

Round Two: MT-Vandy Preview

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The Blue Raiders are far removed from their upset victory over Vanderbilt in the season opener last year that sparked Middle Tennessee to a 5-0 beginning. Thirteen months later and a 0-5 record, head coach Andy McCollum isn't looking to last year for motivation, but is focusing more on how to make his team better. "They're two totally different teams from last year," McCollum said. "We're a team right now that is struggling and trying to learn how to win...Vanderbilt is playing with a whole different attitude and scheme of things on both sides of the ball. Last year's game has nothing to do with this year's game except maybe the revenge factor for Vanderbilt." Not only are both teams different from last year, but both teams are quite different from the season opener. Middle Tennessee



hasn't played with their Heisman Trophy Candidate Dwone Hicks since the third quarter of the Kentucky game, and Vanderbilt will be without their starting quarterback and tailback. Benji Walker will replace Jay Cutler at quarterback due to Cutler being suspended for violating team rules. Cutler had started every game this season for Vanderbilt, but head coach Bobby Johnson told the Tennessean that Walker at quarterback does not affect the way Vanderbilt runs their offense. "We're not changing anything in what we do offensively," Johnson said. "Benji is certainly talented enough to run the option." Cutler was averaging 185 yards per game - 41 of that on the ground. But offensive guard Jim May agreed with Johnson in the Tennessean that it really doesn't matter which one is at quarterback, but added that Walker may be better suited for the type of offense they are running now. "It's not going to be a big deal," May said. "Both quarterbacks are aptly suited for this offense, and Benji (Walker) runs the ball better than Jay (Cutler), plus, we've been running a lot more option than we really thought we would." McCollum also feels that the difference between the first and second string quarterbacks isn't all that much. "The two (Cutler and Walker) went neck-and-neck all

the way to the first game," McCollum said, "thus there is probably not too much difference in them. Their offense is probably not going to change too much with Benji (Walker at quarterback)." Cutler, however, isn't the only starter for Vandy that will miss Saturday's game. Starting tailback Norval McKenzie will miss the rest of the season after suffering a broken leg Tuesday in practice. Based on the numbers, however, there will not be much of a drop off at that position either. McKenzie's replacement, freshman Kwane Doster, has carried the ball 49 times for 278 yards and a touchdown, while McKenzie has 42 carries for 326 yards and a score. Despite the offensive numbers for Doster, Johnson is still concerned about the number of players he has at the tailback position. "Kwane obviously has the talent to get the job done," Johnson said, "but we're looking at a depth problem now." Depth at running back is something McCollum hasn't had to worry about the last couple of seasons. But it's obvious the Blue Raider offense misses their Heisman Trophy Candidate, not just for his numbers, but simply his presence on the field as well. "We miss his leadership and the physical element he brings," McCollum said. "We also miss how the other kids react around Dwone." Hicks is still listed as "day-to-day". But McCollum says he is doing better. "He (Hicks) wants to play," McCollum said, "but I also don't want an 80-percent guy out there. We won't play him unless he is at full speed." McCollum, however, will be quick to kill the notion that Hicks' absence is the reason for Middle's slow start. Instead, turnovers have really hampered the Blue Raiders' ability in achieving victory. "It's tough to win when you turn the ball over two times in the red zone, and miss two field goals in the red zone as well," McCollum said. "We have got to learn how to win. We're a struggling team that is not playing with a lot of confidence." Perhaps the defense could find some confidence from a performance last week against Arkansas State that McCollum termed, "encouraging". But the fourth year head coach still acknowledges the tough task that Vandy's offense presents. "We're going against an offense this week that runs the ball very well," McCollum said, "and we've got to do a great job of stopping the run as well as be ready for the play action pass that feeds off the run." And it's that diverseness in the offense that Vanderbilt receiver M. J. Garrett told the Tennessean is the reason they should have the advantage Saturday. "It's so diverse and I really think that'll help us against MTSU," Garrett said, "because obviously we're going to try to slam it down their throat, but then again we can take it deep on them and throw the ball around the field as well." The Blue Raiders, however, are staying true to their philosophy that it's not what the other team does, it's what we can do to get better ourselves. "It's all about Middle Tennessee," defensive back Tony Sutton said. "Whatever we do, so long as we correct our mistakes, we can win a ballgame." "We need to step up and make plays and better decisions as a team," linebacker Randy Arnold said. "We have to step up and make plays and believe we're going to win." "It's just a matter of making plays when we have the opportunity," wide receiver David Youell said. "It's time for us to get our first win. We can't look at the big picture anymore of trying to win the Sun Belt. We have to take it one game at a time." Despite the disappointing 0-5 start and the frustration that comes with that, McCollum is teaching his players that "adversity makes you grow stronger," and incorporating the lessons learned in football to reality lessons in life. "How easy it is one day and how tough it is the next, that's just part of the profession," McCollum said. "But it's also a growing part of it. It's something that I want my kids to learn and understand because that's not just in football, that's in life. Everything we do, we want to better our kids, not just for now, but for later on - that's just part of life. There are lots of worse things going on in our country and in the world than what's happening right here. But with that said, it's not OK to lose here and nobody is proud of that. Our kids are giving great effort and our kids are playing hard. We've just got to have some kids step up and make plays and fight through this thing." Kickoff is set for 6 p.m. at Vanderbilt Stadium and plenty of tickets are still available.

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