Blue Raiders rush past Owls in Sun Belt opener

MT rushes for 302 yards in 31-17 rout

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee compiled 480 yards en route to a 31-17 victory over Florida Atlantic University in the Blue Raiders' Sun Belt conference opener Saturday evening.

MT (1-1, 1-0 Sun Belt) used an extensive rushing attack to amass 302 yards. The rushing yards were the most by the Raiders since totaling 353 against Austin Peay in 2010.

The tandem of Jordan Parker and Drayton Calhoun combined for 221 yards, becoming the first MT duo to reach 100 yards each in a game since Nov. 7, 2009 against FIU. Parker, a freshman from Lawrenceville, Ga., carried the pigskin 17 times for 117 yards, while Calhoun picked up 104 yards on 14 carries with a touchdown.

A stout Blue Raider defense held Florida Atlantic (1-1, 0-1 Sun Belt) without a touchdown for three quarters. In total, the Owls were outgained 480-to-356 yards by Middle Tennessee. The Blue Raiders held FAU to just 96 yards rushing, while forcing two fumbles.

Defensively, Roderic Blunt led the team with 12 tackles as the Blue Raider bruisers forced six tackles-for-loss and three sacks in the game.

Quarterback Logan Kilgore completed 10-of-14 passes for 178 yards and two touchdowns. Anthony Amos had two touchdown grabs for a career high102 yards in the victory.

Both teams remained sluggish in the opening quarter. Middle Tennessee had two opportunities in FAU territory, but both tries resulted in lost fumbles. The Blue Raiders overcame the early turnovers to strike first when Kilgore connected with Amos on a 38-yard pass to give Middle Tennessee the 7-0 edge at 14:44 in the second quarter.

The Blue Raiders opened the offensive attack in the second half, scoring 17 points in the third quarter. Middle Tennessee extended its lead to 14 when redshirt junior Kyle Griswould capped a 66-yard drive with a three-yard touchdown.

FAU placekicker Vinny Zaccario broke up the goose egg for the Owls, striking a 39-yard field goal at 6:02 to cut MT's lead to 14-3. Lopez added a field goal to extend the Blue Raiders advantage back to 14.

Chris Sharpe recovered a Florida Atlantic fumble on the Owls' side of the field giving Middle Tennessee great field position. Kilgore zipped a 26-yard pass to Amos in the end zone as MT took a 24-3 lead into the fourth quarter.

Florida Atlantic's touchdown from Cameron Wilbert to Damien Fortner was short lived. On the next possession, MT answered as Drayton Calhoun rushed 29 yards to extend the Blue Raiders' lead to 31-10. FAU added a second touchdown as Wilbert threw to Byron Hankerson for eight yards. Wilbert finished with 25 completions for a career-best 260 yards.

In the first half, the Blue Raiders held FAU to 130 yards, just 48 rushing. Middle Tennessee totaled 209 in the opening half, including 122 on the ground. The victory marked Middle Tennessee's first SBC opening win since knocking off Louisiana, 34-14, on Sept. 25, 2010.

Next Saturday, Middle Tennessee visits rival Memphis for the Blue Raiders first road game of the year. The Tigers and Raiders square off in a 6pm contest at the Liberty Bowl.

1ST QUARTER

Both teams started slowly as the game remained scoreless in the opening quarter. The Blue Raiders outgained the Owls, 126 yards to 23, but had two fumbles in the red zone. Quarterback Logan Kilgore connected on three completions for 39 yards. Smyrna's Jeremiah Bryson led Middle Tennessee with 36 rushing yards on seven attempts, while Anthony Amos had two grabs for 38 yards.

2ND QUARTER

The Blue Raiders struck first as they started the second quarter in FAU territory. Kilgore completed a pass to Vincent Van Horne to give the Blue Raiders a fresh first down. On the next play, Kilgore connected to Amos for a 38-yard touchdown to put the Blue Raiders up, 7-0. Blue Raider linebacker Ykeem Wells forced a Florida Atlantic fumble as Omar McLendon made his second career recovery. Later in the quarter, punter Josh Davis helped avoid a snafu as he grabbed the overthrown snap to launch a punt into FAU's side of the field. As the half closed, the Blue Raiders accumulated 209 yards in the first half. Logan Kilgore completed five-of-six for 87 yards and a touchdown. Jeremiah Bryson led the Blue Raider rushing attack with 10 carries for 56 yards. Graham Wilbert led FAU with 11 completions for 82 yards, as Damian Fortner ran 11 times for 37 yards.

3RD QUARTER

The opening possession for MT started off on the right foot. Middle Tennessee's offense put together a 10-play, 66-yard drive to take the 14 point lead. Kyle Griswould notched his second touchdown of the season after a three-yard scamper in the end zone. On the next possession, Florida Atlantic used a 10-play drive that resulted in a 39-yard field goal by Vinny Zaccario to make it a 14-3 contest with 6:02 left in the third. Carlos Lopez helped Middle Tennessee extend its advantage to 17-3 when he knocked in a season-long 39-yard field goal at the 3:08 mark. Chris Sharpe, a native of Stone

Mountain, Ga., recovered his first career fumble at the FAU 45 to give Middle Tennessee's offense excellent field position. The Blue Raiders added another touchdown in just one play. Kilgore again found Amos as his target in a 26-yard connection to give the Blue Raiders a 24-3 lead. The reception catapulted Amos to a career-high 102 yards, besting his total of 100 set against WKU last year.

4TH QUARTER

Florida Atlantic managed its first touchdown with a nine-play, 79-yard drive to cut the Blue Raiders lead to 24-10. Graham Wilbert threw a four-yard pass to Damien Fortner to give the Owls life. Once again, the Blue Raiders answered with another scoring position. Drayton Calhoun trotted in for a 29-yard touchdown to extend the Blue Raiders lead to 31-10. Wilbert added his second touchdown pass when he connected with Byron Hankerson for eight yards. The Blue Raiders broke the 300-yard rushing mark in the game to compile 302 yards - the most for a MT team since 2010.

NOTES

CAPTAINS: Tonight's game captains were OL Micah James, DB Kenneth Gilstrap, and DT Jimmy Staten.

BRYSON SHINES: Seeing his most extensive time at running back, redshirt freshman Jeremiah Bryson filled in admirably for the injured Benny Cunningham. Bryson had 10 attempts for 56 yards, and both were personal bests.

GASGUE GETS FIRST: Linebacker Leighton Gasque, who led all freshman nationally last year with 7.0 sacks, recorded his first of the season early in the third quarter against FAU. Gasque now has eight sacks and needs just two more to break into the top ten all-time.

CALHOUN LIKES FIRST START: Transfer running back Drayton Calhoun earned his first start tonight and responded with 104 yards rushing on 14 attempts. Both statistics were career highs for the former LSU Tiger and it was the 19th 100-yard rushing game under Rick Stockstill. Calhoun also added a 24-yard reception for his career long.

AMOS HAS CAREER NIGHT: Senior wide receiver Anthony Amos recorded the second 100-yard receiving game of his career in the win over FAU. Amos finished with four receptions for a career-best 102 yards. It marked the 14th 100-yard receiving game under Rick Stockstill.

RUSHING RAIDERS: Middle Tennessee used a balanced attack in the win over FAU but its ground attack was one of the best in recent memory. The Blue Raiders rushed 55 times for 302 yards. It was the most attempts since having 55 against FAU in 2010 and the most yards since they gained 206 against WKU at home last season.

PARKER TOPS 100: True freshman Jordan Parker registered his first collegiate 100-yard rushing game by racking up 117 yards on 17 attempts in the win over FAU. Parker and Drayton Calhoun became the first Raiders since Nov. 7, 2009 to both top the century mark in the same game (D.D. Kyles and Dwight Dasher vs FIU).

QUICK HITTERS: QB Logan Kilgore started his 15th career game tonight which ranks second on the team behind Tavarres Jefferson's 16 ... DB Chris Sharpe, TE Kevin Pope, and RB Drayton Calhoun both made their first collegiate starts tonight ... Walk-on William Wilson saw his first collegiate action at TE during MT's short yardage situation ... DT Kendall Dangerfield's second

quarter sack was just the second of his career ... RB Drayton Calhoun's 24-yard reception in the third quarter was the longest of his career ... Kyle Griswould's TD in the third quarter was the Blue Raiders' first rushing score of the season ... The 31 points scored tonight was the most by the Blue Raiders since scoring 38 in a win over FAU last season.

QUOTES

Middle Tennessee Head Coach Rick Stockstill

On tonight's game...

I'm really proud of our players and team. It was a good conference win, and anytime you can get one of those, it's special. This was a physical week in practice. We really got after them, but they came out and responded. It was a disappointing first half. We fumbled on a fourth down, and then Kyle it put on the ground inside the five. I got after them at halftime, too, and I think they responded.

On the defensive play...

Our defense played well tonight. We didn't defend the option very well, so we'll have to get that fixed this week, but we played pretty consistently on defense. I was proud that we had the ball at the end of the game. We had a pretty physical camp in August. We lost our leverage last week, but we did a better job this week. We set the edge better, and when you do that, it allows the other players to get into the play. We had a lot more hats to the ball and some pretty violent hits, so they played a lot better.

On the team's play tonight...

The fumbles were a disappointing. We had a chance to put the game away early and couldn't do it. We had some penalties and we'll have to fix that. I want to play the perfect game, but we played a lot better tonight and I'm proud of our team.

On Jordan Parker...

He was better this week. He was a lot better in the passing game. Drayton played well, too. I'm very proud of all our running backs. They played really well except for those two turnovers. They're getting better, and that's good to see.

LB Rod Blunt

On tonight's game...

At first we just had to gather ourselves to figure out what we needed to do to execute, and then we just started making plays. Last week was a big disappointment on the defensive side and we had to change the perception of our defense. We also wanted to make sure our offense knew we had their back. And we were able to do that tonight.

WR Anthony Amos

On tonight's game...

They gave us man coverage, and Logan gave me a great pass and we were able to execute on the first one. The second one actually got caught in the lights, but when it came out, I was able to snag it. We just wanted to come out tonight and execute. We didn't do that very well last week and were able to fix that issue this week.

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