

August 15, 2005

## Monday's football camp notebook

*MT Media Relations*

### MT FOOTBALL NOTEBOOK

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Middle Tennessee is putting an emphasis on its ground attack in 2005 after struggling to run the ball consistently during the 2004 campaign. Junior running back **Eugene Gross** was the team's leading rusher last season with 412 yards, the lowest output for a leading ground gainer at Middle Tennessee since 1969 when Reuben Justice's 375 yards led the way.

The onus for a revamped running game in 2005 rests squarely on the shoulders of an offensive line that returns three starters and an attitude committed to running the ball productively.

"As an offensive lineman you love to run block so we are trying to focus on the running game," center **Marcus Gates** said. "Being able to run the ball with an attitude is the whole offense. You have to have the interior blocking but the perimeter with the receivers is important and the quarterbacks have a job to do. It's the whole offense, not just the line. We have the attitude that we are going to come out and run it down people's throats."

Middle Tennessee Head Coach Andy McCollum says the emphasis on putting balance back in the Blue Raider offense actually began during the offseason and has carried over into this preseason.

"You have to have guys that it means something to run the ball and you have to get a push up front," McCollum said. "The people we play are good up front and we have to match up. That's been the attitude through the spring and it has carried through into fall camp. We have to have tough guys and I think we are starting to get tough guys."

Gates, **Willie Hall**, and **Germayle Franklin** are returning starters in the trenches, while **Franklin Dunbar**, **Brian Smith**, **Richard Bortner** and **Brandon Nix** also have caught the attention of the staff. Nix has been recovering from an injury that has slowed him during camp and the staff is hopeful he will be back in action within the week.

"(Hall, Gates, and Franklin) are leading by example and they have great work ethic," McCollum said. "We still have a lot of work to do but the work ethic and attitude right now is where you want it."

**HIS TIME TO SHINE:** Senior **Chris Henry** enters the 2005 season as the team's most experienced receiver with 93 career catches and one career touchdown.

His name rarely is mentioned in preseason magazines or conversations regarding whom will replace heralded receiver Kerry Wright among pass catchers, but McCollum said Henry's teammates know what is on the horizon for the Kingsport native who has spent his career playing in the shadows of some of the greatest receivers in school history.

"**Chris Henry** has been an unsung guy around here for three years but he does everything right," McCollum said. "He has made a lot of big plays around here for three years. He has great hands and is a tough competitor. Everyone on this team knows when he gets his hands on the ball, something good is going to happen."

Henry doesn't care about the limelight that has accompanied Middle Tennessee receivers

since the move to Division I-A in 1999. Three Blue Raider receivers - Kendall Newson, Tyrone Calico and Wright - all have been in NFL camps since 2001.

What he does care about is becoming a difference maker and the 5-foot-8 receiver believes he is more than capable.

"I feel this will be my breakout year," said Henry, whose 60 receptions in 2004 were a career high. "I need to show everyone I can make plays and do it consistently. As a group (of receivers), we feel pretty confident about the way things have gone so far. I think all of us can make plays and everybody is accepting their role. I believe we have several guys capable of making plays when they are called on."

Although Henry is clearly the leader of the returning receivers, McCollum said few bring up his name when asking about the deep corps.

"Chris is a guy that doesn't want the recognition and that's rare in this day and time," McCollum said. "He just goes out and does his job. Even this year, when people get excited about our receivers they want to talk about **Cleannord Saintil**, **Pierre Ingram** and even some of our new guys, but (Henry) is still one you never hear about."

In addition to Henry, Ingram, Saintil, **Taron Henry**, **Walt Bell**, **Linnie Yarbrough**, and a host of newcomers, are expected to make an impact among the receiving corps.

In addition to the receivers, Middle Tennessee expects greater productivity from its tight ends in 2005. **Stephen Chicola** is a great route runner who hauled in 14 receptions as a freshman in 2004, while Clint Corder is braced for a productive season after missing all of last season with an ankle injury.

"We really haven't had that threat in the passing game and now we do," McCollum said. "I believe those tight ends will make a big difference in our running and passing game."

**MANY HAPPY RETURNS:** Linebacker **Jonathan Bonner** appears to be fully recovered from a cervical fusion suffered in the opener against Akron last year and cost him the rest of the season and spring. The junior linebacker is having a strong preseason camp and will help solidify the middle of the Blue Raider defense.

"It's great to be back out here and practicing with the team," Bonner said. "I feel good and have had no problems. It was tough not being able to get out there and help the team last year, but I'm glad to be back now and have the chance to make a difference. I think our defense has made strides and we just have to keep doing that day by day."

**WAKE-UP CALL:** Freshman safety **Bryant House** delivered the hit of the day during the morning session Monday when he met running back **Ronald Steed** head-on and sent a wave of excitement through the defensive corps.

House, who hails from Kingsland, Ga., tackled Steed with such force that the tailback's helmet went flying from his head and traveled some 3-to-4 yards downfield.

"**Bryant House** definitely got our attention. I know he got (Sneed's)," McCollum said, grinning. "That was one of the hardest hits I've seen by a freshman. It livened the whole thing up."

Junior safety **Justin Rainey** also made a splash during the morning session with a nice open-field tackle on the goal-line.

**MCCOLLUM ON CONDITIONING:** "We are not where we have to be but we are not far off. We had a good, hot morning and the players continue to respond and work through it. It's been good so far, especially as far as the attitude and the approach. We just have to keep going and building. We get a lot of conditioning done during practice because it is high

tempo and we run a lot. We are a high-tempo offense, but we also do it for conditioning."

**TIDBITS:** In today's USA Today, the paper had a story on North Texas' running backs and on the SBC. Ironically, the article predicted the Blue Raiders to win the league in 2005 ... Due to this afternoon's storm, the afternoon practice was delayed until 7:20 PM tonight in the stadium.

**BLUE RAIDER BLAST:** The final "Blue Raider Blast" will be held in Downtown Murfreesboro on the square, Thursday, August 18, from 5:30-7:30 p.m. This event is geared toward Blue Raider fans, alumni, and supporters in Rutherford County and surrounding areas and all interested parties are encouraged to attend and meet Middle Tennessee players, coaches, athletic administrators and University administrators as the athletic department gears up for the start of the 2005-06 school year. Admission to the "Blue Raider Blast" is free; however, food provided by Whitt's Barbecue will be available for \$5 per plate. The blast will include music, inflatables, face painting and a special guest appearance by Middle Tennessee mascot, "Lightning," to entertain the youngsters. Sponsored by the Middle Tennessee Alumni Office, the Blue Raider Athletic Association and the Middle Tennessee Athletic Department, the "Blue Raider Blasts" are designed to give fans an opportunity to meet with student-athletes, coaches and administrators and to officially start getting geared toward the beginning of all sports. Middle Tennessee also will be hosting the Sun Belt Conference men's and women's basketball tournament, the conference volleyball tournament and the men's and women's indoor track and field championships in 2005-06. For more information, contact the Alumni Office at 615-898-2922.

**FAN/MEDIA DAY:** Middle Tennessee's annual Fan/Media Day is scheduled for August 20 at Noon in Floyd Stadium. There will be free hot dogs and cokes given away while supplies last, games for the kids, and various drawings. Also, tickets will be on sale as well as this year's football media guide. As always, fans can get player autographs and photos so make plans now to check out this year's team as they prepare for the season-opener on Sept. 3.

**FENTON PAYNE AND FRED 5K:** On Saturday morning, Aug. 20, the second annual Fenton Payne and Fred 5K Run/Walk to take place on the campus of Middle Tennessee. The event will get underway at 7:30 AM with registration at Peck Hall. The cost is \$25 with cash prizes going to the winning male and female and the overall masters (40 years and over). There will also be awards to the top three finishers in all divisions, male and female, 9 and under, then 5 year age groups through 80 and over. For more information, contact Mark Hardison at 615-848-9063.

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