Raiders, Mean Green in thick of SBC race

Saturday is the annual Blackout Game

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MURFREESBORO - Middle Tennessee Head Football Coach Rick Stockstill knows how big Saturday's conference showdown is with five Sun Belt teams having one or fewer losses. All of them are still very much in the hunt for the SBC championship, as well as for a potential bowl bid.

His Blue Raiders and North Texas, both with 2-l league records, are part of the mix, and the two teams will meet Saturday afternoon at 2:30 PM on MT's Horace Jones Field in a battle that Stockstill calls, "critical" for both teams.

The game will be televised live on ESPN3, with the Middle Tennessee announcing tandem of veteran Chip Walters handling play by play, and former Blue Raider and NFL quarterback Kelly Holcomb providing color analysis. They will also be simulcasting on radio over the Blue Raider Network. BRN's Nashville flagship station is WNSR 560-AM, and will be joined by Murfreesboro flagship station WGNS AM1450 (with FM affiliates 100.5 and 101.9).

> Blue Raider fans are encouraged to wear black on Saturday for the annual Blackout game. The team will be in their black uniforms.

Twitter updates are available on @mtathletics. Both live stats and web audio will be available on GoBlueRaiders.com.

While both teams enter the game with 2-1 league marks, trailing only ULM at 3-0, the visiting Mean Green posted a last-second win over ULL on Tuesday of last week, and comes into the game not only rested, but with a lot of momentum. On the other hand, Middle Tennessee will be trying to overcome a disappointing second half at 12th ranked and unbeaten Mississippi State that resulted in a 45-3 Bulldog win.

"North Texas runs the ball extremely well, and I think they are under-rated in the passing game. They throw it 26-27 times a game, and have thrown for at least 200 yards in each of the last five games. When they had Lance Dunbar the last couple of years, he got most of the reps, but now they are much more evenly balanced," said Stockstill. "They have two really good backs that won't run

the ball as much as Dunbar did, but they will be much more involved in the passing game than Dunbar."

Junior Derek Thompson pulls the trigger on the Mean Green's passing attack, with his signature game coming against undefeated Kansas State when he connected on 25 of 28 throws in a 35-21 loss.

Middle Tennessee has also had a lot of success throwing the ball this season with junior Logan Kilgore calling plays in Buster Faulkner's wide-open offense. Kilgore has thrown for 1,581 yards and nine touchdowns, completing 67 percent of his passes. His favorite target has been senior Anthony Amos, who has caught five of Kilgore's scoring strikes, including a one-handed acrobatic catch in the back of the end zone in MT's 49-28 win at Georgia Tech.

It is the rushing attack that may be the determining factor in the outcome of the game. And the two teams are very similar in their approach, one that could best be described as "by committee"
With the loss of record setting Lance Dunbar to graduation last year, North Texas has gone to a trio of backs to carry the load on the ground. Brandin Byrd, Antoinne Jimmerson and Jeremy Brown have combined to almost double the yards rushing that Dunbar had through the first seven games of last season.

With the loss of Benny Cunningham to a season-ending injury in the FIU game, the Blue Raiders have gone to the same system, rotating true freshman Jordan Parker, LSU transfer Drayton Calhoun and red-shirt freshman Jeremiah Bryson. When Cunningham also missed the FAU game, Parker and Calhoun both rushed for over 100 yards, and Bryson added 56 more on ten carries.

Sophomore Reggie Whatley has had some key runs as well, including a late touchdown to seal a 34-30 win at FIU when Cunningham went out late in the game.

Defensively, both teams are young, and on an upward learning curve. End Omar McLendon and tackle Kendall Dangerfield are the only two seniors on the Middle Tennessee defense, while the Mean Green also has only two. The teams are among the youngest in the nation with a total of only 11 seniors each on the entire team.

This will be the 12th game between the two Sun Belt rivals in a series that has produced some classic battles. UNT leads the series 7-4, and won last year in Denton, 59-7, to close out the most disappointing season in Stockstill's career. It did, however, result in a soul-searching and renewed commitment for the 2012 season that has brought a new work ethic, and a much closer team than last year. It has paid off in twice as many wins this far, with five games left to play.

This will be the last game between the two teams, at least as Sun Belt Conference foes. The Mean Green will join Conference USA next year. Stockstill-coached teams have a 4-2 edge against UNT, winning the first four games, but dropping the last two.

Middle Tennessee's most memorable win over North Texas was three years ago when Dallas native Phillip Tanner scored six touchdowns, including a long kickoff return, as the Blue Raiders won 52-13. It is, however, the only time the Blue Raiders have gotten the best of UNT in Murfreesboro.

Saturday's game will be highlighted by the annual Salute to Armed Services/Veterans Day. The halftime show of will feature current and veteran military personnel marching onto Jones Field in

groups of each branch of the service while the 350+-member Band of Blue plays the anthem of each branch.

After Saturday's game, Middle Tennessee will have a short week to prepare for their next game, against rival Western Kentucky in Bowling Green on Thursday night, Nov. 1st. That game will be an 8:15 PM start, and will be televised on ESPNU.

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