

Mat drills in final week

Annual pre-practice ritual has players up bright and early

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About 20 minutes after sunrise, Coach Rick Stockstill's voice rang out to his sweating and exhausted players. Stockstill's voice is intense, as was the hour of mat drills that his Middle Tennessee football team had just endured.

"Defense up! It's fourth and goal at the one (yard line), with one second left on the clock. Go!"

The entire defense does rapid pushups while the offense cheers them on. After what seems like an eternity, but is only about 15 seconds, Stockstill yells "We win", and the mat drill Program for that day is over.

"It's what you can do when you think you can't do any more that makes a winner," says Stockstill. "It's all about mental toughness and discipline, as well as physical toughness."



The Mat Drill Program is two-thirds of the way through its three-week time frame. Three sessions, each starting at 5:45 am, are scheduled each week, although a lack of discipline can add an extra day to the program.

"We are scheduled to go on Monday, Wednesday and Friday each week, but we also went on Tuesday of last week because two players were late to class the previous Friday," said Stockstill.

The squad is divided into three groups depending on position, and each group spends 12 minutes at each of the three stations. Including exercises before and after, as well as short breaks, the session

lasts for an hour.

Managers and trainers keep squeeze bottles filled with water. "Get you a splash and go," says inside receiver's coach Brent Brock as his group heads to the next station.

No one escapes mat drills. If you have an injury severe enough to keep you out of the program, you ride a stationery bicycle for the entire hour. An arm in a sling will get you a bike ride, but sprains, bumps and bruises won't.

Even the bikers are scrutinized. New defensive line coach John Palermo wondered in a loud voice, "Is that as fast you can go? Pick up the pace!"

Russell Patterson, strength and conditioning coach for football, says the mat drill program has many functions, but perhaps the most important is finding new leadership.

"At this point, you have graduated all of your senior players from last fall, and new leadership is needed. Those guys are no longer here to help push you through it," said Patterson.

"These drills are the first opportunity to have the entire team together in a situation where somebody has got to step up and lead. Your rising seniors and juniors, and returning starters, see that now is the time for them to step up, to push the younger guys."

For the veterans, who know what to expect, and what is expected of them, it is only natural for them to emerge as the team leaders. For the newcomers, who have only heard about the mat drills, they really don't know what to expect.

Defensive tackle Dwight Smith, who is going through mat drills for the third time, says being a rising senior has added responsibility.

"Being a senior, there is no one left to look up to, and we have to take the responsibility of being the oldest and most experienced," said Smith. "We have to lead by example, not just vocally, and show the younger guys that they have to work hard as well."

"One of the purposes of the mat drills is to find out who is going to step up on third and inches, when you are tired and they are tired, who is going to find that last little bit of energy and push to get you through it. The coaches evaluate all of us, but the players watch each other, too. If a guy is going full speed in the drills, he's going to be going full speed on the field."

Some players can recall their "breakthrough moment", when it really hits them how important mat drills are. For Smith, it was his second day of mat drills as a freshman when senior Trevor Jenkins stood up about halfway through a drill and called them out.

"He said we had to come on and work hard and do better, that it was not just the mat drills, it was about getting better every day. He gave me words of encouragement, and I took that to heart and started getting better every day from that point on."

Freshman defensive end Omar McClendon said that the 5 am wake-up call was the hardest thing for him.

"Once you get there, and get calmed down after the first couple of days, it becomes a mind game."

You just have to go hard, and then the rest is really up to you. If you come in with the mindset that you are going to be first in every drill, then you'll be fine. You have to push yourself because the coaches already know what you can do. They have seen you run, and they know if you are going all out or not." `

Redshirt freshman Jamal Ramsey said it was hard work, and that the coaches really pushed them.

"The biggest thing we are learning is that we can push ourselves a lot harder than we thought we could. When I get in a game, I will have the advantage of knowing that I can still push myself when I don't have anything left in the tank.

"One thing that has happened is that it is getting more intense as the days go by," noted Ramsey.

"At first, it was slower as we got used to it, but now it's a whole lot faster and more intense."

One thing that Smith, McLendon and Ramsey all had in common was a mutual dislike for getting up at 5 am.

"It is easy to ask why you don't go to bed earlier since you know there will be mat drills the next morning," said Smith. "It doesn't matter. You can know a year ahead of time, but 5 am is still 5 am."

Mat drills are scheduled to end on Friday morning and the Blue Raiders will begin spring practice on March 15 in preparation of the 2010 season.

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