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2008 Softball Preview - Pitchers, Catchers and the Schedule

Squad opens season Friday in Kennesaw, Ga.

MT Media Relations

- **Audio:** [Preseason Report](#)

First-year head coach Sue Nevar returns seven starters and the team's top pitcher for the 2008 season, as the squad continues its upward swing after last year's 30-30 campaign that featured a 14-9 Sun Belt Conference mark.

The club's top three hitters all return - sophomore [Corrie Abel](#) (.357 in 42 games), senior [Whitney Darlington](#) (.331 in 59 contests) and junior [Martha Davis](#) (.313 in 59 outings) - along with sophomore [Caitlin McLure](#), seniors [Ashley Cline](#) and [Katie Mielke](#), and junior [Justine Cerda](#). The Blue Raiders must fill a big hole at shortstop and find some help for hurler [Lindsey Vander Lugt](#), who logged 66 percent of the club's innings and posted 70 percent of the team's victories in 2007.

"This year's squad still has a bad taste in its mouth from losing a one-run game to advance to the Sun Belt championship game last season. We must build on that competitive desire if we are to make another run for the conference title," Nevar said.

"But we must prove our worth early on. This makes the February tournaments that much more important. This will be one of the determining factors of whether we make the postseason. With the talent we have in our lineup, I don't see any reason not to be strongly considered a front-runner in the Sun Belt and a regional contender. But we must be ready to play at the onset of the season. We must have a huge jump when the gate is opened."

Pitchers

Vander Lugt was the definition of a workhorse in 2007, posting a 21-21 record in 273.2 innings of work. She appeared in 52 of the team's 60 games last season, recording 29 complete games, six shutouts and two saves.

The lefthander pitched well versus the Sun Belt, compiling an 11-8 mark with one save and a 1.80 ERA in 22 contests, tossing 128.1 innings. She allowed just two earned runs in the first three games of the Sun Belt Tournament, victories over South Alabama and Florida International and a 1-0 defeat to Florida Atlantic, as the Blue Raiders came within one run of playing for the conference championship.

She will be asked to shoulder much of the load again in 2008 with senior [Amy Candioto](#) out for the year after undergoing shoulder surgery in the fall. Freshman Kellie Head will garner the remainder of the innings in the circle, which will probably be as many as the Paris, Texas, native can handle.

"Lindsey carried the Blue Raiders the second half of last season and will lead the way for us in 2008 to a successful campaign. She is the workhorse that every coach dreams of having to lead their staff. The key will be to keep her sharp with intervals of rest," Nevar said.


"Lindsey would love the ball every game, but that's not necessary, as freshman Kellie Head can hold her own. Kellie is quite capable and has a solid mix of pitches to keep hitters off-balance. She will complement Lindsey with a completely different look from the mound."

Whitney Padgett will also join the staff on occasion after pitching some in junior college at Motlow State. Movement on her pitches is a big asset for the righthander.

Catchers

Senior [Katie Mielke](#) anchors the club behind the plate and has the last two seasons, starting 117 times combined in 2006 and 2007. Mielke recorded 11 doubles, seven home runs and 27 RBIs as well as scoring 26 runs. She also threw out 27 percent of potential base stealers last year and Nevar says she may be the best defensive catcher in the league.



Sophomore Lindsey Vander Lugt logged 70 percent of the team's innings and 66 percent of the victories in 2007. (MT) 





"Mielke must handle the young pitching staff and use her experience behind the plate. She is one of the most skilled catchers in the Southeast. She will be expected to direct our team from behind the plate.

"Katie has the ability to get the most out of our pitchers and lead the team as well. She is harder on herself than most athletes, but that same tenacity has vaulted her to status as one of the top catchers in the country," Nevar said.

Sophomore [Jessica Ives](#), who had just 45 at-bats in 13 starts last season, will also see action behind the plate where she started eight times in 2007.

"Ives is a versatile player who could see action at first base and behind the plate. She can be a deep threat in our lineup. Her swing is still developing but the potential is definitely there for her to be a record-setting performer."

Schedule

Middle Tennessee's 2008 schedule includes 20 home games as well as a home tournament. The Blue Raiders will play six teams that made last year's NCAA Tournament, including regional champion Alabama.

The squad heads to the Kennesaw State Classic to begin the season, February 8-10. Ole Miss, Tennessee Tech (2006 NCAA participant), Georgetown and Kennesaw State will all play at Kennesaw. The Blue Raiders will take on a pair of NCAA participants - Georgia Tech and Alabama - as well as New Mexico at the Crimson Classic.

Middle Tennessee will host a tournament on February 23-24, with NCAA participant Southern Illinois, Belmont and UT Martin taking part at Blue Raider Field.

The Blue Raiders host Lipscomb in a nonconference doubleheader on February 28 before opening Sun Belt Conference action on March 4-5 at Troy. The squad then heads to the Buzz Classic in Woodstock, Ga., for contests against Western Michigan, Furman, Florida A&M and Jacksonville State.

Middle Tennessee hosts perennial NCAA participant Louisiana-Lafayette in a three-game series March 15-16 in the home conference opener, and also plays home Sun Belt series versus Louisiana-Monroe (March 29-30), Florida International (April 12-13) and Western Kentucky (May 3-4). The Blue Raiders host two other nonconference doubleheaders, taking on Tennessee State (March 19) and Austin Peay (March 26).

The club will play four road conference series, including at Troy, South Alabama (March 21-22), North Texas (April 5-6) and Florida Atlantic (April 26-27), as well as nonconference road tilts at Southeast Missouri (April 9), Chattanooga (April 10), Jacksonville State (April 15), UT Martin (April 16) and Tennessee Tech (April 23).

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