Blue Raiders set to open 2010 season

Will begin season at Memphis

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Coming off last season's record-setting campaign, the Middle Tennessee baseball team faces the challenges of not only repeating as Sun Belt Conference champions but also going deeper into the NCAA tournament. Steve Peterson, beginning his 23rd season as the head coach of the Blue Raiders, feels like his 2010 team has a chance to be even better than last year, when they won 44 games, including a 27-4 record at home, and posted a 21-8 record in the conference. At least one poll agrees with Peterson. The USA Today/ESPN coaches preseason poll listed the Blue Raiders 38th in the nation with 13 votes, tops among the three Sun Belt Conference teams that were ranked. "I think we have a team that can compete in the upper level of the Sun Belt Conference," Peterson said. "If we can compete in the upper level, then we have a chance to win the league. If we can do that, we have a chance to go to the NCAA tournament. The history of the Sun Belt is that the champion gets at least an at-large berth, whether they win the tournament or not." Peterson warns that everything has to fall in place if his team is to have another "magical season." "There are so many things that enter in like injuries, weather, team chemistry and mental preparation. You never know when all of that stuff will fall into place again. The record we broke for wins last season was set in 1990, 19 years ago. You just never know." Peterson will have 19 lettermen, including nine seniors to work with, but will have to find replacements for some very good players who graduated. Among the missing are all-time home run, total bases, walks and RBI leader Rawley Bishop, centerfielder Nathan Hines, closer Cody Woods, and second baseman Taylor Dennis. Despite the loss of key players, MTSU has a lot of firepower and pitching coming back in 2010. All-American Bryce Brentz, now a junior, was named the Player of the Year in the Sun Belt last season as a sophomore. The Knoxville native hit .465 with 28 home runs, 73 RBI's, 214 total bases and a .930 slugging

percentage. He also posted a 5-3 record on the mound, with a 4.57 ERA in starting 14 games for the Blue Raiders. Peterson knows that for Middle Tennessee to have a successful season, Brentz will have to have another great year. "We hope and expect that Bryce will have a successful season, but he is going to have to have someone hitting in front of him that can get on base, and someone behind him that is hitting well enough to keep teams from pitching around him," Peterson stated. Peterson is also aware of the responsibility that will be placed on Brentz this year. As an All-American and a likely top-five draft choice, Brentz will face a season loaded with distractions. Overall, the Blue Raider pitching can be better than last year. They've added some quality arms to the staff, both freshmen and junior college players. "Our pitching staff starts with senior Kenny Roberts. He will go in as the ace of our staff, and he's a lefthander who earned All-Conference honors last year," Peterson noted. "Past Roberts we have very little left-handed pitching experience. We lost Brett Wilson to an injury, and he's out for the year. Our only other left-hander with any experience at all is Justin Guidry, who also plays outfield and first base, and will play a big role for us this year. He could pitch as either a starter or a reliever. "Roberts (11-1, 3.04 ERA, 62K's) can match up with anybody in the conference on Fridays, so we are in good shape there," said Peterson. "We'll just have to see how Bryce does before we decide where to use him." Peterson has indicated he will start the season using Brentz (5-3, 4.57, 63 K) as a closer or short reliever, and also play him in center field. If the starting pitching doesn't come through as well as Peterson hopes and expects, then Brentz could wind up being the Saturday starter, as he was last year. Peterson would like for Brentz to replace Woods as the closer and save his arm with less innings, even though he would likely make more appearances. Chad Edwards, another senior with three letters, will be a strong candidate for a slot in the three-man weekend rotation. Edwards (8-2, 5.77, 42K) had an outstanding season last year, including good outings against Vanderbilt and Mississippi State, and was promoted to the weekend trio in the South Alabama series. Peterson will look at the pitchers with experience he already has before he makes any moves to use some impressive freshmen in key situations. "We have to see what we are going to get from guys like Tyler Hyde, Jud Stoltz, Marshall Mears, Nick Montgomery and Kevin Whittaker. Whittaker was injured last year, but these are five guys that have experience for us. If they can give us some quality innings, assume and keep roles as starters or relievers, and contribute, that would allow the newcomers to work their way in." There are three newcomers who could make a big impact. Freshman Daniel Palo, a big right-hander who was drafted by the Dodgers, chose to come to Middle Tennessee instead. He has a lot of talent, and will get a chance to pitch very early. Hunter Adkins, another freshman right-hander, has a lot of talent, good velocity, good curveball but needs to work on location. Eric Gilley, a transfer from Vol State CC, is another talented right-hander. Peterson is pleased at how well Gilley got improved throughout the fall. "All in all, pitching is the name of the game, and to have a year like we did last year, we need quality pitching. Now, I'll take a 10-9 win, but we don't need to be playing 10-9 ballgames. We have the opportunity to have a better pitching staff, with some quality and additional arms." In Brentz, Peterson has the cornerstone of a very strong lineup but knows there must be hitters all up and down the lineup to equal the production of last season. "Last year we had Hines and Bishop batting before and behind Bryce, and they are gone. That was a really strong middle of the order," Peterson noted. Some guys are going to have to step up and fill those two slots." Newcomer Will Skinner, one of the top junior college hitters in the nation last year, will more than likely be one of the hitters flanking Brentz. Veterans Blake McDade (.340, 6 HR, 51 RBI) and Tyler Burnett (.344, 7 HR, 37 RBI) will be candidates for the other slot. McDade will be the first baseman for the Blue Raiders, while Burnett will move from shortstop to third base. A pleasant surprise in practice thus far has been Zach Hudson, who has played well in the outfield but may get a shot at third base if Tyler Burnett falters. "Tyler is a better hitter than Zach, but sometimes has trouble with lefthanders, so it may wind up

being a platoon situation." Also expected to produce are senior catcher Drew Robertson, who batted .312 with 36 RBI but tailed off at the end of the season, and senior right fielder Stuart Meinhart (.324, 6 HR, 50 RBI). "Drew Robertson has been a starter for three years, and is one of the top defensive catchers in the country." Peterson said. "He has also made himself into a .300 hitter. He was doing better than that at mid-season but tailed off at the end of the year because he had to catch every game. Catching takes a lot out of you." Justin Miller will be the second baseman. He is a junior with two letters and will replace Taylor Dennis, who was one of the best fielding second basemen in the league. But Peterson thinks that Miller can be just as good. "Justin can make the plays that we saw Taylor make last year. He has a lot of talent and is an outstanding second baseman. He can hit and he can run. It could be really exciting to watch Justin's development this season" If Burnett stays at third, it would open the door for Peterson to start a true freshman at shortstop. Ryan Ford has been very impressive in practices so far, making all of the routine plays. "I think we will have a better team this year, but if everybody in the Sunbelt is better, and they could well be, then it won't show up. We will just be playing to get into the tournament. The Sun Belt is a heck of a league, very competitive, and one of the top leagues in the country," said Peterson. "We have good players, but every team in the league has good players. It's going to be a lot of fun. Our goal this year is to repeat as champions and to sell more season tickets than we ever have. We have won championships here before and have learned that it is harder to defend a championship than it is to win one. And that is certainly true in the Sun Belt Conference. Everybody is gunning for you."

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