

A preview of the Blue Raider offense

Only one offensive player has more than 10 career starts

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The Blue Raider offense needs to find depth along the offensive line, as well as running back and wide receiver, but the majority of practice time will be spent on developing consistency.

In 2007, the Blue Raider offense was a tale of three seasons. After a subpar performance in the season-opener, they turned up the wick on national television against Louisville by scoring 42 points before injuries took a toll over the next two games, and the Blue Raiders managed just 17 total points.

The emergence of Dwight Dasher under center gave the Blue Raider offense another dimension and an added spark. During a six-game stretch in the middle of the year, the Blue Raiders went 5-1, scored 40 or more points three times, won three straight on the road, and nearly upset Virginia.

Following a knee injury to Dasher, the Blue Raiders were never the same, losing their final two contests of the season and averaging just 232 yards of total offense in the two setbacks.

MTSU will also look to improve its running game after averaging just 134 yards in 2007 and ranking fifth in the conference. The Blue Raiders also managed just two 100-yard rushing games, which came from returning players Dasher and Phillip Tanner.

Outside of consistency, the Blue Raiders will continue to fight the numbers game. MTSU has only 11 lettermen returning to the offensive side of the ball in 2008, with six of those being starters from a year ago.

Quarterback



What a difference a year makes. At this time last year, MTSU did not have a signal-caller with any real game experience. Fast forward to 2008, and the Blue Raiders have two quarterbacks who have started and won games. Both Dasher and Joe Craddock had games of over 400 yards of total offense in 2007.

Dasher was a threat with his arm and legs on his way to being named honorable mention freshman all-American by the Sporting News. The dynamic Dasher led the Blue Raiders in rushing while throwing for 1,148 yards and nine touchdowns.

In seven games as a starter, Dasher completed 87 of 152 passes for 1,126 yards and nine touchdowns while adding 483 yards and three scores on the ground. For the year, Dasher rushed for 530 yards, which was the most by a quarterback in the I-A era and just 64 yards shy of the school record.

Competing with Dasher will be Craddock. The senior is coming off a career year by completing 96 of 155 passes for 1,259 yards and 12 touchdowns and showed his ability with two eye-opening games against Louisville and Louisiana-Monroe. At UL, Craddock threw for 290 yards and two scores, and he put together the third-best passing night in school history with 401 yards and four scores at ULM.

Adding depth at the position will be newcomers Brent Burnette (Maryville, Tenn.) and Sancho McDonald (Miami, Fla.).

Running Back

The Blue Raiders will devote a lot of time to improving their running game in 2008, and it will all start with the talented duo of Desmond Gee and Phillip Tanner. Both possess good speed with Gee being the guy with a little more "wiggle" and Tanner providing the power.

Gee, a first team all-conference pick his first two years as an all-purpose player, is expected to spend most of his time in the backfield in 2008. The junior is the team's leading returning receiver, kick returner, and punt returner but will enter the season as the top running back. One of the Blue Raiders' top playmakers, Gee owns a 4.3 yard per carry average for his career.

Joining Gee in the backfield will be Tanner. The Dallas, Texas, native was hurt most of last season, which limited his production, but expect bigger things from the junior in 2008. Tanner, who was third on the team with 299 yards, displayed his ability against Louisville by rushing for a career-best 144 yards and three touchdowns on just nine carries.

The Blue Raiders will count on a couple of newcomers to provide depth as Gee and Tanner are the only lettermen in the backfield. Look for Jawan Carson (Newark, N.J.) and Tony Smith (Bushnell, Fla.) to battle in fall camp for playing time.

At fullback, the Blue Raiders have one of their deepest positions with the return of Jacob Longoria, Marquise Branton, and Wesley Hale.

Longoria, who joined the team as a walk-on last year, played in all 12 games and earned six starts in 2007. The Alpharetta, Ga., product had four carries for 27 yards last year to go along with three receptions.

Branton, a sophomore, played in five games a year ago and was able to register 10 carries while

seeing time on special teams as well. Hale, from Morristown, Tenn., sat out last year after suffering a shoulder injury in fall camp but is expected to be full strength in August.

Wide Receiver

The Blue Raiders return just three of their top eight receivers from a year ago, and with Desmond Gee seeing most of his time in the backfield, the unit only has two lettermen returning to the position.

Patrick Honeycutt and Michael Cannon will lead the way as the most experienced pass catchers for the Blue Raiders.

Playing in his first collegiate season in 2007, Honeycutt turned in a solid year with 28 receptions for 328 yards and a touchdown. The Pelham, Ala., product played in all 12 games and started 10 times while leading the receiving corps in snaps played with 547.

Cannon, out of Memphis, Tenn., saw his most significant playing time last year and responded with a career-best 15 receptions for 157 yards. A standout on special teams as well, Cannon should be more effective in 2008 with a year of experience under his belt.

Also in the mix will be sophomore Wes Caldwell and redshirt freshman D.D. Kyles. Caldwell played in six games as a true freshman with his lone reception coming against LSU.

Kyles, who took a redshirt year last season, saw time at receiver, safety, and running back during fall practice before settling in at receiver. Kyles has tremendous speed but needs to work on his consistency in the receiving department.

The Blue Raiders will also count on newcomers Andrew Banks, Eldred King, Chris McClover, Malcolm Beyah, and Marcus Thurmond when fall camp begins in August.

Tight End

Despite losing regulars Stephen Chicola and Clinton Corder, the Blue Raiders will go into the 2008 campaign deep at the tight end position. Chicola and Corder accounted for 16 of the 23 receptions made by the tight end position a year ago.

Leading the charge will be sophomore Alvin Ingle from nearby Madison, Tenn. The best athlete among the tight ends, Ingle is coming off a season in which he hauled in seven receptions for 77 yards and a touchdown. Ingle has the ability to be a threat down field in the passing game but must continue his improvement in the blocking department.

Behind Ingle will be former quarterback Gene Delle Donne who made the move to tight end at the conclusion of fall camp last year. Delle Donne played in seven games a year ago and possesses the tools to be an effective player at the position. At 6-5, he could become a weapon in the passing game.

Also working at tight end will be redshirt freshman Byron McLeod and senior John Marc Stephens. McLeod saw action in three games before suffering a season-ending shoulder injury; Stephens played in just one game last year.

Offensive Line

The most important unit on the offensive side of the ball is the offensive line, and the Blue Raiders

are coming off an inconsistent season in 2007. The group returns three starters but must find replacements for Brandon Nix and all-conference performer Franklin Dunbar, who left early for the NFL Draft.

The returning starters are junior Mark Thompson, sophomore Jamal Lewis, and sophomore Mark Fisher.

Thompson is coming off a solid season in which he started all 12 games with the last 11 at center. He will move to right tackle in 2008. Thompson, who will be counted on heavily for leadership this season, had 832 snaps last year to rank third among the linemen.

Lewis and Fisher saw their first collegiate snaps in 2007 with both playing in all 12 games and earning 10 starts. Lewis should man the left guard spot with Fisher at right tackle. A shoulder injury in spring practice could keep the talented sophomore out the entire 2008 season.

With Fisher out, redshirt freshman Mike Williams will take over at left tackle. Williams enjoyed a solid spring and the coaches love his upside.

The favorite at right guard will be sophomore Chris Hawkins, who saw spot duty in just three games a year ago.

Taking care of the middle should be freshman Jake Padrick with senior Chris Ritter providing depth. Padrick missed all of last year with a shoulder injury, and the coaches are very excited about finally getting him on the field. Ritter, out of Shalimar, Fla., has played in just five games during his career.

Redshirt sophomores J.C. Moore and Evon Lettsome, along with redshirt freshmen Colin Boss, will provide depth along the offensive front.

The Blue Raiders will begin fall camp on Saturday in preparation for the season opener against Troy on August 28.

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