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Raiders Begin Fall Practice

Jo Jo Freeman

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee's baseball team began fall practice this week with 48 players in uniform under head coach Steve Peterson, who heads into his 20th season at the helm of the program.

The Blue Raiders posted a 32-23 record in 2006 and reached the championship game of the Sun Belt Tournament for the fourth straight time and the fifth in six years since joining the league. Middle Tennessee returns 25 letterwinners to the squad, including 12 pitchers from last season's club.

The squad boasts seven senior hurlers this year, including [Matt Scott](#), [Tyler Copeland](#), [Brett Reilley](#), [Langdon Stanley](#), [Josh Anderson](#), [Nick Marrs](#) and [Shay Horseman](#), with Scott, Copeland, Reilley and Marrs all working in the weekend rotation in 2006.

Peterson has several questions to answer during the four-week fall session, which concludes with the Blue-White World Series the first weekend of October.

The Blue Raiders must replace catcher [Michael McKenry](#), a two-year starter behind the plate who belted 26 home runs in 2005-06, as well as four-year starter [Jeff Beachum](#) at shortstop, the program's career hits leader. Also [Todd Martin](#), who played first base, centerfield and was the designated hitter last season, departed for the professional ranks.

"Number one we have to replace a First Team All-American catcher and that's hard to do, but also a four-year starter at shortstop and a great hitter and versatile player in Martin as well," Peterson said. "Plus a senior third baseman, [Josh Horn](#), who had a career year.

"The biggest concern is finding out defensively who can make the routine plays and then seeing offensively how they can contribute."

Eric McNamee filled the leadoff position for two years before Beachum batted leadoff all of last season. Peterson has a specific type player in mind for the leadoff role and will use the four-week evaluation period to scour the roster for potential candidates.

"We need a new leadoff hitter this season and I'd like to have someone who is a good base-stealing threat," Peterson said. "We don't want to just sacrifice runners over but use our team speed to take the extra base and then drive the runner in."

Returning players always set the tone during fall workouts, and this season is no different. The intensity level of the workouts and intrasquad scrimmages gives Peterson a guide for who is ready to sacrifice the time it takes to improve each and every day.

"The first thing I look for from the returning players is the tempo they set, how competitive they are, and they've done a good job of that so far heading into the fall practice period," he said. "I want to find out who is willing to work and who takes things for granted. The players who don't have the intensity or work ethic open the door for the younger players to take their spot."

Middle Tennessee's pitching depth is much greater than it has been in at least three seasons, which should be a positive for the squad after many of the younger hurlers gained valuable experience last season, including [Chad Edwards](#), [Brett Smalley](#) and [Peter Mantzanis](#).

"Our pitching should be better because each guy is a year older and that should help each one of them. The seven seniors on the staff should be a plus. They've been through the rigors of the schedule and the wars of the conference slate. They've heard the speeches and been to all of the stadiums in the Sun Belt."

Two newcomers who will be a big part of the evaluation process this fall are both utility players, transfers Matt Ray (Central Florida) and Zach Barrett (Olney Central Community College). Barrett will work at third base to start the fall but can also play shortstop and the outfield, while Ray is a middle infielder by trade but will likely spend some time in the outfield this fall as well.

The outfield is a crowded place for the Blue Raiders, with [Adam Warren](#) and [Nathan Hines](#) both returning but not at full strength to start the fall after injuries last season. [Doug Birkofer](#) and [Dillon Heath](#) are both returning letterwinners in the outfield along with redshirts from last season [Jubal Duncan](#) and [Justin Jones](#) as well as freshmen Zach Hudson and Blake McDade. Peterson used his old adage to describe who will see playing time.

"He who hits will play," he said.



Wayne Kendrick, shown here tagging out a Vanderbilt runner last season in Nashville, is one of 25 returning letterwinners for the Blue Raiders as they start fall practice this week. (Neil Brake)

Practices begin each day at approximately 2:45 p.m. and are open to the public at Reese Smith Field. The squad is scheduled to scrimmage on the following dates this week, with these subject to change because of weather:

Monday, September 11 4.5 innings 3:30 p.m.

Tuesday, September 12 5 innings 3:30 p.m.

Friday, September 15 8 innings 3 p.m.

Saturday, September 16 8 innings 1 p.m.

Sunday, September 17 6 innings 2 p.m.

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