MT, WKU meet for 63rd time

ESPNU to broadcast game nationally

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MURFREESBORO - In a rivalry that has spanned 98 years, 62 games and two conferences, Middle Tennessee and Western Kentucky will go at it again on Thursday night in Bowling Green, and this time there could be more on the line than ever before.

MT and WKU are in a three-way tie with Arkansas State for second place in the Sun Belt Conference, all with 3-1 league records. The Blue Raiders are one win away from the six required victories to be eligible for a bowl game, while the Hilltoppers already have six overall wins.

The game will be played at 8:15 PM CDT, and will be televised live on ESPNU. Adam Amin will do the play-by-play, with Tom Luginbill providing color commentary. For Middle Tennessee, veteran broadcaster Chip Walters and former Blue Raider and NFL quarterback Kelly Holcomb will handle PXP and color commentary, respectively, on the Blue Raider Network. BRN's Nashville flagship station is WNSR 560AM, while Murfreesboro's flagship stations are WGNS AM1450, and their affiliates, FM100.5 and 101.9. Blue Raider fans may also follow the game on GoBlueRaiders.com for live stats and game audio, as well as on twitter (@mtathletics).

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Middle Tennessee, picked in the pre-season to finish in the bottom of the league standings, is now a bona-fide challenger for the Sun Belt title. With four league games left to play, the Blue Raiders need some help but still have a shot. Their one loss in Sun Belt play was to UL-Monroe, who sits atop the standings with a 4-0 mark.

"The Sun Belt is a very competitive conference this year, which results in very competitive game, more this year than ever before. I think this is the best this conference has ever been, with some really good teams," pointed out Blue Raider Head Coach Rick Stockstill.

WKU opened the season with a tremendous month of September, winning four of five games, and the only loss coming to No. l ranked Alabama in Tuscaloosa. Among the wins was a first-ever triumph over Kentucky and a blowout win over Southern Mississippi. They closed the month with a road win at Arkansas State, the Red Wolves only conference loss thus far.

Middle Tennessee, with a majority of freshmen, sophomores and transfers, was not as quick out of the gate, losing the season opener at home to McNeese State, 27-21. But they have made steady improvement since. The highlight of the season was a huge 49-28 win over Georgia Tech, and last Saturday, the Blue Raiders downed North Texas 38-21 to avenge a one-sided loss to the Mean Green that ended the 2011 season.

Junior QB Logan Kilgore, who was named the Sun Belt Conference Offensive Player of the Week for his performance against the Mean Green, is the guy who pulls the trigger in the Blue Raider offense. Kilgore threw for 349 yards and three scores, and ran a career-long 45 yards for a fourth touchdown. The maturation of Kilgore in his second season as a starter is one reason the Blue Raider offense has been more potent.

One other very positive influence has come from Offensive Coordinator Buster Faulkner, who is in charge of the offense after being quarterbacks coach last year. The duo has developed a same-wave-length relationship this fall, and Kilgore has been given more freedom to control the offense, including checking off into a different play at the line of scrimmage.

"Logan has performed very well," noted Stockstill. "At times last year, he played very well, and at other times he didn't play quite as well. I think that was part of being a first-year starter. He has worked hard from January, thru spring drills, thru the summer, thru fall camp, to get better every day. I believe every player can get better every day, not just in the spring, or June and July, and Logan has done that.

"I have extreme confidence in Logan, no matter what the situation is."

While this will be Kilgore's first start in Bowling Green, Coach Faulkner has been there before. As Quarterbacks Coach for Central Arkansas in 2009, Faulkner's offense put up four touchdowns on the Hilltoppers and stunned them, 28-7.

Down thru the years, many of the Middle Tennessee-Western Kentucky football games have been classics, going all the way back beyond the playing days of former Head Football Coach and Athletic Director "Bubber" Murphy. But perhaps none have had the back-to-back drama of the last two.

Two years ago, in Coach Willie Taggart's initial season on The Hill, Western blocked MT's first two punts and jumped out to a 13-0 lead. Jamari Lattimore's block of the extra point after the second score would prove pivotal. Also, the fact that MT's T.L. Edwards ran the kickoff back for a score was huge.

A 99-yard fumble return for a touchdown in the 4th quarter by Rod Issac turned the game in favor of the Blue Raiders, but WKU fought back and MT had to block a field goal attempt on the game's final play to prevail, 27-26.

In Murfreesboro last year, the kicking game was again a huge factor. Alan Gendreau connected on

two field goals for the Blue Raiders, but had one blocked. Western missed five FG attempts, but returned a kickoff 90 yards for a score in the 4th quarter. After Gendreau put the Blue Raiders ahead with a FG in the 2nd overtime, Bobby Rainey scored on a seven-yard pass from Kawaun Jakes to give WKU a hard-fought 36-33 win in double overtime.

Stockstill feels like the kicking game could be a critical factor again Thursday night.

"Close games result when you have two evenly matched teams, and I feel like the kicking game will play a huge factor in the game, just like it has the past two years."

Despite Western's impressive start, which includes several quality wins, Stockstill likes his team's chances.

"We have a confident football team. We have some swagger, or juice, or whatever you want to call it. I like this football team. I like our focus, our mental toughness right now, and our intensity. I like our state of mind. We'll go up there with every bit of confidence, every bit of juice and swagger and jazz, and everything we need to go up there and play well."

Following the battle at Bowling Green, the Blue Raiders will have the following week off, then return to action on November 17th when they play at the newest Sun Belt member South Alabama in a 2:30 pm game. The next outing, on November 24, will be the final home game of the 2012 season as MT will host Troy in an ESPN3 game that will start at 2:30 pm.

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