Blue Raiders Deep But Young in 2004

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By Bryan Hand For GoBlueRaiders.com

One would think that losing a player like two-time All-American Daniel Klemetz, considered by many as the second-best player to ever grace the courts at Middle Tennessee, would worry Blue Raider tennis coach Dale Short about the upcoming spring season, but it is in fact quite the opposite.

"Daniel will be severely missed for his tennis ability and his character," said Coach Short. "But I feel that we are a deeper, healthier team than in the past. This year we are nine

the past. This year we are hine players deep and there is very little difference from top to bottom. I feel like anyone can play for us."

The Blue Raiders may not miss Klemetz in the genuine sense of the word, but they do have to find a replacement for him at the top position. Klemetz played at the No. 1 spot for the past three years and Short has yet to find someone to take over the position.

"Right now I am looking at playing our two seniors in the upper half of the lineup," Coach Short said.

The seniors to whom Coach Short is referring are Trevor Short (Murfreesboro, Tenn.) and Kirk Jackson (Melbourne, Australia). Both are battling injuries, making it hard for either to step up and grab the top spot for the spring season.

"I am most worried about our seniors right now because Trevor is battling a recurring knee injury and an arm injury and Kirk is battling injuries as well," said Coach Short. "Because of them having to battle all these injuries, it is like they are having to resort to being freshmen because they aren't able to play the way they know how to play."

Jackson struggled during the fall campaign in singles play, but played well last spring. Short played well during the fall, compiling a 7-4 mark in singles and a 6-3 record with Jackson in doubles. Jackson and Short are ranked No. 30 in doubles by the ITA to start the spring and the duo earned Preseason All-Sun Belt honors in a poll of the league coaches. Short was also named to the Preseason Singles team.

Coach Short also expects a great deal from the only other upperclassmen on the roster: juniors Anant Sitaram (Hyderabad, India), Rishan Kuruppu (Vancouver, British Columbia) and Greg Pollack (Memphis, Tenn.).

Sitaram, who played anywhere from 4 to 6 in the lineup, posted a 10-10 record last spring. In the fall he posted a 5-4 record that included a three-match winning streak.

Pollack struggled last spring and in the fall, but does have experience after playing at the 2 or 3 spot last spring. Kuruppu went 12-5 in the fall to help improve his positioning within the team.

The only other returnee, sophomore Brandon Allan (Knoxville, Tenn.) played splendidly during the fall, winning nine of 14 matches. Allan also won 10 doubles matches in the fall with freshman Kai Schledorn (Worms, Germany), which was enough for the ITA to award them with a spring preseason ranking of 46. The duo also joined Short and Jackson as members of the Preseason All-SBC doubles team.

Schledorn, one of four newcomers to the program along with Sanner Holmes (Knoxville, Tenn.), Andreas Siljestrom (Stockholm, Sweden) and Aidan Fitzgerald (Bendigo, Australia), started the fall season on a seven-match winning streak. He also won the Middle Tennessee Fall Invitational singles title with a victory over Kuruppu in the finals.

Siljestrom, who is 6-feet, 11-inches tall, posted five victories in nine matches during the fall campaign. Holmes posted a 1-2 record in the fall, including a victory over Victor Mendoza of Lindsey Wilson College. Fitzgerald, who enrolled in January, has not played a match yet at Middle Tennessee, but is ranked as one of the top 40 juniors in Australia.

The Blue Raiders, who start the season ranked No. 67, may be relatively young, but Coach Short expects his team to be competitive.

"We have two or three guys in our lineup who have no dual-match experience and due to this, I think the question is whether we have the confidence to win," said Coach Short, who is beginning his 17th year at the helm of his alma mater, having guided the program to 10 conference championships and six NCAA Tournament appearances during his watch.

"I am very anxious to see what we can do this spring. We should get better, if we can stay healthy. We could be ranked as high as No. 30 or as low as where we are now at No. 67."

Middle Tennessee begins dual-match play at Noon Saturday at the Racquet Club of Murfreesboro against 51st-ranked Indiana.

"We have a 50-50 chance against Indiana," said Short. "It is most likely going to be very competitive. Probably one of those matches that ends at 4-3."

Which should be a familiar scene all season for the young and talented Blue Raiders.

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