

Blue Raider football season ends in bowl loss

MT plays in second-straight bowl game

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MOBILE, Ala. - Turnovers and missed opportunities cost Middle Tennessee a chance at its second-straight bowl win as it fell 35-21 to Miami (Ohio) in the 2011 GoDaddy.com Bowl in front of 38,168 live nationally on ESPN Thursday night at Ladd-Peebles Stadium in Mobile, Ala.

Senior Phillip Tanner closed his Blue Raider career with 121 all-purpose yards, including 87 on the ground and 34 receiving, and a pair of rushing scores. He was eclipsed by just three yards by quarterback Dwight Dasher on the ground and the signal-caller completed 18-of-29 for 162 yards but was hampered by four interceptions in his final collegiate contest.



Kevin Brown paced the defensive side the ball with 10 tackles, while Dwight Smith and Darin Davis each had eight stops. The Blue Raiders finished with 11 stops behind the line of scrimmage but managed just one sack.

Thomas Merriweather finished with an even 100 yards on 27 carries and a pair of touchdowns. Nick Harwell finished with seven receptions on 86 yards to lead eight different pass catchers.

Austin Boucher connected on 22-of-35 attempts for 289 yards and two scores, along with two interceptions.

Jerrell Wedge topped the Miami defense with 13 tackles, while Evan Harris had nine stops, although eight were assisted. C.J. Mark had two of the team's eight tackles for loss.

Neither team was able to advance the ball during their respective opening drives but it was Middle Tennessee that struck first on an 18-yard carry by Tanner at 4:37 of the first quarter for a 7-0 lead.

The Blue Raiders began their second drive backed up at their own 11 but quickly moved down the field in just eight plays. Dasher completed all three of his pass attempts for 50 yards, the last a 27-yard strike across the middle to Sancho McDonald to the Miami 18 and setting up Tanner's scoring dash.

The RedHawks answered right back on their next possession, marching down the field in short order, by covering 82 yards during just four plays. Boucher connected with Armand Robinson for 70 yards down the MT sideline, putting Miami inside the Blue Raider five-yard line. Merriweather then knotted the scoring at 7-7 with a three-yard sprint up the middle at 2:29 of the opening 15 minutes. Robinson appeared as though he was going to score on the long rush, but Rod Issac caught him from behind.

Dasher put Middle Tennessee (6-7) back on top, 14-7, with a 49-yard keeper up the middle untouched. After the 2009 New Orleans Bowl MVP completed three passes previously, including a pair to Richard Drake, before breaking free on the sixth play and the Blue Raiders held the one-score edge after the period.

The second quarter began with the RedHawks again answering the bell and forcing the game's second tie just 37 seconds in at 14:23. Boucher, the signal-caller for Miami (10-4), located an open Harwell, who hauled in the toss just over the outstretched hands of a MT defensive back. Merriweather punched the ball across the plane on the next play from three yards away and evening the score at 14-14.

The rest of the second frame remained a stalemate with neither team advancing more than 21 yards until Miami's final possession before the half. The RedHawks threatened to tack on more points before the intermission but an apparent scoring strike was called back due to a penalty. Miami again looked towards the end zone for a score; however, T.L. Edwards stepped in front of Boucher's pass and grabbed his first career interception to end the threat. Middle Tennessee ran out the remaining time on the clock and the teams went into the break tied at 14 apiece.

The Blue Raiders had the ball to start the second half but the brief drive was stopped when Dasher threw an interception to Dayonne Nunley grabbed an errant pass and raced down his own sideline. He broke numerous tackles along the way, before stretching across the goal line for a 52-yard scoring return at 13:22 to put the RedHawks on top, 21-14.

Middle Tennessee would not be denied and it countered immediately on its next possession. On the drive's second play, Tanner escaped a would-be tackler near the line of scrimmage and then sprinted untouched the remainder of the way for a 54-yard touchdown at 12:32. His second score evened the scoreboard once again at 21-21.

Boucher began the next Miami drive by having his first pass picked off by Brown on a Jared Crittenton deflection. The Blue Raiders returned it back to the RedHawks after Malcolm Beyah coughed up a Dasher pass and Nunley pounced on the loose ball. Fortunately for MT, the defense held firm and forced a Miami punt.

The first play after the kick, D.D. Kyles ripped off a 25-yard carry. After the Blue Raiders crossed midfield, a fourth-and-one try by Tanner was stopped and the ball returned to the RedHawks on downs. Miami also could not capitalize on the opportunity and Zach Murphy's punt went only one yard, sailing out-of-bounds and hitting the ESPN cameraman behind the MU bench.

A short series by Middle Tennessee resulted in another Josh Davis punt. DeMarco Paine grabbed the kick, stepped through a couple tacklers and broke open for a 45-yard return to set up Miami with a short field. The RedHawks took advantage as the quarter neared the end when Boucher hit Chris Givens from 17 yards out to the near left pylon just inside the stripe to give Miami a 28-21 edge with 54 seconds left.

The momentum remained with the RedHawks when Dasher was unable to find one of his own receivers but instead had his pass gathered by Harris, who returned it down to the MT 17. After Miami was stopped on three plays, Crittenton leapt in front of a Trevor Cook field goal attempt from 32 yards away. Darin Davis scooped up the loose ball and returned it 13 yards, giving the Blue Raiders the ball on their own 43. Middle Tennessee only went the opposite direction with its chance before returning the ball back to the RedHawks.

A scoreless fourth quarter was finally broken at 5:25 when Miami went up by two scores, 35-21, following a Boucher to Harwell connection from five-yards out to cap the longest scoring drive of the game, covering 6:47 off the clock. Boucher was 4-of-4 for 38 yards, including a pair of passes to Harwell with the other duo to Givens, on the possession. Merriweather also helped eat up time with six rushes for 39 yards.

Dasher attempted to bring the Blue Raiders back with two straight completions for 23 yards but his third pass was grabbed by the RedHawks' D.J. Brown, who raced 36 yards on his return. Miami was stopped on a fourth-and-short, giving the ball back to MT.

Middle Tennessee reached RedHawk territory after Dasher broke a couple tackles in the backfield before breaking free for a 19-yard gain. However, no more yards were gained when Dasher tossed his fourth interception of the game to Pat Hinkel in the endzone for a touchback. Miami then ran out the clock to seal the win.

Middle Tennessee Postgame Notes

TANNER TOPS 3,000: With 121 all-purpose yards tonight, senior Phillip Tanner topped the 3,000-yard mark for his career to become just the 12th player in school history to accomplish that feat. Tanner now has 3,088 career all-purpose yards.

GROUND SCORES: With three rushing touchdowns tonight, Middle Tennessee now has 32 rushing scores for the season. The 32 rushing scores matches the most in the FBS era for the Blue Raiders with the 2001 team.

DASHER REACHES TOP 10: QB Dwight Dasher moved into the top 10 at Middle Tennessee in career rushing touchdowns when he raced 49 yards for a score in the first quarter. Dasher now has 23 career touchdowns to tie Mike Moore (1974-77) for 10th. Dasher is the all-time leader in rushing touchdowns by a quarterback.

BOWL RUSHER: Dwight Dasher, who rushed for 201 yards in last year's New Orleans Bowl, added 90 yards on the ground tonight against Miami. The senior is now the Blue Raiders' all-time leading rusher in bowl games.

EDWARDS GETS PICK: Junior T.L. Edwards, who receives spot duty in the secondary, came away

with his first career interception as a Blue Raider late in the first half to give Miami signal-caller Austin Boucher just his second interception of the season. Edwards' pick came at the Blue Raiders' 2-yard line to stop a Miami scoring drive with 18 seconds left in the first half.

TANNER TOPS 2,000: With 87 rushing yards against Miami, Phillip Tanner went over the 2,000-yard mark for his career to become the 12th player in school history to accomplish that feat. Tanner ended his career with 2,224 rushing yards to enter the top 10 at 10th among all-time Blue Raiders.

TURNOVERS ONCE AGAIN HURT RAIDERS: After committing only two turnovers in its previous three games combined, Middle Tennessee gave the ball away five times against Miami. The Blue Raiders ended the year with 38 turnovers to finish last in the FBS.

UPSHAW GETS BLOCK: Freshman Derek Upshaw blocked a critical field goal attempt by the RedHawks early in the fourth quarter. It marked his second career blocked kick. As a team, it was the Blue Raiders' sixth blocked kick of the season and the fourth field goal. Under Rick Stockstill, the Blue Raiders have now blocked 20 kicks in 63 games with 11 being field goals.

QUICK HITTERS: January 6 is the latest date the Blue Raiders have ever played a football game and marks just the second January game in school history ... Safety Jeremy Kellem played in his 50th career game tonight which equals the Blue Raiders' FBS record shared by Center Mark Thompson (2006-09) ... Tonight's game was the fourth nationally-televised game for the Blue Raiders this season which is a new school record ... After losing the coin toss in the first 10 games of the season, the Blue Raiders won it for the third straight time tonight in the GoDaddy.com Bowl ... Phillip Tanner's 54-yard TD run went down as the longest TD run in MT's bowl history ... MT had the lead after the first quarter for the first time since the ULM game on Oct. 23 ... Dearco Nolan recorded his first career sack late in the second quarter and later added another tackle for loss ... Phillip Tanner's first quarter touchdown was the 34th of his career and his 12th of the season ... Tanner also hauled in a career-high five receptions for 34 yards, besting his previous best of two catches which had happened twice ... Safety Kevin Brown came up with his first interception of the season in the third quarter and the seventh of his career ... Dwight Dasher threw four interceptions against Miami to give him 18 for the season and that ties for the second most in a single season. Dasher also now has 38 for his career which is also the second most in school history.

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