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Soccer team seeks fifth-straight winning season

Season begins Friday at East Tennessee

MT Media Relations

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee enjoyed the greatest season in program history in 2006 when the Blue Raiders steamrolled their way to a school-record 17 wins and earned the program's first regional ranking; however, the successes of last season were more of an extension of the unparalleled accomplishments realized under sixth-year head coach Aston Rhoden.

The Blue Raiders will look for their fifth-straight winning season with a talented blend of veterans and a highly regarded class of newcomers as the 2007 season unfolds at East Tennessee Friday at 3 p.m. The road trip continues with a match at Belmont Sunday afternoon.

Middle Tennessee has emerged as a consistent Sun Belt Conference contender during the Rhoden era, and the 2007 Blue Raiders expect to make another run at the league title with 13 returning veterans joined by eight newcomers. Middle Tennessee is 55-20-6 over the past four seasons with four straight winning seasons. During this remarkable run, Middle Tennessee has set the single-season record for wins, won the Sun Belt championship in 2004 - a first in program history - and the Blue Raiders have finished second in the league standings twice.

The Blue Raiders' new home - the Middle Tennessee Track and Soccer Stadium - is completely renovated and the upgrades could add to what already has become one of the toughest places to win in the Sun Belt. Middle Tennessee enters the 2007 campaign with a 21-game home winning streak.

Following is a breakdown of the 2007 Blue Raider soccer squad.

FORWARDS

[Holly Grogan](#), [Kala Morgan](#) and Jennifer Threlkeld return at the forward position. The trio accounted for 45 of the Blue Raiders' 78 goals last season. Newcomers [Kelly Downs](#) and [Vanessa Mueggler](#) are expected to challenge for playing time immediately and will add some diversity to an already potent attack.

Morgan returns after a stellar performance last season which saw her gain Sun Belt, regional, and national attention. The senior from Wales has played well in the offseason and is expected to a great offensive weapon for the Blue Raiders.

Much like Morgan, Grogan also had a great year and proved to be another offensive weapon for the team. She is a tireless worker with a nose for goal. Her versatility will no doubt be an asset to the offense. Despite being hurt most of the year, it was easy to see the quality Threlkeld possessed when she stepped on the field. Her work ethic and ability in the box led to crucial game-changing moments during the season. Downs and Mueggler will add some flexibility to the Blue Raider offense. Both are very versatile and possess great work ethic. Mueggler can play as a forward and an attacking midfielder and has solid tactical awareness. Downs could create lots of problems for defenders based on her ability in and around the box.

"Our attack will be more potent and flexible than that of last year," Rhoden said. "All our forwards are very efficient inside and around the box and possess good speed, strength, and strong mental toughness. The versatility possessed by this group will allow us to utilize several different attacking schemes."

MIDFIELDERS

Much like the 2006 season, the midfield will most likely be the most competitive position on the team. With veteran midfielder [Kaley Forrest](#) leading the way, this group will feature a strong group of young players.

Joining Forrest in midfield will be returnees [Kathrine Andresen](#), [Kim Farrant](#), [Jeanette Heltne](#), and Sara Beth Lee and newcomers [Jaimee Cooper](#) and [Vanessa Mueggler](#). Forrest continues to be the unsung hero for the Blue Raiders and had an outstanding spring season. Despite her height, she dominates aerial battles and is an excellent passer over long distances. Forrest's experience and tactical awareness will be significant in midfield this year.

Andresen and Heltne have now adjusted to the college game and are expected to be significant contributors in midfield this year. Farrant made great strides during the spring season and can be played as a forward as well. Lee is still recovering from an ACL injury that kept her out of Sun Belt play last season. She showed great improvement during the spring and could be a force to reckon with during her sophomore campaign.

Cooper and Mueggler are expected to challenge for a starting position. Both bring a lot of experience and a winning mentality to an



Head Coach Aston Rhoden, left, and his staff will lead the Blue Raiders into the season opener at East Tennessee Friday. (MT)

already talented midfield. "Despite this group's youthfulness, I expect it to be a solid part of our team," Rhoden said. "There are a lot of different personalities in this group which will make it a very flexible but productive unit."

DEFENDERS

Senior All-Conference selection and 2005 Sun Belt Newcomer of the Year [Ingrid Christensen](#) leads the defensive unit for the Blue Raiders. She will be joined by juniors [Nenita Burgess](#), [Elise Hutter](#), and [Caitlin Reeves](#). Much like the midfield unit, the defense will consist of several young but talented players in [Bethany Bertovic](#), [Emily Harris](#), Fran Howells, and [Emily Snowdon](#).

Christensen was a stalwart in the back for the Blue Raiders in 2006 and was also an attacking threat as well. Burgess, Hutter and Reeves all gained a great deal of experience this spring and will be vying for starting positions this fall. Howells' leadership abilities and experience at the national team level will be an asset in the back. Bertovic and Harris are very technical and strong defenders who also have experience playing several other positions. Snowdon has great work ethic and is a strong marker with exceptional speed. "We now have a lot of flexibility and depth in our defense. Several of our young players have grown more confident and will now be solid contributors to the team," Rhoden said. "Our new players will allow us to maintain a solid defensive unit throughout the season."

GOALKEEPER

Goalkeeping duties will rest on the shoulders of sophomore [Erynn Murray](#) and freshman [Kela Casiple](#). Murray took over the starting role last season and had great performances in several matches. Her confidence grew during the spring and she now has a better understanding of Middle Tennessee's defensive schemes. Casiple is a great addition to the team. She is expected to challenge Murray for a starting position.

"It's great to finally have two keepers with close to equal abilities," Rhoden said. "With two very solid keepers we should see increased competition for playing time. The position is wide open and a good showing in preseason by either keeper will earn her early playing time."

SCHEDULE

The 2007 schedule is even tougher than the 2006 schedule and features teams from strong conferences such as C-USA, SEC, A-Sun, and Pac 10. The Blue Raiders open the season on the road with in-state rivals East Tennessee and Belmont before taking on Tulsa and Mississippi State at the newly renovated Blue Raider Track and Soccer Stadium. Other nonconference games include Oklahoma, Alabama, Alabama A&M, and Long Beach State University. The team will also be tested by a rigorous Sun Belt schedule with conference home openers against Florida Atlantic and Florida International on Sept. 28 and 30 respectively. "Last season we had a great year finishing 17-4 with our losses coming on the road in close games to three teams in the top 20," Rhoden said. "This year our team goal is to finish in the top two during the regular season, championship tournament, and in team GPA. To accomplish the first two goals we have to play a schedule much like that we have put together for the 2007 season. I am confident we can accomplish these goals if we are able to remain injury free in certain positions this season. Only time will tell."

OUTLOOK

This is the youngest of Rhoden's Blue Raider teams since he took over as head coach in 2002; however, despite its youth this team has great chemistry, a lot of talent, and some unfinished business stemming from last season. The Blue Raiders' impressive 17-4 season was not enough to earn them a spot in the NCAA tournament and this year's team is determined to go to the dance for the first time in program history. With a strong returning group, a very talented recruiting class, strong leadership and a bit of luck, the Blue Raiders could get their chance to represent the Sun Belt in the NCAA tournament in 2007.

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