

August 14, 2009

Soccer season begins with Sunday's exhibition

Blue Raiders to battle Jacksonville State at 5 p.m. at home

Athletic Communications

Middle Tennessee earned its sixth-straight winning season among head coach Aston Rhoden's seven years last fall. This season the Blue Raiders have greater aspirations and welcome back three all-conference performers to a core which allowed the fewest goals scored in program history. Middle Tennessee also had a solid recruiting period, in which it inked five freshmen and a pair of transfers, all of whom will have the opportunity to compete immediately for starting slots. Below is a position-by-position breakdown of the 2009 Blue Raiders.

FORWARDS

[Shan Jones](#), [Luisa Moscoso](#), [Alyssa Palmacci](#) and Jennifer Threlkeld all return at the forward position for the Blue Raiders. Together the group accounted for 16 of the Blue Raiders 26 goals last season. Newcomers [Regina Thomas](#), [Paige Goeglein](#) and [Whitney Jorgenson](#) are expected to challenge for playing time immediately and will add some diversity to an already potent attack.

Jones returns after a stellar freshman performance last season, which saw her gain Sun Belt and regional attention. The sophomore forward from Wales played well in the off-season and is projected to be a great offensive weapon for the Blue Raiders. Much like Jones, Threlkeld also had a solid year and proved to be another offensive weapon for the team. Moscoso saw plenty of action as a freshman last year and had a productive spring season. Palmacci missed the season due to an ACL injury but showed flashes of brilliance throughout the spring.

The newcomers will add some flexibility to the Blue Raiders' offense. This group brings pace, creativity and keen awareness in front of the goal.

"I'm very excited at our attacking options," noted Rhoden. "This group of players will be capable of scoring multiple goals per game. All our forwards are very efficient inside and around the box and possess good speed, strength and strong mental toughness. The versatility utilized by this group will allow us to feature several different attacking schemes."

MIDFIELDERS

The midfield will most likely be the most competitive position on the team this year. Veteran midfielder [Sarah Beth Lee](#) leads the way for a strong group of young players.

Joining Lee in midfield will be returnees [Jaimee Cooper](#), [Hope Suominen](#), [Vanessa Mueggler](#), [Laura Lamberth](#) and freshman [Allison Stallard](#).

The midfielders performed very well last season and during the spring. Suominen and Lamberth have adjusted to the college game and showed improvement during the spring. Mueggler had a great year as did Cooper and Lee. All three players will be a force with which to be reckoned and are predicted to be significant contributors this year.

Stallard is a strong physical player with great athleticism, shooting and passing range. She brings a winning mentality to the program and is expected to challenge for a starting position.

"Despite this group's youthfulness, I expect it to be a solid part of our team. There are a lot of different personalities in this group which will make it a very dynamic and productive unit."

DEFENDERS

All-conference selection and team captain [Fran Howells](#) leads the defensive unit for the Blue Raiders. Returnees [Emily Snowdon](#), [Elisabeth Sikes](#), [Jenna Bowers](#), [Charity Blair](#), [Jessica Heckman](#), [Emily Harris](#) and newcomer [Emily Hancock](#), will join her. Much like our midfield group, the defense will consist of several young but talented players.

Howells was a stalwart in the back for the Blue Raiders and also as an attacking option. Sikes and Blair missed the latter part of the campaign due to injuries and Heckman missed the season due to an ACL injury. All made tremendous progress during the spring and adjusted well to the speed of the college game. Bowers played well in the fall and made significant progress during the spring season. Returning defenders Snowdon and Harris showed much improvement throughout the spring and will be vying for starting positions this fall.



Junior Fran Howells returns to a Blue Raider defense which set school records in 2008 for fewest goals allowed (21) and lowest opponent's goals against average (1.00). (Bradley Lambert)

Hancock's experience at the national team level will be an asset for the team in the back. She has great work ethic and her versatility will improve our backline.

"We now have a lot of depth in our defense. Several of our young players have grown more confident and will be solid contributors to the team. Our new players will allow us to maintain a solid defensive unit throughout the season."

GOALKEEPERS

Goalkeeping duties will rest on the shoulders of [Erynn Murray](#), [Rebecca Cushing](#) and [Jessica Gilchrist](#).

Murray is the only returning keeper and has acquired a better understanding of the defensive schemes. Both Cushing and Gilchrist are great additions to the team and both will challenge Murray for the starting position immediately.

The position will be one of the biggest battles in preseason camp with the competition most likely continuing into the early part of the campaign before a consistent starting keeper is named.

"It's great to finally have three keepers with close to equal abilities. With three very solid keepers, we should see increased competition for playing time. The position is wide open and a good showing in preseason by any keeper will earn her early playing time."

SCHEDULE

The 2009 schedule is very balanced but challenging and features teams from strong conferences such as the Big 12, Atlantic 10 and Missouri Valley. The Blue Raiders open the season on the road with in-state rival Tennessee Tech before traveling to Dayton, Ohio, to compete against first-time opponents Wright State and perennial powerhouse Dayton. Home stints with Alabama A&M, Oklahoma and Belmont along with road trips to Evansville and Austin Peay round out the non-conference slate. The team also will be tested with a rigorous Sun Belt schedule with conference home openers against FIU and Florida Atlantic, September 25 and 27, respectively.

"Despite having another winning season we were not pleased with our finish in the league or the way we lost games. This year our team goals are to finish in the top two of the SBC regular season and championship tournament as well as make the NCAA Tournament. To accomplish the first two goals, we have to play a schedule much like that we have put together for the 2009 season. I am confident we can reach all our goals if we are able to remain injury free in certain positions this season. We are a young team and only time will tell."

This is the youngest Blue Raider squad since Coach Rhoden started here in 2002. However, despite its youth, the team has great chemistry, a lot of talent and some unfinished business stemming from last season. Despite having a slow start, the Blue Raiders were in a position to finish within the top two of the league on the last day of conference play. The squad is yearning for a spot in the NCAA Tournament and this year's team is determined to go to "The Dance." With a strong returning group, a very talented recruiting class, strong leadership and a bit of luck, the Blue Raiders could get their chance to represent the Sun Belt in the NCAA Tournament in 2009. As Coach Rhoden pointed out recently, "only time will tell."

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