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Balance, experience key components for women's golfers

2008-09 season opens this weekend

MT Athletic Communications

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Chris Adams sees the best of both worlds as the Middle Tennessee women's golf team begins the 2008-09 season at the Chris Banister Golf Classic in Glencoe, Ala., this weekend.

Half of the Blue Raiders' six-person roster includes three upperclassmen with a wealth of tournament experience in seniors [Mallory Bishop](#) and [Leigh Wilkins](#) and junior [Clara Leathers](#). On the other hand, Adams is excited about the prospect of three hot-shot underclassmen including sophomore [Morgan Hale](#) and freshmen [Karisa Akin](#) and [Steph Gough](#).

The blend of experience and quality youth excites Adams, who is really starting anew after being hired in December, 2007 and coaching the team through the spring.

"Coming in during the middle was a little different last year so just starting over a new year, a complete new year, getting my own tournament schedule, sometimes you get a feel for things and it's the start of your program," Adams said. "I hope to have a good fresh start and we are excited about the beginning of a new year."

Adams believes the team's greatest asset this season will be a balanced lineup and experience where it counts.

"I like our chances with the players we have coming back with the experience factor," Adams said. "Obviously we lost two very good seniors in Taryn Durham and Jamey Dillard but the skill level of the players returning is high. They all have competed and traveled and at some time they all have led the team in scoring. I think the morale of the team is any one of them can be No. 1 and in the past maybe they haven't felt that behind a player like Taryn Durham and all she accomplished here. If someone slips up they know someone will be there to pick up the slack."

All six players will be on the course when the Blue Raiders open the fall season in the first of five fall events. Wilkins is the most experienced player in the lineup with 29 career tournaments under her belt. More importantly, the Murfreesboro native started coming into her own at the end of her junior season and it carried into the summer.

Wilkins, who played in four consecutive Class AAA state tournaments during her prep career at nearby Oakland High School, won the Metro Nashville Championship with two rounds in the 60s and a bogey-free tournament during the summer. She also finished runner-up to last year's Big 12 champion in a Collegiate Players Event and had a Top 20 finish in the Tennessee State Open.

This on the heels of leading the Blue Raiders in scoring at the Sun Belt Conference Championships where Wilkins turned in her fifth career Top 10 finish by placing eighth and narrowly missing all-conference honors.

"Leigh had a strong finish to the spring season and that carried over into the summer," Adams said. "She worked hard and had some very impressive showings. I look for her to carry that into the season and be one of our leaders."

Bishop is another veteran and she has played in 27 career tournaments at Middle Tennessee. Bishop also enjoyed a good summer. She fashioned a Top 20 finish at the Tennessee State Open and reached the semifinals of the Tennessee State Amateur before falling to the eventual champion.

"I'm proud of Mallory and am expecting her to be a contributor this season," Adams said. "She enjoyed a good summer and considering we only have six seniors in the lineup (Wilkins and Bishop's) leadership will have to come out even more."

Leathers also has a wealth of tournament experience. She has logged 26 career tournaments and appears to be brewing with confidence at the outset of what she hopes will be a strong junior campaign.

Adams said Leathers spent most of the summer working on her game and the results have been evident during fall practice.

"Clara spent the summer working on more lessons and swing mechanics," Adams said. "She has come into this fall with a great deal of confidence and I'm expecting good things from Clara this year."

Hale burst onto the scene as a freshman at the end of last season and offered a glimpse of the potential she possesses. Hale, a two-time All-State performer at Tullahoma High School, played in four tournaments during her debut season, including the last three. She led the team in scoring at the Challenge at Wolfdancer and finished fourth overall. She also won a Collegiate Players Event this summer.



Leigh Wilkins is one of two seniors on the Blue Raiders' women's golf roster. (B. Lambert)

Akin and Gough bring lofty prep credentials and will be in the lineup for their first college event this weekend. Akin won the Kentucky Open with a great finishing round this summer. She was a four-time All-State selection at Central Hardin High School in Elizabethton, Ky.

Gough enters her freshman season after strong showings in two prestigious events in her native England. She won the Bucks County Junior Championship and finished runner-up in the Bucks County Ladies Championship. Gough has enjoyed strong fall practices and earned the top spot in the lineup during qualifying. "I'm sure Karisa and Steph will be a little nervous at the beginning because even though they have played a lot of golf there is still nothing like playing in college," Adams said. "I hope with their golf experience and golf backgrounds they can come in and prove they can play. There will be growing pains but that comes from the lack of experience. I do think in the end this group will play with a lot of confidence."

The Blue Raiders open in a three-day, 54-hole event at Silver Lakes Golf Course on the Robert Trent Jones Trail. The Chris Banister Classic is hosted by Jacksonville State.

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