Blue Raiders score early and often in win over Belmont

Blue Raiders record 15 hits

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. Middle Tennessee scored
early and often in a 12-9 win
over Belmont on Tuesday
night at Reese Smith Jr. Field.

Third baseman Hank LaRue led the charge with a 3-for-5, three-RBI performance as the Blue Raiders mustered 15 hits in the contest. First baseman Trent Miller and centerfielder Ryan Stephens also recorded three hits apiece, while catcher Michael Adkins drove in a pair of runs.

Jordan Cooper (3-2) helped stabilize MT (21-18) from the mound to pick up the win.



Cooper came out of the pen and delivered two innings of hitless ball, fanning four in the relief effort. Kooper Kessler and Aaron Hyder combined for 2.2 scoreless innings in the middle of the contest, with Kessler striking out three. Daniel Palo picked up his sixth save of the season, fanning three Bruins in the final inning to preserve the win.

The Blue Raiders pushed two runs across in the first, capitalizing on an error to take the early lead. Shortstop Ryan Ford led off the frame with a walk, the first of three in the game, and second baseman Johnny Thomas laced a single to the gap in left-center. Belmont centerfielder Drew Ferguson overran the ball, allowing Ford to score and Thomas to move up to second. Thomas later scored on a passed ball for the 2-0 lead.

The Bruins (26-9) responded in the top of the second with three runs to take the one-run lead. Three hit batsmen and three hits in the inning put Belmont on top, 3-2. The Bruins threatened to do more damage, but Cooper entered the contest with the bases loaded and picked up the final two outs to keep it a one-run game.

MT seesawed back into the lead with two runs in the third, then broke the game open with a four-run fourth. Adkins drove in the tying run and Stephens crossed on an error for the go-ahead run in the

third. After a single for leftfielder Robert Lawrence and another walk for Ford in the fourth, LaRue nailed a two-out triple to the rightfielder corner to give MT a three-run cushion. Miller and Adkins followed with RBI singles to make it an 8-3 contest.

The Blue Raiders continued to pour it on in the fifth, with Ford scoring on another error and LaRue driving in his third run on a sac fly for the 10-3 advantage.

Belmont wouldn't go quietly though, putting up a five-spot in the seventh. A leadoff single for first baseman Judah Akers opened the floodgates, with catcher Jamie Ritchie's two-run home run capping off the onslaught to cut the deficit to two at 10-8.

Paul Mittura was roughed up for all five runs in the frame, but just two of them earned, in two-thirds of an inning.

Stephens pushed the lead back to three for the Blue Raiders with an RBI-single, and the two teams would trade runs in the eighth before Palo came in and shut down the Bruins in the ninth.

Belmont's Zach Hodgkiss (0-1) took the loss. He went 1.2 innings and allowed two runs, one earned, on two hits.

MT resumes Sun Belt action this weekend when FIU visits Reese Smith Jr. Field. First pitch is slated for 6 p.m. on Friday.

HEAD COACH JIM MCGUIRE

His thoughts on the game...

"It's hard to describe this game. It was a night game that we have all seen before at different times of the year. The starting pitchers didn't go very long and that set the tone that we would both use a lot of pitchers. We found a way to get through it, and that was the biggest thing. We righted the ship and (Daniel) Palo came in late in the game and closed the door."

On the good pitching from the bullpen...

"I thought they all did a very good job through the middle. We don't want to use those guys too much, but we wanted to get Jordan Cooper in first. I thought (Kooper) Kessler was very good for coming in after he hadn't pitched in a week. (Aaron) Hyder came in and went about business as usual. Paul (Mittura) pitched in both games on Sunday, but we wanted to get him back out there, and he had some bad luck. We want to get him back going because we will need him this weekend."

On Palo's consistent pitching lately...

"He's been very good. He's back to the old Daniel Palo that we all knew coming out of high school. He went through some ups and downs his sophomore year, and we are very proud of Daniel with how far he has come. I've gone back and forth on whether or not to start him, but it is sure nice having him at the back end throwing that kind of velocity and sitting down batters like he's been doing. But this is another great outing for him."

SENIOR LHP JORDAN COOPER

On stabilizing the game tonight...

"I knew I had to come in and throw strikes. I got down early, but I bore down and made some big pitches when I had to. My change-up and curve ball were there tonight, and in previous outings, it hasn't been. I got ahead with the off-speed pitches, which allowed me to spot my fastball late to get

them off-balance."

On tonight's offense...

"We came in before the game and (Ryan) Ford let everyone know he was going to step up and hoped that everyone would follow behind him. That really got our guys going and they were able to step up tonight."

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