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A preseason look at the offense

Six starters return from 2006 campaign

MT Media Relations

One of the most efficient and disciplined offenses in the Sun Belt Conference last year, the Blue Raiders return six starters and 14 lettermen from that unit in 2007.

In 2006, Middle Tennessee had the top scoring offense in the league with Troy at 22.8 points per game while leading the SBC in fewest penalty yards and red zone scoring, and registering a turnover margin of plus 6.

Offensive coordinator G.A. Mangus will have plenty of experience to work with, however, as the top five leading receivers and two of the top three rushers will return.

The biggest question marks for Stockstill and Mangus will be finding a replacement for quarterback Clint Marks, two new starters on the offensive line, and all-conference running back Eugene Gross who ended his career as one of the top scorers in school history.

"I think our offense improved throughout the season last year, but several reasons for those gradual improvements are no longer with our program as their eligibility expired," said Stockstill. "When you lose as many people up front as we did and then throw in your starting tailback and quarterback you have a lot of experience and holes to fill. We have some key players returning at significant positions but we will have a lot of new faces in some very important areas of our team in 2007. It is important that these new or returning players who simply lack experience exemplify the type of work ethic that made our offense more productive as the season progressed a year ago."



The Blue Raider offense will have a new man under center when the season kicks off on September 1. (MT)

Following is a position-by-position look at the 2007 Blue Raiders:

QUARTERBACK (Coach G.A. Mangus)

The most often asked question in Murfreesboro has been "who will be the starter at quarterback on September 1?". After three years as the starter and 34 straight starts, Clint Marks has left the position wide-open for 2007. Marks, an all-conference pick as a senior, ended his career ranked second all-time in passing yards, completions, and attempts at Middle Tennessee.

That question was answered quicker than most thought as [Joe Craddock](#) earned the job with a solid spring. Others fighting for playing time behind Craddock, are [Patrick Jackson](#), [Salin Simpson](#), [Gene Delle Donne](#), and true freshman [Dwight Dasher](#).

Craddock, a junior, completed 8 of 11 passes for 113 yards in the spring game to further solidify his starting spot. The Birmingham, Ala., native possesses a strong right arm and is capable of making plays with his feet. He has the most game experience of any quarterback on the roster after seeing action in nine games as a backup to Marks last year. Craddock completed 9 of 24 passes for 75 yards in limited snaps.

Jackson, a fifth-year senior, played in his first two career games in 2006 after turning in a 200-yard passing game in the spring. Jackson hopes to make a push for more playing time in his final year.

The future may include a lot of Simpson, a redshirt freshman from Lexington, Ky. The talented Simpson, who was rated one of the top 50 players in Kentucky coming out of high school, was the first quarterback recruited by Stockstill.

Also, heavily in the mix will be Delle Donne, a transfer from Duke who sat out last season. The former Prep Star All-American is a presence in the pocket at 6-5.

Dasher possesses all the tools of a playmaker but how quickly he learns the system and adjusts to college football will determine his playing time.

RUNNING BACK (Coach Willie Simmons)

The Blue Raider running game showed vast improvement in 2006 and despite the loss of all-conference back Eugene Gross, the 2007 group of ball carriers possess tremendous potential, talent, and athleticism.

A four-year starter, Gross was the total package during his career. He finished seventh on the all-time rushing list, fourth in touchdowns scored, and became the leading receiver among backs all-time at Middle Tennessee.

Senior [DeMarco McNair](#) has been patiently waiting for his opportunity and 2007 will be his time to shine. Known for his tough running, McNair rushed for a career best 586 yards last year to go with seven touchdowns and 16 receptions. The Thomson, Ga.,

native turned in a personal-best 98 yards rushing on only nine attempts in the win over Arkansas State on the road.

Sharing time with McNair will be sophomore [Phillip Tanner](#), who spent 2006 as a safety on defense to help shore up depth problems. Tanner, who played in all 13 games last year, rushed for over 4,200 yards and 76 touchdowns at Justin Kimball High School in Texas. Tanner showed a flash of the future in the spring game by rushing for 104 yards and two touchdowns.

The electrifying [Desmond Gee](#) will also play a big role for the Blue Raiders in the running game. Gee, a first team all-conference selection as an all-purpose player, was the Blue Raiders' best playmaker a year ago. A running back and wide receiver, Gee accounted for 27 receptions and three touchdowns while adding 277 yards on the ground and five scores. Gee led the team with a 4.5-yard per carry average.

The fullback position will be a battle between Hunter Birtsch and walk-ons Brodey Mann and Joseph Baydoun. True freshman [Wesley Hale](#) (Morristown, Tenn.) will also get a look in fall camp.

Birtsch, a senior from Knoxville, competed in 10 games and started a career-best four contests in 2006. Prior to his injury, Birtsch hauled in a personal-high four receptions for 27 yards. Birtsch will not compete in spring drills but hopes to be ready when fall camp opens in August.

Mann, a junior from Heath, Ohio, will also compete for playing time along with Baydoun.

WIDE RECEIVER (Coach Justin Watts)

A position that was young and inexperienced in 2006 should be much improved in 2007 as all three starters return along with the starting tight end.

The top five leading receivers from last year all return, including the trio of [Bobby Williams](#), [Taron Henry](#), [Jonathan Grigsby](#), and [Desmond Gee](#). Williams led the Blue Raiders with 36 receptions as a sophomore but suffered with inconsistency all season. The junior will be looked to for leadership and more consistency in 2007.

Henry, a local product from Murfreesboro, is ready for a breakout year in his final season in the blue and white. A 12-game starter during Middle Tennessee's championship season, Henry registered 16 receptions for 247 yards and a touchdown.

The most consistent receiver for the Blue Raiders in 2006 was Grigsby. The former walk-on enjoyed a career year with 24 catches for 319 yards to rank third on the team. The senior collected seven receptions at Maryland and ended the season with five grabs for a career-best 86 yards in the Motor City Bowl.

Gee, who will also see time at running back, was the playmaker of the group in 2006 with 27 receptions and three touchdowns. Over the final seven games of the season, Gee hauled in 25 catches, including a personal-best nine at the Motor City Bowl.

Also in the mix for playing time will be [Michael Cannon](#), [Patrick Honeycutt](#), and [Dale Galvin](#). Cannon played in seven games last year and had two receptions, but struggled with an injury in the middle of the season which cost him three games.

The biggest addition to the receiving corps could be Honeycutt. The sophomore missed the entire 2006 season with a knee injury after working his way into a starting job with a solid fall camp. The Pelham, Ala., native is a sure-handed receiver who runs great routes and will be a key ingredient in 2007.

Another player who could figure into playing time that missed 2006 is Galvin. The sophomore has yet to play in a college game after being redshirted in 2005 and sitting out for academics last season. He has to become a lot more dependable before he sees any playing time.

Newcomers [Wes Caldwell](#), [Walter Dozier](#), and [D.D. Kyles](#) will all have a chance for playing time as well.

All four tight ends return to the fold in 2006 to make it one of the most experienced positions on the team. The tight end spot accounted for 18 receptions and two touchdowns in 2006.

[Clinton Corder](#), a senior from nearby Brentwood, is the returning starter. In 2006, Corder registered a personal-best eight receptions after playing in all 13 games and earning nine starts.

Corder's backup and sometime starter is Chicola who has 52 career receptions in his three seasons. The Jacksonville, Fla., product led all tight ends last year with nine catches and two touchdowns. Chicola, who has enjoyed a good off-season, has good hands but needs to continue improvement as a blocker.

Redshirt freshman [Alvin Ingle](#) will push Corder and Chicola for playing time. Ingle played in two games last year before suffering a season ending injury. The Madison, Tenn., native had worked himself into a starting job in fall camp before another injury cost him valuable practice time. Unfortunately, Ingle did not participate in spring drills but should be a factor at the position before the season ends.

Junior [John Marc Stephens](#), a former offensive lineman and fullback, will also vie for playing time. Stephens saw action in 11 games last year and reeled in one reception.

The Blue Raiders also signed [Byron McLeod](#), a freshman from Tampa, Fla., who will get a look in fall camp.

OFFENSIVE LINE (Coach Jimmy Ray Stephens)

The Blue Raiders return three starters off last year's unit that helped produce the Sun Belt's highest-scoring offense and must find replacements for all-conference performer Germayle Franklin and the steady Marcus Gates and Paul Cantrell.

Leading the way up front will be returning starters [Franklin Dunbar](#), [Brandon Nix](#), and [Mark Thompson](#). Dunbar, a second team all-conference pick in 2006, was the only lineman to play and start all 13 games a year ago. An aggressive and physical player, Dunbar enjoyed a productive off-season and looks to become one of the elite linemen in the Sun Belt.

Nix also brings a level of toughness to the offensive line where he started at guard in nine of 13 games last season. The senior had a cumulative grade of 72.2 percent a year ago to go along with 34 knockdowns.

Thompson, a sophomore out of Hickory, Tenn., played in all 13 games and received seven starts with six at guard and one at tackle. Thompson, who did not participate in spring drills due to an injury, recorded 31 knockdowns in 2006 and will be the starter at right tackle.

Also vying for a spot in the starting rotation will be [Jamal Lewis](#), [Richard Bortner](#), [David Price](#), and [Chris Hawkins](#). Lewis is a promising redshirt freshman who spent most of 2006 listed number two at left tackle behind Dunbar. The coaches feel he has a bright future and is penciled in as the starting left guard entering fall camp.

Bortner, a six-game starter in 2005, saw most of his snaps last year on special teams. The Blue Raiders need the Crestview, Fla., product to step up his play and solidify his spot at right guard. At 6-6, 330, Bortner gives the Blue Raiders good size up front.

Junior [David Price](#) out of Jacksonville, Fla., will backup at both tackle positions. Price played in nine games last year including three as a starter at guard.

Another promising player up front will be redshirt freshman Hawkins. After sitting out last year, the coaches feel the Lexington, Ky., native has a bright future in Murfreesboro.

Freshman [Jake Padrick](#) and redshirt freshman [Evon Lettsome](#) will both provide depth and push for playing time in 2007. Padrick is a promising newcomer who enrolled in January and Lettsome sat out last year in order to get more acclimated to the college game.

Junior [Chris Ritter](#) and redshirt freshman J.C. Moore will also be in the mix.

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