New beginnings for MT Softball

2010 season opens this weekend at Kennesaw State Tournament

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - The Middle Tennessee Softball team kicks off its 2010 campaign this weekend in Kennesaw, Ga., as the team will travel to the Phyllis Rafter Memorial tournament hosted by Kennesaw State.

The 2010 campaign will be a period of new beginnings for the Blue Raider softball squad as the team looks to redeem themselves from an '09 season filled with disappointment and injury.

"Last season is behind us, and we are turning the page," said head coach Sue Never. "It is a new year and we have seen some great improvement from fall to spring. We have solidified our freshman class which is key because we will have freshman in our starting order."

Senior Lindsey Vander Lugt will be called upon to be the workhorse for the Blue Raiders on the mound this season. The hard-throwing lefty is chasing the record-books in 2010 and is expected to finish among the tops in school history in wins, appearances, innings pitched and strikeouts. Behind Vander Lugt, sophomore Caty Jutson and freshman Janele Robinson will also handle hurling duties. Jutson will provide the ice for Vander Lugt's heat. The Phoenix, Ariz., native gets by with an

excellent accuracy and a strong command of the strike-zone. She lacks the power of Vander Lugt but uses guile and pin-point precision to handle opposing hitter. Robinson is a hard-throwing freshman who is improving her accuracy and consistency. Nevar and the team expect 20 to 25 wins from ace Vander Lugt.

Vander Lugt talked about dealing with the pressure in 2010, "I like the pressure and expect it when playing at this level. I need my defense to win and everything is a total team effort."

Natalie Ysais is the only returning battery-mate from last season's squad. Ysais' dependability and catching abilities behind the plate are strong and will complement the team's pitching talent. Transfers Jessi Couch and Abbey Sanders will also help out behind the plate this spring.

Kaycee Popham, Jessica Ives, Kandra Singelton and Brittney Banania make up the returning Blue Raider infielders with incoming freshmen Kailey McDougald and Kristi Marquez. Popham and Ives will handle responsibilities at first-base as both can produce at the plate and in the field. Singleton and McDougald will handle second, Banania will hold the short stop position, and Marquez expected to start at third.

"Our team will have to play superb defense as a whole if we are going to have any chance this year. This starts with our infield. Brittany has the tools to be one of the best shortstops in the Sun Belt. She has worked on her hitting and will looked to for clutch hitting this year. Kristi will start at third and will provide great power at the plate for us," said Nevar.

The Blue Raider outfield should be one of the top groups in the Sun Belt Conference offensively and defensively with the most upper-classmen starters at any position on the field. Senior Caitlin McLure will be the catalyst that will kick-start the team's potent offense. A consistent lead-off hitter and crafty base-runner, McLure is tied for seventh in school history in stolen bases with 45 and runs scored with 79. Big-bat and 2008 Second-Team All-Sun Belt selection Corrie Abel returns after redshirting in 2009 because of injury. Abel's return should help provide a huge offensive prowess as the Shorewood, Ill., native currently holds a batting average of .363. In 2008, she batted .381 while driving in 26 runs and posting a slugging percent of .518. Kelsey Dortch is the third returning outfielder. Dorcth has developed into a sensational player and has proven herself as one of the key leaders on the team and was named team co-captain with McLure and Vander Lugt. Freshman Ashia Terry and Nina Davenport will provide depth.

"We try to lead by example, but we try not to take into account what year a player may be. We put them out their expect them to play a team role as much as we expect from the juniors and seniors," Vander Lugt.

The team will open this weekend at the Phyllis Rafter Memorial in Kennesaw, Ga. after having their opening tournament in Murfreesboro canceled do to inclement weather. This weekend they will face Southern Illinois and Kennesaw State on Friday, Alabama State and Western Illinois on Saturday and conclude with Mercer on Sunday.

"We missed not getting to play last weekend at home," said Nevar. "We will go into this weekend as the only team that has not played their first game. It is critical that we go into this confident and prepared and not anxious to play and you are making mistake because you are in a hurry. The teams we are playing are coming out swinging and are average six runs a game between the five of them."

Vander Lugt will start in the opener verses Southern Illinois. In her last appearance against the Salukis, Vander Lugt pitched a complete game one-hit, shut-out with seven strike-outs.

Stay tuned to goblueraiders.com for all 2010 team coverage and results.

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