

Comeback falls short as Middle Tennessee falls to McNeese State

Blue Raiders outscore Cowboys 15-3 in fourth quarter

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - A furious fourth quarter comeback by Middle Tennessee fell short as the McNeese State Cowboys escaped Floyd Stadium with a 27-21 victory Thursday evening.

The Blue Raiders (0-1) outscored the Cowboys (1-0) 15-to-3 in the final quarter. In the fourth quarter, Middle Tennessee completed a 97-yard drive to make it a 24-14 contest. With less than five minutes remaining, MT used an 85-yard kick return by Reggie Whatley to put the Blue Raider offense in prime



scoring position. Just one play later, Logan Kilgore connected to Kyle Griswold for 15 yards to put the Raiders within six.

On the next offensive possession, McNeese State used the clock to its advantage before punting back to MT. An attempted lateral play did not work for the Blue Raiders, as Middle Tennessee fell short in the season opener.

Middle Tennessee jumped out to a six-point lead early in the second quarter. However, McNeese State answered with 24 consecutive points. The Pokes used a strong offensive performance, totaling 450 yards. McNeese State used seven tailbacks to combine for 298 rushing yards. Marcus Wiltz led the rushing attack with 20 carries and 105 yards. Cody Stroud completed 10 passes for 139 yards and a touchdown.

Kilgore completed 27 passes for 240 yards and two touchdowns. The redshirt junior finished just a completion short of his career-best 28 set last season against Florida Atlantic and Troy. Anthony Amos grabbed eight passes for a team-best 70 yards and a touchdown. Griswold added five catches for 63 yards and a touchdown grab in the loss. The MT offense completed the game with 383 offensive yards.

Defensively, three Blue Raiders reached double-digit tackles. Jajuan Harley, Christian Henry and Kevin Byard all totaled 11 tackles. Harley added a team-best five solo tackles. Right end Omar McLendon picked up two tackles-for-loss totaling eight yards. Shubert Bastien managed a sack and a TFL with a total of four tackles.

McNeese State controlled the time of possession, totaling 36:05 minutes compared to just 23:55 for the Raiders. Middle Tennessee set a school record in total kick return yards during a game. Thursday's total of 241 yards broke a previous best of 220 set against Louisville on Oct. 6, 2006.

The Blue Raiders look to regroup when they open Sun Belt Conference play against Florida Atlantic at Floyd Stadium next Saturday, Sept. 8. Kickoff is set for 6:00 p.m.

1ST QUARTER

Middle Tennessee compiled 118 yards and took a 3-0 lead into second quarter. Logan Kilgore, a redshirt junior, completed seven-of-eight passes for 71 yards. Tailback Benny Cunningham amassed 34 yards on nine carries for 3.8 yards per run. On the opening kick, Kenneth Gilstrap returned the kick for a career-long 57 yards. MT used six plays and 34 yards to set up a Carlos Lopez 20-yard field goal. The made field goal was Lopez's first in a MT uniform after transferring from Carson Newman. McNeese State answered with a drive into Blue Raider territory, but fell short after Josh Lewis missed a 34-yard field goal attempt. Later in the quarter, Shubert Bastien earned his first sack quarterback to put McNeese State in a third-and-long situation.

2ND QUARTER

McNeese State used two five minute drives to take a 14-6 lead at the break. To open the second quarter, MT closed out an 11 play drive with a 28-yard field goal from Lopez for a six point lead. The Cowboys took their first lead after driving 70 yards and taking 5:33 off the clock. Backup signal caller Tyler Bolfig connected with tight end Josh Jordan for the first touchdown in the contest. Josh Lewis nailed the PAT to put the Cowboys up 7-6 with 9:19 left in the opening half. In the final stages of the half, the Cowboys drove down another 87-yards to take a 14-6 lead in the half. Quarterback Cody Stroud threw an eight-yard pass to Champlain Babin to put the Pokes up by eight. At the break, the Cowboys amassed 244 offensive yards, holding the Blue Raiders to 146. Stroud was 6-of-9 for 96 yards and a touchdown. Logan Kilgore finished the first half with 10-of-13 completions and 77 yards. Cunningham led MT with 34 of the 69 rushing yards in the first half.

3RD QUARTER

The Cowboys padded their led with a touchdown and field goal in the third frame. McNeese's Josh Lewis bounced back from a previous miss to connect on a 46-yard field goal, putting the Cowboys up 17-6. Linebacker Bo Brown recovered a punt return for the Cowboys that bounced off a MT player. The Cowboys proceeded with a 30-yard pass from Stroud to Ernest Celestie to advance to the red zone. Three plays later, Stroud rushed up the trenches to give McNeese State the 24-6 advantage.

4TH QUARTER

Middle Tennessee answered with its' first touchdown in the game, driving 17 plays and 97 yards. The scoring drive culminated with a Logan Kilgore six-yard toss to Anthony Amos. The Blue Raiders successfully completed the two-point conversion after Jordan Parker grabbed a deflected pass to make the game a 24-14 contest.

The onside kick attempt failed for MT. Josh Lewis tacked on his second field goal, extending McNeese State's lead to 27-14 with 5:21 remaining. Reggie Whatley broke through for an 85-yard kickoff return to put the Blue Raiders in prime field position. On the first play, Kilgore connected to Kyle Griswold for a 15-yard pass to put the Blue Raiders within six, 27-21, with 5:01 left in the game. Whatley's return helped set a new school record as MT amassed 241 return yards, surpassing the previous school-best 220 set against Louisville on Oct. 6, 2006. McNeese State used effective time management to dwindle down the final minutes of the game. Middle Tennessee's attempts at a lateral were unsuccessful as the Cowboys picked up the win.

GAME NOTES

CAPTAINS: Tonight's game captains were RB Benny Cunningham, WR Kyle Griswold, and DE Omar McLendon.

RAIDERS SET SCHOOL RECORD: Middle Tennessee set a new single-game school record in kickoff return yards with 241 against McNeese on six returns. That broke the previous mark of 220 yards set against Louisville in 2006.

FIRST STARTS: Middle Tennessee had six players make their first starts as a Blue Raider on Thursday night against McNeese State. Offensively, LT Darius Johnson, WR Christian Collis, and TE Jacob Corbaley all made their first starts. On defense, the first timers were SS JaJuan Harley, FS Kevin Byard, and RC Khari Burke.

FIRST ACTION: A total of 18 players competed in their first Blue Raider game tonight. Following is a list: Alexandro Antoine, T.T. Barber, Jeremiah Bryson, Kevin Byard, Christian Collis, Jacob Corbaley, Jajuan Harley, Marcus Henry, Darius Johnson, J.D. Jones, Carlos Lopez, Roberto Loya, Jordan Parker, James Roberson, Jonah Sells, Blaine Sidders, Jared Singletary, and Ykeem Wells.

BYARD STRONG DEBUT: Redshirt freshman Kevin Byard registered 11 tackles in his first collegiate game against McNeese. Byard's double digit stops led the Blue Raiders and were a game-high.

AMOS CAREER-HIGH: Senior Anthony Amos turned in a career performance in the 2012 season opener. Amos led the Blue Raiders with a career-high eight receptions and a touchdown. Amos' previous high was seven against WKU in 2011.

OVER 90: Middle Tennessee's 97-yard scoring drive in the fourth quarter went down as the third longest under Rick Stockstill. Overall, the Blue Raiders own 12 scoring drives of 90 or more yards in the Stockstill era. The Blue Raiders had four in 2011.

QUICK HITTERS: Middle Tennessee's successful two-point conversion in the fourth quarter was its first since 2008 against FIU ... QB Logan Kilgore recorded the eighth 200-yard passing game of his career ... DE Omar McLendon played in his team-leading 37th game tonight ... DE Shubert Bastien recorded his first career sack late in the first quarter ... Kenneth Gilstrap had a 57-yard kickoff return to open the game and that went down as his career long ... Christian Collis, Drayton Calhoun, and Marcus Henry made their first collegiate receptions tonight ... MT lost the coin toss tonight and has only won it 10 times in the last 26 games ... Reggie Whatley's 85-yard kickoff return was the longest of his career.

QUOTES

MT Head Coach Rick Stockstill

*On tonight's game...*It was disappointing tonight. We tackled very well, and they also out-leveraged us. There were two critical plays in the first quarter when we drove all the way down and had to settle for field goals. Then we drove down in the second quarter and threw the interception. Then we forced them to punt in the third quarter and the punt hits our guy, and they get it on the plus side of the field.

*On the defensive play...*Our corners didn't do a very good job in the run game when they got outside of us. But we didn't tackle very well at all and it's disappointing we didn't do a better job with that.

*On the running backs...*Jordan (Parker) did a nice job running the ball. Benny (Cunningham) went out and then Drayton (Calhoun) went out with injuries, but Jordan did a nice job and he'll be a heck of a player for us.

On the kicking game...

I thought we did a nice job in the kicking game. Our field goals were pretty much extra points. We had some great punt returns and that one big kick off return. The only disappointing thing was the punt that hit our guy and they recovered it.

*On moving forward...*I told the guys that I believe we have some great character on this team. They didn't give up or quit. Our big picture is to win the conference and that starts next week. But they didn't quit and that's encouraging.

DE Omar McLendon

*On tonight's game...*We have to stop the run to be able to compete in the game. Once you stop the run the other team is going to pass and we feel like that's our strength. But we have to do a better job with that. But everything we did tonight can be fixed and will get fixed.

QB Logan Kilgore

*On tonight's game...*Any time you're playing a quality opponent, you can't settle for field goals in the red zone and expect to win the game. We have to do a better job of converting when we have the chance and we will get better with that.

*On the offensive line...*Although we do have new people up front, they did a good job. Once they get into the flow a little more things will get better in the running game. They did a great job in the passing game though. I had all day to throw and we just need to do a better job of repaying our offensive line when they do as well as they did tonight.

*On the offenses play...*I felt like our offense was working well all game long. We just had some mistakes. One drive was killed by a personal foul penalty, then we had a turnover, and it's tough to get things going when you have those types of mistakes.

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