The Heritage of Champions

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In this five-part series, the legacy of MT athletics will be revisited. The series serves to inform fans about MT's rich history, and it also serves as a prelude to the Emmett and Rose Kennon Sports Hall of Fame Building, which is slated to begin construction this summer.

The first part of the series briefly outlines the coming of various MT sports. There is so much history to be recounted that it would take volumes of books to illustrate all of it, as several alumni realized before writing their books on the subject.

In the second part, we will look in detail at MT's victories, including the top 10 moments in MT sports history, MT records, and some Olympians the school has produced. The third part, "What's In a Name?" will discuss the people for which MT's facilities are named. We will go on to look at some important championships in the fourth part, and finally, the fifth part will showcase the new MT-- from 2000 until the present.

Early Sports (1912-1939)

Coached by a student, Middle Tennessee State University, then Middle Tennessee State Normal School, played its first football game in 1912. Unfortunately, there are no surviving records of the earliest unofficial season. After hearing urges to start an official team, the MTN faculty appointed Alfred B. Miles to coach the "Pedagogues." Winning 47-0 in the first-ever game and proving itself to the local community, the Normal School would go on to post its first undefeated season the following year, 1914.

In 1917, Coach Miles, along with numerous other students and faculty, left to fight in WWI. That season, Johnny "Red" Floyd, a Vandy football player who would go on to become a Blue Raider legend, took over for Miles since there was no football at Vanderbilt that year. In 1918 the MT season was cancelled, but Miles would return in 1919, to lead the team to its second straight undefeated season and its third overall.

Baseball began in 1912 and was the first official sport of any kind at Middle Tennessee Normal. Max Souby, a history professor at MTN, coached the first Normal baseball team. Between 1912-40, both football and baseball was played in the field south of Jones Hall, often referred to as Normal Field, which was fully equipped with a chicken wire backstop and portable bleachers. After construction of the science building, the baseball and football teams moved northeast of Jones Hall. It was from here that Charles "Bubber" Murphy, Jay Bird Hamblen, and Cromer Smotherman went on to professional baseball.

Baseball, 1917.

MT track and field has been around since at least 1914, but it is not known whether the early teams participated in any intercollegiate meets until 1955, when track and field became an official sport.

Men's and women's basketball has been around since the school started, although many of those early incarnations were not officially recognized by the university. In 1924, Ms. Tommie Reynolds organized the first women's basketball team. The first official men's team started in 1913 and was coached by Alfred B. Miles.

Men's Basketball, 1923.

In 1939, the men's golf program started. Although it took seven years for MT to win a title in the OVC, men's golf at MT has since gone on to produce a long record of victories.

In 1925, the school was renamed Middle Tennessee State Teachers' College. In 1930, the name changed again to State Teachers' College, Murfreesboro. Four years later, the community decided that the school needed a new nickname, so Murfreesboro's Daily News Journal held a contest to name the team. Charles "Stumpy" Sarver, class of 1936, won the contest and the $5 prize for his entry of "Blue Raiders," which he borrowed from the Colgate Red Raiders. Sarver is acknowledged as the "Father of the Blue Raiders." In 1934, the first Blue Raiders played Tennessee Tech on Thanksgiving Day.

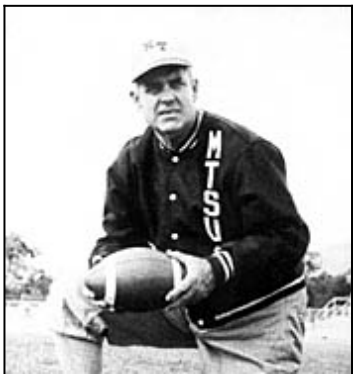
Football, 1938.

Raider Forties

As they did during the First World War, the Raiders' cancelled their 1943-45 football seasons. By 1944 the number of male students enrolled at MTS had dropped from 342 to only 20. To help recruit more enrollees, the school's curriculum was broadened and its name was changed again to Middle Tennessee State College. As many male students left to join the military or were drafted, women's sports dominated.

As WWII came to an end in 1945, veteran enrollees at MTS increased to 578. Since the GI Bill made it possible for many adults to go to college who could not have previously afforded it, there was age diversity never before experienced at MTS. As more males enrolled, MTS sports prospered and legends were made.

Charles "Bubber" Murphy, the winningest coach in MT history, started his 22-year career with the school in 1947 and led his first team to a 9-1 record. Against much criticism, Coach Murphy switched the offensive system to the wing-T the year after he began coaching. It fared badly that year, but in the next season, Murphy led the Blue Raiders to the first of his four undefeated seasons.



However, not all Middle Tennessee legends were permanently associated with athletic greatness. One ambitious MTS athlete, Joe B. Jackson, class of 1949, played football, basketball, and baseball. However, after serving two years in the Pacific with the Marine Corps, he went on to pursue a political career.

Jackson remembers that his friends talked him into running for city council in 1968. After winning, he moved up to vice mayor of Murfreesboro. Jackson then went on to be elected mayor of Murfreesboro in 1982 and served four terms. He continues to support the Blue Raiders and looks back fondly on his time with the school.

The Coming of Age (1950-1969)

Prior to the 1950s, the school's mascot was Nathan Bedford Forrest, a well-known confederate leader in the Civil War and founder of the Ku Klux Klan. At games, fans waved the confederate flag, and the fight song was "Dixie." Band director Joe Smith changed the song during the 1950s due to changing community sentiment toward civil rights issues.

Started by Coach Joe Black Hayes in 1955, men's track and field was the first MT sport to become integrated with Robert Mallard being the first African American athlete in 1965. Mallard, a Murfreesboro native, placed in the top five at the OVC meet that spring. In the coming years, a number of African-American student-athletes would become Blue Raider legends. In 1966, Art Polk and Willie Brown became the first black basketball players and Jerry Singleton joined the track and field squad. In 1968, Raymond Bonner became the first African-American to sign a football scholarship with Middle Tennessee.

In 1950, Max Arnold, Maxie Runion, and Charles Lyons became the first All-American selections in MT history, and in 1952, MT football joined the Ohio Valley Conference, winning their first conference title in 1956 with a 5-0 league record.

Boots Donnelly, under "Bubber" Murphy, played football as a defensive back from 1962-64. Donnelly went on to become one of the most recognized names in Middle Tennessee athletic history, as he served as head football coach from 1979-1998 before becoming athletic director in 2002.

Men's golf gained national recognition in the 1960s, as the Raiders won the NCAA National Championship in 1965 and boasted two NCAA All-Americans, including Larry Gilbert who went on to a career on the PGA and Senior PGA tours. MT has since produced seven OVC Golfers of the Year for nine separate years. Brett Alexander, one of the top golfers in MT history, won the title consecutively in 1999 and 2000.

An Era of Growth (1970-1999)

Since 1968, MT baseball has produced eight All-American players and 13 conference players and pitchers of the year. The Blue Raiders have also participated in 11 NCAA Tournaments.

In 1971, Lefty Solomon became the first full-time baseball coach at MT. Solomon inherited the field

in its current location, although its condition would soon change under former head coach and athletic director John Stanford.

Reese Smith, an alumnus whose two sons played at the school, made massive improvements to the stadium. By 1982, Reese Smith Field was fully lighted and landscaped. The renovation of Reese Smith Field is only representative of the tremendous rate at which MT has grown in the last 33 years.

In 1972, enrollment at MT surpassed 10,000. The Charles M. Murphy Athletic Center was completed in the fall of 1972 and currently seats 11,520 people for basketball games. The center also seats as many as 13,000 for concerts, which used to be held on a regular basis. The facility has hosted numerous events, including University convocations, commencements, the Tennessee Secondary Schools Athletic Association's Boys and Girls State Basketball Tournaments. The building has also been home to an NCAA Regional in 1979, an NIT in 1988, and several Ohio Valley Conference basketball tournaments. Two nationally-ranked teams, North Carolina in 1998 and Kansas in 1999, took on the Blue Raiders inside the "Glass House."

During the 70s, women's sports took off. The first official women's basketball team was started in 1975, women's volleyball began in 1977, and women's tennis began in 1978.

Women's Basketball, 1920.

The Lady Raiders have faired well in their history, flaunting a 517-292 overall record over 28 seasons of play. The Lady Raiders have 11 OVC Championships under their belt, winning seven consecutive titles between 1982-89 under coach Larry Inman from 1982-86, coach Jim Davis in 1986-87, and coach Lewis Bivens from 1987-89.

The 1982-83 Lady Raiders were the first to participate in a total of seven NCAA Tournaments, and they still hold the school record for made free throws with 518 and most free throw attempts with 763.

The MT men's basketball squad has also done well over the years. Coached by Jimmy Earle, the 1975-76 team made it to the first of what is now six NCAA Tournaments. The Raiders have also won five OVC titles, mostly in the 80s, and 1982 saw what is considered the biggest win in MT history, as the Raiders upended Kentucky 50-44 in the NCAA Regional in Nashville. The Raiders' 1987 squad became the only OVC team ever to get an at-large bid into the NCAA Tournament.

In 1976, the first women's tennis began, although 1978 is the year remembered as the first one played in the OVC, where the Raiders finished 4th. The team would go on to capture 10 OVC regular season titles, 10 OVC tournament titles, an NCAA appearance, and produce eight OVC Players of the Year.

Also in 1976, the Blue Raider Hall of Fame was established. Charles Murphy, Teddy Morris, and Horace Jones became the first inductees for their outstanding athletic achievement.

Head track and field coach Dean Hayes put MT on the map as his men's and women's teams have captured 29 OVC titles, eight Sun Belt championships, and 17 NCAA Top 25 finishes. The team has 72 All-American awards produced by 35 different athletes.

MT has also produced 11 Olympians over the course of the program's 48-year history, including Brian Oldfield, who set a world record in the shot put, throwing 75-0, and competing in the 1972 Olympics in Munich, Germany. Hayes boosted MT's world reputation even further by serving as an assistant coach for the 1988 U.S. Olympic Team in Seoul, South Korea. Hayes' reputation as a top-flight coach has allowed him to become a recruiter on a world-wide level as evidenced by the large number of outstanding international athletes that have donned the MT Blue over the years.

Women's softball began in 1993 under coach Karen Green. After only seven years of play, the Lady Raiders won their first OVC Championship in 2000 and appeared in the NCAA Regionals.

In 1996 women's soccer started at MT, and the 1998 team, coached by Colette Gilligan, was first to play in the OVC. Soccer and track and field share a six-year-old facility, which consists of a regulation soccer field encircled by an Olympic-size track. The Raiders' first soccer game at the field produced a 4-0 win over archrival Tennessee Tech.

Raider Football became very well known during the 70s, 80s, and 90s.

In 1970, the Nashville Banner named Teddy Morris as the Offensive Player of the Decade for the 1960s. In 1973, Ray Oldham became the first Blue Raider to be drafted in the NFL, going to the Baltimore Colts. In the years that followed, MT would boast six more NFL draftees. In 1978 MT played its first game against a Division 1-A opponent, Tennessee State, which was classified "1-A" from 1978-81.

In 1984 Boots Donnelly led the team to its first ever 1-AA playoff appearance, setting a school record with 11 wins along the way. Between 1980-89, five Raiders were chosen as All-Americans and seven as OVC Players of the Year.

In 1990, the Raiders won their 400th game with a 20-7 decision over Western Kentucky. Joe Campbell was the first two-time All-American at MT in 1990-91 and shared OVC Player of the Year honors with teammate Marty Carter, who became the fifth Raider to be drafted into the NFL with Tampa Bay in 1991.

In 1992, MT defeated its first 1-A team since reclassification in 1978. The game was a 21-13 victory over Northern Illinois. During the 90s, the Raiders produced two other OVC Players of the Year. Mike Caldwell won the award in 1992 and Kippy Bayless took home the league's top honor in 1993 and 1994.

In 1995, a $25 million stadium expansion was announced, and five days later, the school announced that the football program would move to Division 1-A, although the move did not actually take place until 1999. A crowd of 27,568, which established both an OVC and MT attendance mark, witnessed the Raiders defeat Tennessee State 28-27 in the first game in MT's newly renovated stadium.

1998 was a significant year for MT athletics.

Coach Boots Donnelly saw the Raider football team play its last season as a 1-AA football member. The 1998 season was also Donnelly's last, as he retired from the gridiron to begin working in the school's athletic administration.

Also in 1998, the current mascot for MT was created. After having used "Ole Blue", a tick hound, as the official mascot for years, "Lightning" was born on January 17 of that year.

Coach Andy McCollum led the Blue Raiders into Division 1-A, playing the first-ever game against Mississippi State in 1999.

As the decade wound to a close, so did the school's long-time affiliation with the Ohio Valley Conference. The MT athletic department announced in 1999 that it would be leaving the league to join the Sun Belt Conference. The school began play in the new league during the 2000-01 campaign in all sports except football, which began SBC play in 2001.

What's to Come?

If you want more, look for "Champions All," part two of the series, which will look more closely at some of MT's star players and some sports highlights. Part two can be found on this site after July 2.

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