

Blue Raider Softball Season Begins Today

Faces No. 9 LSU at Tiger Classic

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee softball is looking to parlay a successful fall campaign into a triumphant spring in the 2007 season. It all starts on Friday when the club opens the season at the Easton Tiger Classic in Baton Rouge, La. The Blue Raiders open the tournament with No. 9 LSU at 5:45 p.m.



- [Preseason Audio Report](#)

"This is one of the hardest working teams I have coached," Podlesny said. "Each athlete is committed to building this program and earning respect nationally."

The Blue Raiders were a perfect 8-0 in the fall and were bolstered by the inspired play on the mound of a pair of youngsters. Returning sophomore pitcher Samantha Floyd and freshman Lindsey Vander Lugt combined to help vault the Blue Raiders to an undefeated fall, and their inspired play has the club and Head Coach Leigh Podlesny excited about the possibilities of the upcoming season.

"This was an important fall season for us because we played aggressively and took charge on the field. This program is moving in the right direction," Podlesny said. "It is rewarding to see our hard work beginning to pay off."

A late addition will help bolster the already promising pitching ranks as Podlesny welcomed Amy Candioto to the club after transferring from Central Michigan University. Candioto will be available to play in the 2007 season.

"Amy brings valuable collegiate experience to our team," Podlesny said. "She challenges herself as a player and does not settle easily on the mound. "

Candioto played two seasons at Central Michigan. She made eight appearances on the mound in 2006 and tossed 14.1 innings. As a freshman she played in 11 games and had a record of 2-3 in 35.2 innings pitched.

It will be a tender balance between returning players and newcomers as the Blue Raiders try to mesh both to create a cohesive team. Podlesny will turn to her three heralded seniors to help lead the squad as Muriel Ledbetter, Melissa Weiland and, Shelby Stiner are playing their final year for the

Blue Raider softball team.

"All three seniors are incredible student-athletes and very dedicated to our program," Podlesny said. "They all have very different personalities and attack problems from different angles. Our senior leadership is an advantage for our team."

Ledbetter was a Second Team All-Conference selection in 2006 as the designated player and broke the school record for homeruns in a season with 11. She became the first Middle Tennessee softball player to be named to the ESPN the Magazine District IV Academic All-America First team and ended the season ranked second on the team with a .329 batting average.

"This is the first time I have seen Muriel play injury free," Podlesny said. "I have confidence in her to be one of the top hitters in the country. Her ability to hit against any pitching staff in the nation confirms her talent at the plate. "

Weiland, who plays third base, was also a Second Team All-Conference selection and, with 16 career homeruns, needs just eight her senior season to break the school record for homeruns in a career. Her .412 batting average in conference-only games led the Sun Belt, she ended the year with a .294 batting average, which was third-best on the team.

"Melissa's growth and maturity has impressed us this fall," Podlesny said. "She is compelled to leave her mark in this program. I believe fans will remember her clutch hitting and power at the plate."

Stiner is the reigning Sun Belt Conference Newcomer of the Year, becoming the third Blue Raider in four years to garner the award. She was also voted Sun Belt First Team All-Conference, and her .339 batting average led the Blue Raiders and ranked second in the Sun Belt. Stiner's 16 stolen bases were the most by a Blue Raider in three years, and it also led the team and was fourth-best in the Sun Belt. Her 59 hits not only led the team and ranked fifth in the Sun Belt but also ranks her eighth for hits in a single season in the Middle Tennessee record books. She was also recently voted Sun Belt Preseason All-Conference for the upcoming 2007 season.

"Shelby is a player with presence," Podlesny said. "Everyone notices her talent as an all around ball player. She is smooth on defense, has a great swing at the plate, and is fast on the bases. She's a Blue Raider athlete people like to watch."

In total, Middle Tennessee returns nine players from the 2006 squad and welcomes seven newcomers.

Among the newcomers is junior Ashley Cline, who spent two seasons at the University of Tennessee prior to her transfer to the Blue Raider club. Cline, who is listed as a utility player, is expected to see time at various positions. In her two years as a Lady Vol, she had a career batting average of .236, with 46 hits and 25 RBI and was 12-for-12 in stolen bases. "Ashley will bring depth to our roster as a true utility player," Podlesny said. "We will use her speed and experience to challenge our opponent's defense."

Middle Tennessee's remaining transfer is junior utility player Whitney Darlington from nearby Motlow State. She was named a Second Team NJCAA All-American her sophomore year. She broke the single-season record for triples with eight and also broke the career record for triples (12) and tied the career stolen base record with 82. Darlington is a two-time all-conference selection and was also

voted to the 2006 Louisville Slugger/NFCA NJCAA Division I South Region Second Team.

"Whitney is a passionate player," Podlesny said. "She translates her natural athletic ability into success on the field. Whit sets the tone in games using her speed and aggressiveness. Those traits make her a threat in the top of our lineup."

Six returning underclassmen and four freshmen round out the squad for Podlesny. The pitching ranks tout two returning pitchers in junior Ashley Katinas and sophomore Floyd and the heralded lefty freshman Vander Lugt.

Katinas is still struggling to recover from the injury she sustained her freshman year. As a sophomore, she made 27 appearances in 2006 and started 17. Katinas recorded 21 strikeouts.

"Although Ashley is currently injured she impresses all of us with her sound work ethic and positive attitude at practice everyday," Podlesny said. "She has not let her injuries limit her contribution to this team."

Floyd saw limited action on the mound in the 2006 season, splitting her time between the pitching circle and first base. Floyd made 18 appearances on the mound and started nine. She picked up her first win as a Blue Raider pitcher when she came into the game in relief against Troy and tossed a season-high 10 innings, helping Middle Tennessee win the extra-inning affair 8-6. At the plate, Floyd had a .198 batting average with four doubles and six RBI and led the team with 12 sacrifice hits. "The one word describing Sam is competitive," Podlesny said.

"She wants the ball every game and thrives on challenges. Her strong performance this fall is linked to her hard work in the off season. I think Sam will surprise teams this spring."

Vander Lugt's dominant performance in the fall could be a prelude to the 2007 season. In her senior year at Tumwater High School, she led her club to its first Class 3A state title for the first time since 1993. Vander Lugt ended her season with a record of 24-1 with 239 strikeouts and 15 walks in 170 innings of work. She surrendered only 10 earned runs all season and notched a total of 17 shutouts, including 11 out of her last 14 games, closing out the year with a 0.41 ERA and earned MVP of Class 3A by the Seattle Times.

"Lindsey is a prototype DI pitcher," Podlesny said. "She is a tall lefty with long levers. This translates into great ball movement from the opposite side. Combining these assets with her unwavering poise on the mound makes her an immediate impact player."

Justine Cerda returns in the infield for the Blue Raiders. The sophomore played mostly at first and second in the 2006 season. She had a .216 batting average with six doubles and 12 RBI. Cerda fielded 10 double plays and led the team with a .983 fielding percentage.

"Justine is our best defensive player and at first base her strength is utilized every time she receives the ball," Podlesny said. "Her consistent fielding is the cornerstone of our defense."

Freshman Jessica Ives shares a lot in common with junior Katie Mielke. The duo is interchangeable in the infield and behind the plate. Mielke made the transition from catcher to first base look easy in 2006.

In the 2007 season, Mielke will be most effective behind the plate handling a very youthful pitching staff. As a sophomore, she was a Sun Belt Second Team All-Conference selection. She ranked fourth on the team with a .265 batting average and scored a team-high 41 runs. She had eight stolen bases, which was second-best on the team and led the team with 235 putouts.

"I really believe Katie is one of the best defensive catchers in the country," Podlesny said. "She is intelligent, calls a great game and has a gun for an arm. We can rely on Katie to get the most out of our pitching staff."

Ives was a four-year letterwinner at Boyd-Buchanan High School. She was voted to the Chattanooga Times Free Press Best of Preps First Team as a junior and senior. She was on the All-District Tournament team all four years and won the district homerun derby as a senior. Ives was selected to play for Tennessee in the Tennessee vs. Georgia All-Star Game as a senior.

"Jessica has natural ability coupled with power and size," Podlesny said. "She has the opportunity to contribute this season at two positions and at the plate."

The outfield is filled with a pair of returning players and two freshmen. Junior Kristine Reed and sophomore Martha Davis saw significant playing time last season and freshmen Caitlin McLure and Corrie Abel will be vying for a position with the upperclassmen. Reed spent most of her time in left field in 2006. She had a .216 batting average, hit the first homerun of her career against Southeast Missouri, and ended the year with three long balls.

"Kristine is fundamentally sound and a hard worker," Podlesny said. "With a year of outfield experience under her belt we can expect her to be a constant in our outfield. She is a smart, reliable and capable of leading a young outfield."

Davis saw most of her time in centerfield. She ended 2006 with a .244 batting average, which was fifth-best on the team. Davis was third on the team with 17 RBI and second on the team with two triples and 10 sacrifice hits.

"Martha is a true centerfielder," Podlesny said. "She is a great diving outfielder with a strong arm. She combines speed with a instinctive jump on the ball. Look for her to make game winning catches this spring."

McLure comes from Troy High School in Anaheim, Calif. As a senior, she had a .427 batting average with a .551 on base percentage and a .488 slugging percentage. She also was a perfect 10-for-10 in stolen bases.

"Caitlin is one of the two freshmen we recruited predominately for speed," Podlesny said. "She is a lefty slapper and that gives us a lot of options as a team."

Abel was a four-year letterwinner at Joliet West High School. She was twice voted Herald News First Team All-Area and was also twice named All-Conference in the Southwest Suburban Conference.

"The second half of the duo brought in for speed is Corrie Abel," Podlesny said. "She is a quick lefty who hits for power. She is a powerful and explosive athlete. Her hard work this fall improved every aspect of her game."

Hosting the 2007 Sun Belt Championships is the highlight of Middle Tennessee's 2007 campaign. The Blue Raiders will welcome the conference's first-ever eight-team tournament with the expansion of the league in 2007. It is exciting to host the Sun Belt Tournament this season.," Podlesny said.

"Our fans will see recent strides we have made in the Blue Raider softball program. This team wants to win the conference. I can't think of a better place in than on our home field."

Including its own tournament, Middle Tennessee will participate in four tournaments in 2007. The Blue Raiders' opening weekend will be at perennial powerhouse LSU February 9-11. Middle Tennessee will turn around the next weekend and head to Tucson for a tournament at defending NCAA National Champion Arizona. It will be the second time in as many years the Blue Raiders will face a national champion - as the club played Michigan in 2006. The Blue Raiders will face four current top-25 teams this season including LSU, Arizona, Louisville and Sun Belt Conference member Louisiana Lafayette. Other notable teams include Texas Tech, Missouri and Georgia Tech.

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