Football Camp Notebook for Sunday

Blue Raiders watch film and go through walk-thru

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DAILY STOCK REPORT:
Today's activities: "Today, we had a team church service with former players Chris Johnson and Dwone Hicks in the gameday room. Both guys did a great job and I appreciate them staying involved with the program and I always want them to know they are welcome back and are always appreciated. After the service, we got together to watch the scrimmage from yesterday before having a special teams walk-thru in the afternoon."

Looking toward the week ahead: "We will find out what kind of team we have this week because it will be a tough, hard-nosed, physical week of football. We will have two-a-days every other day with a scrimmage on Wednesday morning before concluding two-a-days on Friday. We will try to correct all our mistakes, get our assignments down, learn how to finish, and learn how to go full-speed every play in preparation for that Wednesday scrimmage."

Comments on Saturday evening's scrimmage: "We emphasized the run a little more during that scrimmage, but we did make some throws and catches. We did have a couple of drops but it was an improvement. For the most part, Jay Robinson has had two or three good practices in a row. He has shown toughness and has fought through some nagging injuries which I have been really pleased with. The disappointing part of the scrimmage was getting down inside the redzone and not finishing."

A PLAYERS VIEW FROM TODAY'S CHURCH SERVICE: The Blue Raiders held a church service today on campus led by Pastor Chris Johnson of the Mt. Zion Rucker Missionary Baptist Church and Assistant Pastor Dwone Hicks. Both Johnson and Hicks are former Blue Raider players who

continue to stay involved with the program.

"It was a great church service this morning with their message coming from the Book of Mark about the woman with the twelve-year issue of blood," said sophomore Trevor Jenkins. "He related with her seeing life, then speaking life, then seizing life and made a correlation to football. See the Blue Raiders winning the Sun Belt Conference, and then speaking it because whatever you speak will come into existence, and when you get the opportunity seize it. When you have a chance to make that fourth-down play or a critical catch or run then take it because you don't know when that opportunity will come again. It was a great message today and it hit home with everybody in that room.

"It went beyond football. It was all class. Dwone Hicks told us how he thought of nothing but football and going to the NFL. Now he has to go back to class and it all comes out of his pocket because he did not take advantage or seize the moment when Middle Tennessee was paying for it. He stressed to us to please go to class and seize the day. He regrets now that he did not seize it and now it is coming out of his pocket."

WALDEN MAKES STRIDES: Junior defense end Erik Walden has rapidly progressed throughout his Middle Tennessee career; however, his development isn't limited to the gridiron.

Walden, who hails from Dublin, Ga., had to sit out the 2003 season due to NCAA academic guidelines but the driven young man demonstrated his work ethic, not only on the field, but also the classroom by earning the Dr. James E. Walker Junior Academic Award last spring.

He's also turning heads on the gridiron. Walden is coming off his best season as a Blue Raider with a career-high 33 tackles to go with three sacks and 8.5 tackles for loss.

Walden did all of that while demonstrating his versatility by playing end and finishing the season with three straight starts at a linebacker position due to injury. Now he finds himself in more of a leadership role for the 2006 season.

"I have a different role and I have to show my leadership by making plays because I am not a vocal guy," Walden said. "I try to make plays and hopefully the rest of the defensive line will follow."

Although the defensive line was one of the biggest questions marks entering fall camp, following the loss of starters Jeff Littlejohn (the 2005 SBC Defensive Player of the Year), Quinton Staton and Devarick Scandrett, Walden believes those concerns are being answered.

"We have a different scheme and with our defensive line now you don't have to be big, but you have to have really good quickness and get off the ball, make plays," Walden said. "I see us progressing and getting better each day."

Communication and picking up the new defensive scheme are keys to the progression of a line that believes it can be better than prognosticators believe.

"There are a lot of things we have to work on as a defensive line to get better but we are coming together as a unit," Walden said. "When everybody knows where the other is going and we are communicating that makes us a better defensive line."

GETTING DEFENSIVE: Middle Tennessee enjoyed its best season in the I-A era from a defensive standpoint in 2005 when it was ranked 28th nationally in total defense and 17th in scoring defense.

Senior linebacker J.K. Sabb was a major part of the defensive improvement and he expects this year's unit to be even stingier.

"Defense is all about pride," Sabb said. "You don't want anyone to score on you, pass on your or run on you. We are attacking more and I think this defense should be even better than last year."

The Blue Raider defense, under the direction of coordinator Manny Diaz, has produced consistent practices, for the most part, throughout the first week of fall camp. Sabb says the effort and productivity will be even better when everyone becomes more comfortable with the new scheme.

"Everybody knows what they are doing but we have to get where we can do it full speed all the time," Sabb said. "The enthusiasm is good and everybody is working toward getting ready for the season."

EAGER TO LEARN: The majority of Middle Tennessee's football players recently completed the summer session and final exams; yet, senior running back Eugene Gross already is talking about hitting the books - the playbook, that is.

Gross believes some of the sluggishness exhibited by the offense at various times during the first week of training camp is the result of players needing to spend more time educating themselves.

"The mental part of all of this is getting into your playbook," Gross said. "There have been times when the offense couldn't pick up the intensity level because someone didn't know what they were doing. As we get in our playbooks and understand our assignments more it is going to give us an opportunity to go out and go full speed because you know what you are doing."

Players are continuously improving and Gross said everyone is eager to learn and that's the positive with less than three weeks remaining before the season opener, Aug. 31, against Florida International.

"The thing I'm pleased with is that everyone is eager to learn," Gross said. "It's kind of hard trying to come back out from the summer because you are going to have some rust but everyone is trying to work through it. I haven't heard guys complaining out here, and I have heard of a lot of encouraging statements."

COACH BRENT BROCK ON THE TIGHT ENDS: "There is no question it is a good collective group and that we have some talent at the position. Right now the bang up bug has hit us with (Clinton) Corder and (Stephen) Chicola but we are starting to get them back slowly. On a positive note, the injuries have given guys like Alvin (Ingle), (Derek) Shropshire, and John Marc (Stephens) some added reps which should make us even better. I wish we had them all at full speed right now but eventually they will be ready to go."

Brock On Freshman Alvin Ingle: "He is a very talented young man and has the ability to get deep in the passing game, but he is a rookie and is having a tougher time with the run game. He will be a good football player for us down the road. He has received added reps because of some injuries and it has matured him a little faster than expected."

Brock On Stephen Chicola: "We had our growing pains with Stephen in the spring, but the encouraging thing was his attitude during the summer. Coach (Russell) Patterson said he upped the ante during the off-season conditioning period, so I think he totally understands how things need to be done. Unfortunately, he turned his ankle and can not show us everything he can do right now. He has grown up and knows what it takes to be a champion so I don't think you will see him with any more sub-par practices like he had in the spring."

NEXT PRACTICE: The Blue Raiders will hold their 12th and 13th practices of fall camp on Monday from 8:45 AM to 10:55 AM and 4:35 PM to 6:30 PM.

BLUE RAIDER BLAST: The final "Blue Raider Blast" will be held in Downtown Murfreesboro on the square, Thursday, August 24, from 5:30-7:30 p.m. This event is geared toward Blue Raider fans, alumni, and supporters in Rutherford County and surrounding areas and all interested parties are encouraged to attend and meet Middle Tennessee players, coaches, athletic administrators and University administrators as the athletic department gears up for the start of the 2006-07 school year. Admission to the "Blue Raider Blast" is free; however, food provided by Whitt's Barbecue will be available for $5 per plate. The blast will include music, inflatables, face painting and a special guest appearance by Middle Tennessee mascot, "Lightning," to entertain the youngsters.

FAN/MEDIA DAY: Middle Tennessee's annual Fan/Media Day is scheduled for August 19 at Noon in Murphy Center. There will be free hot dogs and cokes given away while supplies last, games for the kids, and various drawings. Also, tickets will be on sale as well as this year's football media guide. As always, fans can get player autographs and photos so make plans now to check out this year's team as they prepare for the season-opener on Aug. 31.

FENTON PAYNE AND FRED 5K: On Saturday morning, Aug. 19, the third annual Fenton Payne and Fred 5K Run/Walk to take place on the campus of Middle Tennessee with Head Football Coach Rick Stockstill firing the starting gun. The event will get underway at 7:30 AM with registration at Peck Hall. The cost is $25 with cash prizes going to the winning male and female and the overall masters (40 years and over). There will also be awards to the top three finishers in all divisions, male and female, 9 and under, then 5 year age groups through 80 and over. For more information, contact Mark Hardison at 615-848-9063.

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