

April 4, 2008

A look at the Blue Raider defense midway through spring drills

Unit trying to replace six starters from 2007

MT Media Relations

After losing two all-conference players in [Erik Walden](#) and [Tavares Jones](#) from the defensive line, which players have stepped up in their absence this spring? We can't do it with just one guy because we are counting on a bunch of guys. [Wes Hofacker](#) is a dependable guy that we moved from tackle to end and he has done a good job so far. We are hoping that [Chris McCoy](#) seizes the moment. He has a chance to be decent at that position. The biggest thing at that position is there is no one that has done it yet. In the past, we at least knew some people had playing experience. Before 2006, [Tavares Jones](#) and [Erik Walden](#) hadn't done it yet either. We have been there before, but we are desperate for someone to step up.

You have two starters returning to the linebacker position, how confident are you with that position's progress? To me, it's really open right now. We have four guys in [Danny] Carmichael, [Andrew] Harrington, [Ivon] Hickmon and [Lonnie] Clemons that are ahead of the pack. Clemons has been out for most of the spring and has only been able to practice one full pad day. We haven't been able to see what he can do. Hickmon and Harrington are guys that we weren't able to see much last year because of injuries. The bottom line is that we have to play better at linebacker than we did a year ago. I can't tell you how good we are going to be at that spot, but I know they are trying to improve every day.



Defensive coordinator Manny Diaz has his unit focused on stopping the run and regaining their toughness. ()

After coaching the safeties for two seasons, how does it feel to transition back as the linebacker's coach, a position you held at N.C. State? It's my favorite place to coach on defense because I like that position. A defensive back will always think of himself as an athlete first, whereas a linebacker will describe himself as tough. I like being around those guys and what they value. It's been fun for me and I feel like I'm back at home. We have to get these guys ready to play. We have to coach better than we did last year and we've got to play a lot better than we played last year.

How do you feel the cornerbacks are improving after losing key starters in [Roy Polite](#) and [Bradley Robinson](#) from last season? They are working hard and doing well, but we only get to test ourselves against our offense, which has a limited number of wide receivers. We probably should dominate this spring. That's not taking anything away from the players we have on offense, but with their limited experience against our experience at cornerback, we should have an advantage. We're not at a dominating level because there is too much give and take. I don't think Troy or any opponent we play this year will worry about any player we line up on our defense. [Alex Suber](#) and [Rod Issac](#) must understand that we are counting on them to be some of our better players this year.

[Alex Suber](#) began his career as a running back and switched to the corner position last season. How has Suber contributed to the Blue Raiders defensively? I think he has transitioned really well because he has started to believe he is finally a defensive back now. He was one of our better players last year. He is very quick, very smart and he understands the little things that make you better. He has a lot going for him. Now, he is first in line after [Bradley Robinson](#) has graduated. We are counting on him to step up even more now that he is at the top.

[Rod Issac](#) and [Jeremy Kelleem](#) received some early playing time as freshmen. How will their game experience help in the progress of the defensive backfield this season? They have to understand that they must take it to another level after doing well their freshman year. They were good for freshmen, but now they have to be good college football players. Our expectations of them have grown and both kids are capable of handling it. They are both talented football players with a passion and knowledge of the game. They have to understand now that they are leaders in our secondary because they have the most experience over anyone else. This year begins their first year as seniors at Middle Tennessee. I hope they realize that they are playing as three-year seniors because that's the situation we are in.

There are no returning starters for the safety position, but you have several players returning with game experience. How confident are you in the safeties' progress? We need [Jeremy Kelleem](#) and [Anthony Glover](#) to step up in a big way. Our guys respect them, but they need to understand the defense better so they can take the leadership role. We may be led by a sophomore this year. Those kids need to understand what is expected of them and they need to take that responsibility.

What is the main focus for improvement for the defense this off-season? It's obvious that we must stop the run because of what happened at the end of the season should have happened. The way we fell from 2006 to 2007 in run defense is not excusable. As the season progressed last year, we lost our toughness and we need to get that back. We may win or lose, but when you come off the field, you want them to at least know they were in a tough, physical game. I don't think everybody we played felt that by the end of the season. I think that is the first identity we are trying to get back. In the middle of the season, we were a very

sharp blade, but we were very dull by the end of the year. The same knife doesn't work the same way when it's not sharpened and we are trying to sharpen our blade back up again.

Which player has been the biggest surprise this spring? [Dwight Smith](#) is walking around with a lot of maturity. Dwight took that role on during spring practice. He doesn't look like a young man that has been here eight months because he has an urgency about him that would resemble an older type of player. He has a great attitude and work ethic.

Which position needs the most work before the season begins? I wish there was one position that didn't need work. We don't have one position squared away that would allow us to focus on the other positions. Defensive end is the biggest glaring weakness, but once you name that one position all the others fall right behind. We have a lot to prove. I hope our guys come out with a chip on their shoulder because of that. There are not a lot of known quantities about our defense right now.

Which position do you feel is the strongest defensively? If all the players voted for the first guy we'd pick if we were only able to bring 11 players, you would have 11 different answers. That could be a good thing because we may not be a one or two man show. I don't know if we have one player that stands above the rest. It's our responsibility as coaches to get 11 ready to go, and at this point there is not one particular position that is above the rest.

Printed on May 22, 2012

Original URL: <http://www.goblueraiders.com/content.cfm/id/31066>