a 48-yard pass down the visitors sideline to put the Blue Raiders in scoring territory. FIU's defense held MT to a 4 th-and-5 but the Blue Raiders went for it and Dasher hit Jared Bamber on a 17-yard gain to set up a 3-yard touchdown run by Phillip Tanner. Bamber's catch was just the second of his career and the Blue Raiders regained the lead at 28-27.

Middle Tennessee will find out its bowl destination at 1 PM on Sunday. The Blue Raiders will either be going to the New Orleans Bowl, the GoDaddy.com Bowl or the Little Caesars Pizza Bowl.

GAME NOTES

LATTIMORE TIES RECORD: Senior Jamari Lattimore recorded a sack in the first quarter to give him 11.5 on the season. That matches the school record set by Erik Walden in 2006. Lattimore now has 20.5 for his career to rank second all-time at MT.

MR. TD: Running back Phillip Tanner recorded his 32nd and 33rd career touchdowns with a score in the second and fourth quarters. That ranks him 5th on the Blue Raiders'all-time list. Tanner now has 31 rushing touchdowns, a receiving score and a kickoff return for a TD.

No. 40: Dwight Dasher's 14-yard touchdown pass was just his sixth of the season but went down as the 40th of his career. The 40 touchdown strikes ranks third all-time and is just one shy of second place Teddy Morris.

QUICK HITTERS: Middle Tennessee is going to a bowl game for the third time in five years … After losing the opening coin toss the first 10 games of the season, MT won the toss for the second straight game against FIU … Tyler Mason had his first career punt return early in the second quarter … Benjamin Cunningham scored his fourth touchdown of the season on a 2-yard run in the first quarter and the 7th of his career … Safety Jeremy Kellem played in his 49th career game today against FIU, while making his 42nd start … Middle Tennessee scored a touchdown on its opening drive of the second half for just the second time this season (North Texas) … Tavarres Jefferson's third quarter TD reception was the second of the season and the third of his career … Dwight Dasher is now 18-8 as a starter and the 18 wins ties Bob Hallum for 7th place on the all-time quarterback wins list ... Rick Stockstill is now a perfect 5-0 all-time in games decided by one point.