


August 22, 2008

Blue Raiders to begin 2008 season Saturday

Match set for 6:30 PM at Jacksonville State

David Powell



The Blue Raiders return 15 players from last year's squad that finished second in the Sun Belt Conference during the regular season. (MT) 

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn.- Middle Tennessee soccer is set to play their first match of the season as they travel to take on the Jacksonville State Gamecocks on Saturday. The return of key veterans and the emergence in preseason camp of several exciting newcomers have the Blue Raiders striving for big things in 2008.

The team is coming off a disappointing defeat on penalty kicks to Arkansas-Little Rock in the first round of the Sun Belt Conference Tournament in 2007, but a second-place regular-season finish last season leaves the perennial Sun Belt Conference contenders with a mix of high expectations and something to prove.

"I think we have a lot of young kids who are good leaders and some senior players who have stepped up and are doing a good job of leading on the field," Head Coach Aston Rhoden said. "We have a lot of players coming into their own now and unless you are familiar with the team you will not be able to tell which players are senior players and which are new players."

Rhoden's squads are known for their attacking-brand of soccer that utilizes efficient possession to create scoring opportunities. The influx of young players into the program should do little to alter that game plan as long as defensive lapses are kept to a minimum.

"We will certainly look to play an attacking style but at the same time we have put a lot of emphasis on consistent defending in the preseason," Rhoden said. "We have a lot of new players in both the defensive unit and in the attacking unit, so we have to make sure that they know what to do."

Goalkeeping is one of the most important positions on the soccer field and it is one that the Blue Raiders have no need to worry about during the coming season. They return two talented goalkeepers in Kela Casiple and Erynn Muray, both whom have acquitted themselves well during the preseason.

"Erynn is going into her junior season and has shown signs in preseason camp of what she did her first year here," Rhoden said. "Kela was great last year during her freshman season and it looks like she is picking up where she left off."

After two weeks of intensive training in preseason camp and last Saturday's 3-1 exhibition win against Austin Peay, the squad is anxious to begin regular season play against Jacksonville State.

The Julie Davis-led Gamecocks return six of their 11 starters and just ten players overall from last year's squad that finished 4-12-1. They played to a 5-1 loss and the Under-17 Mexican National Team on August 15.

"Jacksonville State will be very disciplined and organized, as well as being tough to break down defensively," Rhoden said. "They should have some weapons up top that may create problems for us and I looking forward to beginning the season."

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