Blue Raiders Picked Fifth in Preseason Poll; Five Members Voted to Preseason All-SBC Team

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee's baseball team was picked fifth in the Sun Belt Preseason Coaches Poll while five players were named to the first-ever Preseason All-SBC Team, released by the conference office Wednesday.

Middle Tennessee finished fourth in 2005 in the final Sun Belt standings before making another run through the conference tournament and falling in the championship game. Head coach Steve Peterson, in his 19th season at the helm of the program, returns 19 letterwinners and six starters from last year's 32-23 squad.

South Alabama received six of nine first-place votes in taking the top spot in the preseason poll with 78 points. The next four spots were separated by just seven points, with Louisiana-Lafayette, the defending regular season champion, claiming two first-place votes and 61 points. Florida International and Troy tied for third with 55 points, with the Blue Raiders receiving one first-place vote and 54 points in fifth. Middle Tennessee was also picked fifth by Collegiate Baseball and Baseball America.

"We're picked in the middle of the pack, which is pretty much where I see us at this point," head coach Steve Peterson said. "I see the league as very competitive throughout the league race, and our team's goal will be to move from the middle of the pack to the top. We'll see what happens."

Arkansas State, New Orleans, Western Kentucky and Arkansas-Little Rock rounded out the vote.

In the first-ever Preseason All-Sun Belt team, five Blue Raiders were voted to the team, including junior Matt Scott earning Preseason Sun Belt Pitcher of the Year honors.

Scott earned Second Team All-South Central Region honors last season by the American Baseball Coaches Association and Rawlings after posting a 10-1 record with a 3.07 ERA in 99.2 innings of work, collecting almost a third of the team's 32 victories. The righthander was named First Team All-Sun Belt after striking out 68 and walking only 10, with opponents batting just .238.

He was voted Sun Belt Pitcher of the Week three times last season and tossed a perfect game for seven innings in the Sun Belt Championships. He was 7-1 with a 2.99 ERA against Sun Belt opponents, winning six of eight Friday night starts in league play and leaving with the lead in another. The Blue Raiders were 12-2 in his 14 starts in 2005.

Scott was dominating in the month of May, going 5-0 with a 1.77 ERA in his last five starts, including three complete games and allowing just four earned runs in his last four starts. The LaVergne High School product feels like expectations will be higher for him this year, but he wants to do many of the same things as last season and expects to be successful every time he takes the mound.

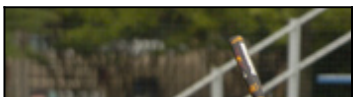
"I feel like the expectations will be higher this year. Last season I started as the Saturday guy and fell into the Friday night role," Scott said. "I didn't expect to have the kind of success that I did have last season. It just kind of happened that way. I got some good breaks and then also pitched well at times.

"I just want to take the same approach as last year. I expect to do well. In fact I demand that of myself. Even if I get roughed up, that just makes me work harder."

Also earning one of the two relief spots was senior Allan Woodward. The righthander shuffled between the starting rotation and bullpen last season, but really found a home in the second half of the year as the team's closer. Woodward posted a 5-0 record with a 3.00 ERA and four saves in 24 appearances out of the bullpen. The Columbia, Mo., native worked 39.0 innings as a reliever, striking out 40 with opponents batting just .197. His final 17 appearances of the season were as a reliever, picking up all five of his victories and all four of his saves in 33.1 innings of work. Woodward said it took some time last season to find his role and now is feels very comfortable with being the guy in late-game situations.

"Last year took a little but of adjusting. I wasn't doing so well starting but really felt more comfortable coming out of the bullpen, being able to set up hitters with my breaking pitches and going right after them instead of thinking about the long run and working through the lineup several times," Woodward said.

"I love of the feeling of the game being on the line and it's my turn with the ball. It was a good feeling at the end of the season when we were winning and I was having success doing that. It's a great feeling when the head coach has confidence in you when the game is on the line and you're the guy he wants in the game. That really helps my confidence a lot, especially mentally since most of the game is played in your head."



Senior Todd Martin was voted to the designated hitter spot. Martin earned First Team All-South Central Region and Third Team All-

America honors by the ABCA and Rawlings after batting .412, the third best average in school history among players with more than 100 at-bats and the 15th best last season in the NCAA. Martin battled a myriad of injuries last season, including an elbow ailment that limited him to the designated hitter role for all but the first three weeks of the season. He also had a knee problem, with both issues requiring surgery during the offseason.

The lefthanded hitter registered 13 doubles, eight home runs and 31 RBIs in 46 contests, walking 32 times and scoring 39 runs. He was named First Team All-Sun Belt as the DH and was the first All-American at Middle Tennessee since Dewon Brazelton and Josh Renick in 2001. The Cookeville, Tenn., native says he doesn't feel any pressure to duplicate last year's numbers other than what he puts on himself.

"I'm sure there are expectations to have at least as good a numbers as last year, but I don't feel any pressure from the outside," Martin said. "Hitting over .400 last year was a blessing. I seemed to come easy last year. Each year I set my goals early in the season to hit certain things, but I don't feel pressure from other people.

"Right now I'm nowhere close to where I need to be hitting-wise, but that takes time. I have total confidence in my God-given ability to be back where I was. Injuries last year affected my power, but I have full confidence I will be able to hit for more power this year. Just starting the year healthy is a big edge mentally, not having an injury to hold me back."

Senior Jeff Beachum was voted the team's shortstop. Beachum is a two-time All-Sun Belt selection for the Blue Raiders, having played in all but five possible games in his three-year career. He is a three-year starter at shortstop for the Blue Raiders, though he did start 21 games at second base as a freshman.

Beachum is a career .328 hitter and is within striking distance of breaking the school's all-time hits record this season. He was second on the team with 80 hits in 2005 and has 225 in his three seasons. The Cordova, Tenn., native has also driven in 99 runs and stolen 27 bases in his three seasons, batting everywhere in the lineup but cleanup. Beachum says the expectations are higher for him because he is a fourth-year starter and is expected to be a leader on this year's club.

"There are some added expectations since this is my fourth time around," Beachum said. "I know what it takes to make [All-Conference] an accomplishment at the end of the year. I feel like I need to

take a leadership role because there are a lot of new faces who haven't been through the Sun Belt yet, but I'm not really a vocal guy. I lead by example. I feel like if what I'm doing on the field is successful, then people will try to follow that example."

Sophomore Nathan Hines earned one of the three outfield spots. Hines batted .342 last season, ranking second on the club with 53 RBIs while starting 50 contests. The lefthanded hitter had 13 multi-RBI games in 2005, including a pair of outings driving in six runs. Hines batted .333 against Sun Belt opponents in 26 contests. He became the first Blue Raider freshman since Chris Whitehead in 1986 to drive in more than 50 runs in a season. The Murfreesboro, Tenn., native says posting last year's numbers will not be an easy feat, but he looks forward to the challenge everyday.

"I certainly think it's a reward for having a good season last year. There's so much competition and so many good players in the league, it's an award and a reward," Hines said. "It will be hard to duplicate last season. I just want to go out there and play and have fun. I know people have high expectations for me. Our team is expecting that from a lot of guys. If I have a bad game, I have to come back the next day and do well. I have to play within myself and not get overconfident."

The Blue Raiders open the season in 22 days on February 18 with a doubleheader versus IP-Fort Wayne at Reese Smith Field.

SUN BELT CONFERENCE BASEBALL PRESEASON COACHES POLL

-- Poll conducted of league's nine head coaches
-- 1st place votes in parentheses

Place Team - Pts
1. South Alabama (6) - 78
2. Louisiana-Lafayette (2) - 61
T3. Florida International - 55
T3. Troy - 55
5. Middle Tennessee (1) - 54
6. Arkansas State - 39
7. New Orleans - 26
8. Western Kentucky - 21
9. Arkansas-Little Rock - 16

PRESEASON ALL-SUN BELT CONFERENCE TEAM

Pos. - Name (Class, School)
SP - Matt Scott (Jr., Middle Tennessee)
SP - P.J. Walters (Jr., South Alabama)
RP - Frank Gonzalez (Sr., Florida International)
RP - Allan Woodward (Sr., Middle Tennessee)
C - Jordan Newton (Jr., Western Kentucky)
1B - Michael Lopez (Sr., Florida International)
2B - Brett Kinning (Sr., Arkansas State)
3B - David Freese (Sr., South Alabama)

SS - Jeff Beachum (Sr., Middle Tennessee)
OF - Brandon Bowser (Jr., New Orleans)
OF - Nathan Hines (So., Middle Tennessee)
OF - Josh Landry (Sr., Louisiana-Lafayette)
DH - Todd Martin (Sr., Middle Tennessee)

Preseason Player of the Year: Brett Kinning, Sr., ASU
Preseason Pitcher of the Year: Matt Scott, Jr., MT

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