Middle Tennessee set to open regular season Saturday

Blue Raiders begin their 34th season of women's basketball in the Preseason WNIT.

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee women's basketball will open its 2008-09 regular season at 7 p.m. Saturday when the Blue Raiders play host to Lafayette College in a Preseason WNIT matchup inside the Murphy Center. It will mark the first meeting between the two schools.

"We are improving every day," said head coach Rick Insell. "Overall we are passing the ball better than any time I have had since coming to Middle Tennessee. We are shooting extremely well and I like the chemistry of our team. The leadership and the communication are there as well. We have some things about this basketball team that we have lacked in the last three years. We have had some good players and teams in the past but some of the things I just mentioned we did not have."

MT completed a successful 2-0 exhibition campaign with wins over Kentucky Wesleyan and Lincoln Memorial. The Lady Raiders started Nov. 3 with an 82-51 triumph over Kentucky Wesleyan with junior transfer Alysha Clark leading all players with a double-double of 30 points and 11 rebounds in her first Middle Tennessee action. The two-time player of the

year in the Atlantic Sun, Clark sat out last season due to NCAA transfer regulations but will wear the blue and white for Insell's squad this season.

Sophomore Emily Queen came off the bench to net 17 points, including a 7-of-10 field goal performance. Junior point guard Chelsia Lymon joined her in double figures with 12 points and a game-high seven swipes on the defensive end. Her steals were part of a 21-to-3 advantage the Blue Raiders carried in the category, while forcing 40 Lady Panther turnovers.

"We still have some things we need to work on. When we decide to play good defense then we are a good defensive team. Sometimes we take 10 possessions and only on about one and a half of them will we play great defense. The other times we are going through the motions and are getting away from our game plan. We have to come out and maintain the focus and the intensity to shut an opponent down during every possession. If we can get to that we will be a very good basketball team."

Scoring picked up for MT in the second exhibition game, as it posted a 116-41 victory over Lincoln Memorial Nov. 10. Six Blue Raiders reached the double-figure scoring plateau, including all five starters.

Clark again poured in 30 points, on 12-of-16 field goals, in just 20 minutes of action. She contributed 12 of the team's first 22 points in the second half.

Sophomore Anne Marie Lanning nearly added a double-double of her own, finishing with 10 points and a game-high eight rebounds. Seven of the eight boards came on the defensive end and helped the Blue Raiders to a 43-to-31 edge in the category.

Queen (16), Jackie Pickel (15), Lymon (14) and Brandi Brown (14) also surpassed the double-digit mark for MT, as the team shot 53.8 percent (43-of-80) from the field. The Lady Raiders also knocked down 16-of-32 (50.0 percent) of their shots from behind the 3-point arc.

"We are happy to start at home. It beats going to Old Dominion and on the road against it in 2007-08. We have to take the same approach against Lafayette that we had against top-ranked Maryland at home in 2006-07. We have to come out with the approach that Lafayette is a very talented basketball team. They are well coached and their players are highly intelligent, knock down shots and pass the ball well. They are a lot like us and we have to bring the same intensity with Lafayette as we did against Maryland. We need to be ready to play from the opening whistle."

Middle Tennessee is coming off a 22-12 record from a year ago and an appearance in the second round of the Postseason WNIT. The Blue Raiders knocked off then-No. 8 LSU inside the Murphy Center and earned a 14-4 record in Sun Belt Conference action.

Lafayette enters Saturday's game following a 14-16 (6-8 Patriot League) mark in 2007-08. The 14 wins were double of its previous season's total and the six victories in league play were the Leopards' most since equaling the mark in 1997-98.

Head coach Tammy Smith's squad returns four starters and 11 letterwinners but Lafayette will have to find an answer to the departure of leading scorer Vanessa Van De Venter, who averaged 15.6 points per game. She finished her career fifth on the school's all-time scoring list with 1,381 career points.

Tickets for the Preseason WNIT game are $11 for adults and $4 for students. Call the MT ticket office at 1-888-YES-MTSU for more information.

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