MT welcomes ACC foe to Floyd Stadium

ACC Coastal Division leader UVA rolls into the 'Boro

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MURFREESBORO - As the Virginia Cavaliers prepare to visit Murfreesboro for the first time, Middle Tennessee is looking to make quite an impact on the current ACC Coastal Division leaders.

The Cavaliers have won their last four games and are undefeated in conference play. Meanwhile, the Blue Raiders are coming off a 41 point victory over conference foe Florida International behind a stellar performance from freshman quarterback Dwight Dasher.

But there is more to Saturday's game than a top-notch opponent and a turn in the national spotlight. Since Middle Tennessee began playing at the highest level of collegiate football in 1999, Blue Raider nation screamed for the administration to bring a nationally-known team to Murfreesboro. The day is here as UVA represents the first of many scheduled to make its appearance at Horace Jones Field.

Last year's Motor City Bowl appearance and share of the Sun Belt Championship offered fans a taste of what they've been waiting for since joining the big boys in 1999. On Saturday, the Blue Raiders will take the next step by hosting a national powerhouse at Floyd Stadium for the first time.

"Having an ACC school on the schedule is very exciting," says Murfreesboro mayor Tommy Bragg. "Last year we went to play Maryland and it just shows that the athletic department is understanding of what it is the fans are looking for."

And fans certainly are looking forward to Saturday.

There is a buzz around town as students and fans alike are gearing up for what is sure to be an exciting game. After all, many fans see this as the next step in establishing Middle Tennessee as a powerful force in college football.

"After all the times we had to go and play at Vanderbilt it's good to see us actually bring somebody big like this to our home turf," says senior biology major Josh Hughes.

Hughes recalls big games that the Blue Raiders have played on the road in the past like Alabama and in-state rival Tennessee.

"This game is all about visibility and getting our name out there. It's big for people who haven't really heard about us or aren't from this area because it puts us in the spotlight," he says.

Students and fans aren't the only ones preparing for the match up this weekend. The city of Murfreesboro is getting ready, too.

Mona Herring is the Vice President of the Convention and Visitors Bureau at the Rutherford County Chamber of Commerce. She says the Chamber takes an active role in supporting Middle Tennessee athletics by informing all of their businesses and visitors about upcoming athletic events.

"We send out weekly faxes requesting that all of our chamber members wear Blue Raider blue on gameday and we ask everyone to be supportive of Middle," Herring says.

Obviously, with a school the size of Virginia, fans are expected to travel with the team. But the Chamber of Commerce and Middle Tennessee are working together to ensure that businesses around the city are well prepared.

"We've corresponded with Middle to work on rallying support for the game," Herring says. "And we've let our members know that the game is going on and to be prepared. We're hoping to draw a lot of people so we made all our members aware of it."

Murfreesboro attorney Darwin Colston has gotten the message loud and clear. As a member of the Blue Raider Athletic Association and a Middle Tennessee alumnus, Colston planned on going to the game long before his inbox filled with emails encouraging him to attend.

"I was pretty excited about last year's team and it carried over into this season," Colston says. Since graduating in 1997, he has seen Murfreesboro's support for the team increase dramatically, but it's the football program's potential that excites him the most.

"I look at a team like South Florida being in the top ten and I think they were where we are just a decade ago. It's the South Floridas and the Boise States that give us hope to be up there with the big boys in the next couple seasons," he says.

Despite fans waiting years for this, nobody understands the importance of this game more than the players themselves. After starting the season 1-4, the Blue Raiders are looking to prove they are a team to be reckoned with. Going into Saturday with most people not giving them a chance at victory, the Blue Raiders are looking to atone for several close losses so far this season.

"It's a big game because it's a home game and we only have five of them this year," says senior tight end Clinton Corder. "Virginia coming in here makes it a little bigger."

When Middle Tennessee welcomes Virginia into Floyd Stadium on Saturday, it's obvious that the fans and players will be ecstatic. It's rare that a team has a moral victory before they even take the field, but this is one of those times.

As the university and football program continues to grow, there is a lot of hope that this is the first of many big games in Murfreesboro.

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