

Vols Fall to No. 19 Mississippi State

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For the first 30 minutes in Davis Wade Stadium, No. 19 Mississippi State was in control. For most of the second half, Tennessee moved into the driver's seat. But the Vols were on the wrong end of a big turnover -- and an even

bigger fourth-quarter drive -- in a 41-31 loss to Mississippi State on Saturday night in Starkville. The Bulldogs led by 13 points at halftime after out gaining the Vols by a nearly 3-to-1 margin in the first half.

After the break, though, Tennessee's defense plugged some holes and its offense scored 10 quick points to pull within three points at 27-24 midway through the third quarter. But starting with a huge play by star cornerback Johnthan Banks, the fourth quarter belonged to Mississippi State (6-0, 3-0 SEC). Tailback Devrin Young, seeing lots of action in the second half after starter Rajion Neal left the game with an injury, broke free for a 10-yard run to the UT 30. But at the end of the play, Banks pried the ball loose and fell on it, just barely remaining in bounds in front of Tennessee's bench. Three plays later LaDarius Perkins scored from a yard out to give Mississippi State a 10-point lead with 7:58 remaining.

The Vols (3-3, 0-3 SEC) countered immediately, needing just 2 minutes, 36 seconds to move the ball 65 yards for a touchdown. Ben Bartholomew grabbed a 10-yard pass from Tyler Bray for his first career touchdown, which closed the gap to the three points once more at 34-31 with a little more than 5 1/2 minutes to go. But that's when Mississippi State dug in its heels and held on to the ball. The Bulldogs converted twice on third down and kept moving the chains, running out the final 5:22 and eventually scoring a 9-yard touchdown on an incredible catch by Malcolm Johnson on fourth-and-goal with 9 seconds left.

After that fourth-quarter fumble, the Vols never had another chance to tie or take the lead. The loss leaves the Vols winless in conference heading into its biggest test of the season next week in Neyland Stadium against No. 1 Alabama, which defeated Missouri on Saturday. A kickoff time will be announced Monday. The Vols' loss also overshadowed a stellar night from junior receiver Cordarrelle Patterson, who became the first Tennessee player to score a touchdown on a kick return and a reception since Carl Pickens. And Patterson's 98-yard kickoff return was one of very few highlights in a first half that saw Mississippi State out-gain the Vols 297-93. What's more, the Bulldogs did a fine job of turning those yards into points.

Mississippi State scored on its first six possessions of the game, and three of those drives went for more than 65 yards. After the Bulldogs kicked a field goal on the game's opening drive, the Vols took the lead with a 75-yard, 10-play drive that ended with a 6-yard touchdown run by Neal. MSU scored touchdowns on back-to-back drives to take a 17-7 lead, but Patterson brought the Vols within three points when he returned a kickoff 98 yards for a touchdown with 14:02 left in the second quarter. After another Mississippi State field goal made the score 20-14, the Bulldogs opted for a short kickoff to keep the ball out of Patterson's hands.

The kick, though, went untouched and the Bulldogs recovered at the UT 33. Four plays later, the Bulldogs took a 27-14 lead on a 7-yard touchdown pass from Tyler Russell to Marcus Green. Mississippi State had a chance to pad its lead before the half, but Devon Bell missed a 38-yard field goal with a little more than 2 minutes to go before halftime.