This Week in Blue Raider Baseball

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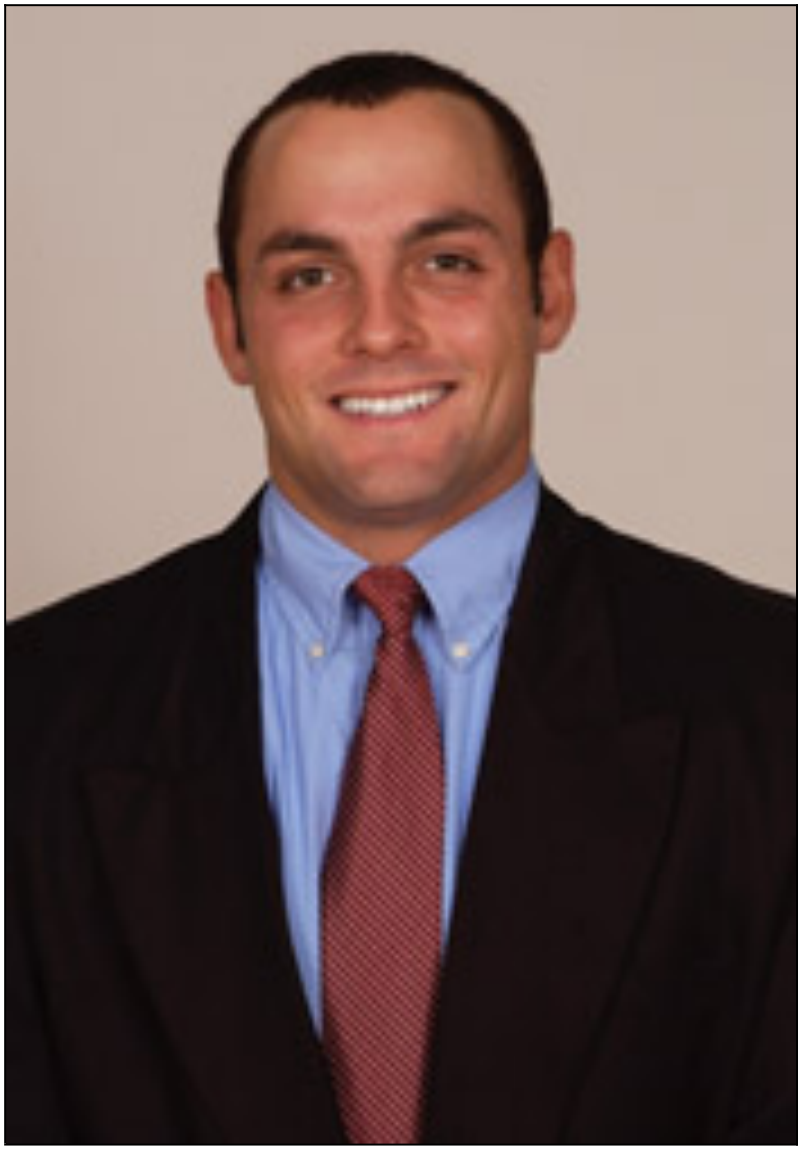

MCKENRY NAMED TO BENCH AWARD WATCH LIST: Junior catcher Michael McKenry was one of 26 players named to the Coleman Company - Johnny Bench Award Watch List announced this week. The Johnny Bench Award is given annually to the nation's top catcher, with the award sponsored by the Coleman Company and the Greater Wichita (KS) Area Sports Commission. The Knoxville, Tenn., native was very honored to be included with the nation's best catcher.

"It's an honor above all honors for catchers," McKenry said. "It's a nice thing when they give you an honor for something you love to do. I'm having a lot of fun and trying to help our team improve."

McKenry was a First Team All-Sun Belt selection last season in his first year as the team's starter behind the plate. He currently leads the Blue Raiders with a .422 batting average with three doubles, two triples, two home runs and 15 RBIs in 12 games. The 2006 Johnny Bench Award Watch List includes: Michael Ambort, Jr., Lamar; J.P. Arencibia, So., Tennessee; Brian Baisley, Sr., South Florida; Ryan Bono, Sr., Central Florida; Justin Brashear, Jr., Ole Miss; Donald Cheney, Jr., Morehead State; John Curtis, Jr., Cal-State Fullerton; Ed Easley, So., Mississippi State; Sean Gaston, Jr., Notre Dame; Brian Hernandez, Sr., Vanderbilt; Robby Jacobsen, Sr., George Mason; Brian Jeroloman, Jr., Florida; Jeff Kunkel, Sr., Michigan; Matt Liuzza, Sr., LSU; Jonathan Lucroy, So., Louisiana-Lafayette; Nick Maragas, Jr., Cincinnati; Matt McBride, Jr., Lehigh; Jordan Newton, Jr., Western Kentucky; Preston Paramore, Fr., Arizona State; Kris Rochelle, Jr., Charlotte; Konrad Schmidt, Jr., Arizona; Bryan Towler, Sr., Marist; Chad Tracy, Jr., Pepperdine; Andrew Walker, So., TCU; Andy Wendle, Jr., Villanova. Because the award is given annually to the top Division I collegiate catcher, the list will be updated to include other candidates until May 1. The watch list will be narrowed to 10 semifinalists,

who will be announced May 11. A comprehensive biography will be created on each of the semifinalists and sent to the national voting panel at the end of May for a vote to determine the three finalists. The finalists will be announced May 31 prior to the NCAA Regionals and Major League Baseball Draft. A final vote among the national committee will occur during the College World Series. All finalists will be brought to Wichita and the winner will be announced at the 9th Annual Greater Wichita Sports Banquet on June 28.

TAYLOR FINDS GROOVE WITH FOUR-HIT DAY: Senior Marcus Taylor has started just five games this season after struggling mightily at the plate during spring practice leading into the season. The Lexington, Ky., native may have found a groove this past Saturday at Southern Illinois, collecting a career-high four hits, including a double and three runs scored. He also added a spectacular diving catch in the bottom of the ninth, staving off a loss for another inning before the Blue Raiders fell, 9-8, in 10 innings. Taylor started three straight games last week, at Memphis on Wednesday and then the first two contests at SIU, recording six hits in 11 at-bats (.545), adding a walk and one RBI in the three outings. Taylor said getting to play less often this season has been a humbling experience that can bring you to some realizations very quickly.

"It lets you know the competition for playing time and that when you get a chance, you can't mess it up," Taylor said. "You have to do everything in your power to make things happen.

"On Saturday I was seeing the ball well and with the field conditions, I wanted to put the ball in play and hit it hard each time and it worked out with four hits. As for the catch, the wind was holding the ball up and I kept running. I was lucky that it fell into my glove and I held onto it after I hit the ground."

MCKENRY STARTING QUICKLY AT THE PLATE: Junior Michael McKenry leads Middle Tennessee in five offensive categories heading into this week's games, including batting average (.422), RBIs (15), slugging percentage (.711) and on-base percentage (.509). The Farragut High School product currently has a seven-game hitting streak, going 15-for-29 (.517) with three doubles, a triple, one home run and 11 RBIs during the seven-game stretch. He tied his career-high with four hits and also recorded his second triple of the season in last Wednesday's contest at Memphis and has four multi-hit outings during the streak. McKenry says the most unusual thing is that he is not usually a fast starter.

"I've been very fortunate so far. Usually I start out with a couple of home runs and then I'm just terrible for a while," McKenry said. "But I'm seeing the ball well and the balls are falling my way. I'm more comfortable at the plate. I worked as hard as I ever have during the Christmas break and changed some things in my swing. I wanted to be quieter and have a better path to the ball and be more aggressive, but cut down on my strikeouts and be able to hit to the situation. I'm focusing on what I can do at the plate and have a plan each time I step in the box."

BLUE RAIDERS IN THE PROS: Middle Tennessee has five former players taking part in spring training, including Dewon Brazelton - San Diego Padres, Jeremy Owens - Tampa Bay Devil Rays, Chad Cooper - Colorado Rockies, and Brett Carroll and Chris Mobley - Florida Marlins. Brazelton has worked in three contests so far, posting a 2.25 ERA in 8.0 innings of work, walking one and striking out 11. He has allowed two runs on seven hits. Carroll has appeared in eight games in big league camp for the Marlins, going 4-for-11 (.364) with a double and two runs scored. The other three are in minor league camps with their respective clubs.

RADIO BROADCASTS: Middle Tennessee will broadcast the two midweek games this week, Wednesday at Austin Peay and Thursday versus UT Martin at home. Duane Hickey will handle Wednesday's contest and Jonathan Hutton will take Thursday's game. There will be no radio this weekend at Birmingham Southern, but there will be livestats for all three contests against the Panthers. Radio will resume next weekend with the Sun Belt opener against Arkansas-Little Rock.

PROMOTIONS: Thursday's contest against UT Martin is a Business Person's Special. Fans can show their business card and receive a $3 general admission ticket for the ballgame. The game is being taped by MT TV and will be shown Friday and Saturday on local channel 10 at 3 p.m. and 7 p.m. both days.

Middle Tennessee vs. Austin Peay/UT Martin

The Blue Raiders own a 73-34 all-time advantage in the series over Austin Peay, including a 33-19 mark in Clarksville. Middle Tennessee has won the last three meetings at Raymond C. Hand Park and five of the last seven. The two teams were longtime OVC rivals and met eight times in the OVC Tournament, with the Blue Raiders owning a 6-2 mark in those contests. Middle Tennessee and UT Martin have not met since the Blue Raiders left the OVC following the 2000 season. Middle Tennessee owns a 19-6 mark all-time in the series, including 8-1 in Murfreesboro. The Blue Raiders have won six of the last seven in the series, including the final two meetings in the OVC, a doubleheader in Murfreesboro on March 18, 2000.

Five Games in Five Days

The Blue Raiders will play five consecutive days this week after being scheduled to play six straight days last week, with 10 of those 11 contests on the road. Middle Tennessee was set to take on Memphis on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday last week, but the final game of the series was cancelled because of rain. The Blue Raiders then played a weekend series at Southern Illinois on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. This week Middle Tennessee heads to Austin Peay on Wednesday for a 6:30 p.m. outing and then hosts UT Martin Thursday at 3 p.m. at Reese Smith Field. The Blue Raiders will then head to Birmingham Southern for a three-game series Friday, Saturday and Sunday. It will be the first-ever three-game series against BSC and just the fifth meeting all-time against the Panthers.

Raiders Road Warriors Until SBC Play

With the first three games of the season against IP-Fort Wayne snowed out, Middle Tennessee will play 14 of its first 18 games of the season away from home. The Blue Raiders hosted Missouri State in three games last weekend and take on UT Martin on March 16 at Reese Smith Field in the team's only other home game until opening Sun Belt Conference play at home against Arkansas-Little Rock on March 24-26. In the recent past, the 2004 squad played eight of its first 11 on the road, while the 2002 club played nine of its first 15 away from home. It has probably been since 1994 when the Blue Raiders played 11 of the first 14 on the road since a Middle Tennessee squad has been so much time on the road in February and March.

Scott Returns to Form

Junior Matt Scott looked like his old self Friday at Southern Illinois, tossing eight shutout innings while striking out six and allowing just six hits. He allowed only four runners to reach scoring position and only one made it to third base. The righthander improved to 2-0 with a 2.70 ERA in 20.0 innings of work. After giving up five runs in 5.1 innings to Missouri State on March 3, Scott worked on his

mechanics and tossed a shutout inning of relief at Memphis last Tuesday. That got him back on track and it carried over to Friday, where the Smyrna, Tenn., native worked ahead in the count and got 12 fly balls on a pitcher's day at the park, cold with the wind blowing in. Scott is now 15-3 in his Blue Raider career, just two wins from reaching the Top 10 and tied for first all-time in winning percentage (.833).

Bullpen Less Than Stellar

The Middle Tennessee bullpen has struggled at times this season, and it was never more apparent than in last week's five games on the road. The unit was 0-3 with a 7.48 ERA in the five outings, including two games where the Blue Raiders were either tied or ahead entering the final inning and lost in that frame. There were bright spots along the way, including Tommy Sterritt tossing three shutout innings at Memphis and Brett Reilley allowing one run in 3.1 innings at Southern Illinois. Freshman Chad Edwards came back from a bad start at Memphis and got out of a jam at SIU on Saturday, tossing 2.0 innings overall. Allan Woodward gave up just one run in three innings of work, but it was the tying run in the eighth in Saturday's 9-8, 10-inning defeat. Langdon Stanley absorbed all three losses out of the bullpen and was not good in two of the three outings. The junior righthander was roughed up for six runs on Wednesday at Memphis, then hit two batters and threw a wild pitch in the 10th inning on Saturday at SIU. On Sunday he was the tough-luck loser despite tossing two-plus innings. The Middle Tennessee bullpen heads into this week's action with a 5.36 ERA as a unit, working 48.2 innings and striking out 52 while allowing 30 runs.

Can't Drive in McKenry

Junior Michael McKenry leads the Blue Raiders in five offensive categories, including batting average, RBIs and slugging percentage. The Farragut HS product also ranks first on the team in on-base percentage at .509, but has scored just three times this season. During Middle Tennessee's stretch of seven losses in nine games, McKenry has reached base 21 times, including nine singles, three doubles, a triple, two home runs, five walks and a hit batter. The Knoxville, Tenn., native has scored just twice in those 21 chances, both on the home runs. The Blue Raiders are just 35-for-115 (.304) with runners in scoring position during the nine games, but the players batting in the No. 5 spot in the lineup (the spot behind McKenry) are hitting only .257 (9-for-35) with four of those hits coming in one game from Marcus Taylor.

Beachum Mr. Consistent at the Top

Senior Jeff Beachum hit in the leadoff spot in the first nine games this season, the first time the Cordova, Tenn., native has hit No. 1 in the order since the final 27 games of his freshman season. Beachum carried an 11-game hitting streak to start the season and hit safely in the first four games of the 2006 campaign before an 0-for-4 performance on March 3 against Missouri State. But the four-year starter at shortstop came back with three hits in eight at-bats and three runs scored in the final two games versus the Bears. Beachum currently has a seven-game hitting streak and has hit safely in 11 of the 12 contests this season. He moved into the No. 3 hole over the weekend at Southern Illinois and collected six hits in 12 at-bats (.500) with four runs scored and three RBIs. For the season Beachum is third on the squad with a .392 batting average (20-for-51) with four doubles, 13 runs scored (tied for team high) and six RBIs. He also has seven walks, an unusually high number (just 36 in career heading into 2006) and a .466 on-base percentage.

More on Beachum

The Cordova HS product has enjoyed a very successful career at Middle Tennessee, starting all but seven possible games in his four-year tenure. Beachum moved into a tie for third with Mudcat

Brewer (1991-94) in career hits after collecting six in the three games at Southern Illinois, giving Beachum 245 career hits. He is 24 hits from tying career leader Clay Snellgrove (1994-97) at the top of the all-time list. Beachum also ranks eighth in career at-bats (738), second in career singles (193), tied for eighth in career doubles (43) and tied for fourth in sacrifices (21). He needs only two singles to move past Snellgrove in that category and three doubles to move into sixth place past Jayhawk Owens (43, 1988-90), Nate Jaggers (44, 2002-05) and Doug Barner (45, 1993-96). A full listing appears on page seven of these notes.

Notes from Memphis

Tuesday: Junior Grant Nickell made his first career start, batting sixth and playing leftfield. Nickell was 1-for-3 and scored a run ... Taylor Dennis collected his first career hit with a single in the ninth ... Tommy Sterritt pitched three shutout innings, striking out a career-high five ... Matt Scott tossed a shutout eighth inning for the Blue Raiders, his first relief appearance since June 5, 2004, versus Birmingham Southern in the NCAA Athens Regional ... The win for Memphis snaps a six-game Middle Tennessee winning streak in the series. The last UM win came on April 27, 2004, in Memphis. Wednesday: Sophomore Doug Birkofer made his first start of the season, hitting second and playing centerfield ... Shay Horseman made his first start on the mound since May 24, 2004, against Western Kentucky in the Sun Belt Championships ... Jeff Beachum's double in the fourth inning moved the senior past Kyle Thomas and into a tie for ninth with Marshall Nisbett (2001-02) for career two-baggers with 42. Beachum also singled in the eighth, moving past Chuck Akers (2001-04) and into fourth place on the career hits list with 239 ... Horseman went five-plus innings, his longest outing since April 28, 2004, when he worked five innings against Memphis ... Michael McKenry tied his career-high with four hits in the contest, including his second triple of the season ... Chase Eakes tied his career-high with three hits, all singles.

Notes from Southern Illinois

Friday: Redshirt freshman Michael McSweeney made his first career start, hitting seventh and playing first base ... Doug Birkofer played centerfield for the second straight game and hit leadoff for the first time in his career. It was also the first time this season someone other than Jeff Beachum batted in the leadoff spot ... Birkofer went 2-for-6 in the contest, a career-high in at-bats and tied his career-high with two hits, his second career two-hit game and first since April 19, 2005, versus Memphis ... Chase Eakes tied his career-high with three RBIs, the third three-RBI game of his career and first since February 19, 2005, versus Ball State. Saturday: Michael McSweeney collected his first career hit with an RBI single in the third ... Tyler Copeland last just 1.2 innings, the shortest start of his career. Twice last season (April 30 - at Arkansas State, May 14 - at Louisiana-Lafayette) the lefthander worked only two innings in a start ... Marcus Taylor extended his hitting streak to three games with a single in the second. Taylor recorded a career-high four hits in the game ... Doug Birkofer had his second straight two-hit game and third of his career ... Wayne Kendrick tied his career-high with three hits in the contest, his second three-hit game this season ... Josh Horn had his fourth straight two-hit game and sixth this season. Sunday: Doug Birkofer extended his hitting streak to four games with a single in the first ... Wayne Kendrick extended his hitting streak to three games with a single in the first ... Jeff Beachum extended his hitting streak to seven games with a single in the first ... There was a 35-minute rain delay in the top of the second inning ... Josh Horn extended his hitting streak to five games with a double in the fourth ... Michael McKenry extended his hitting streak to seven games with a single in the seventh ... Birkofer recorded a career-high three hits and collected seven in the three-game series ... Kendrick tied his career-high for the second day in a row with three hits.

Streaks

Junior Michael McKenry and senior Jeff Beachum both carry seven-game hitting streaks into midweek games at Austin Peay and versus UT Martin. McKenry is 15-for-29 (.517) with three doubles, a triple, one home run and 11 RBIs during the seven-game stretch. He tied his career-high with four hits and also recorded his second triple of the season in last Wednesday's contest at Memphis and has four multi-hit outings during the streak. Beachum is 12-for-28 (.429) with two doubles, eight runs scored and five RBIs during the stretch, including five two-hit outings. The four-year starter has hit safely in all but one game this year. Senior Josh Horn has hit in five straight contests, including four two-hit games in a row before collecting a single in Sunday's outing at Southern Illinois. Horn is 11-for-20 (.550) during the five games with two doubles, two runs scored and one RBI. He has hit safely in 10 of the 12 games this season. Sophomore Doug Birkofer has hit in four straight contests with multi-hits in three of the four outings. Birkofer is 8-for-18 (.444) with two walks and four runs scored during the stretch. Junior Wayne Kendrick and senior Marcus Taylor have both hit safely in three straight games, while senior Todd Martin has a two-game hitting streak heading into Wednesday's contest.

McKenry on Wallace Watch List

Junior Michael McKenry was named to the Preseason Wallace Watch List by the College Baseball Foundation in November, an award presented annually to the national college baseball player of the year. +McKenry, a 5-foot-10, 195-pound catcher, batted .328 with 13 home runs and 42 RBIs in 49 games in 2005, his first as a starter behind the plate. He showed tremendous power during the season, becoming the first Blue Raider to belt a home run into the football stadium during a game since Floyd Stadium's renovation in 1998. The Knoxville, Tenn., native also scored 44 runs, had 11 doubles and walked 20 times for the 32-23 club. His most impressive statistic may have been throwing out 38 percent of attempted base stealers. The Farragut High School product is one of only six catchers among the 130 nominees for the Brooks Wallace Award, while McKenry joins P.J. Walters (P, South Alabama), Taylor Fowler (P, Arkansas State) and Elih Villanueva (P, Florida International) as the only nominees from the Sun Belt Conference. The Wallace Watch will be trimmed to 12 semifinalists by late May. Then the selection committee will narrow the list to three finalists following the NCAA Super Regionals at a press conference in Omaha, Neb, at the College World Series. The finalists, their head coaches and their parents will be invited to Lubbock, Texas, for a schedule of special events tied to the award banquet, which will again be nationally televised by Fox Sports Network. The selection committee for the Wallace Award is comprised of a national panel of preeminent coaches, sports information directors, former winners and beat media who most closely follow the sport. Screening Committee members will evaluate the candidates and will continue their review throughout the entire baseball season. The list will expand and contract during the regular season and additional Wallace Watch candidates may be added as the season progresses. Voting for the three finalists and the Wallace Award winner will be conducted by confidential balloting, with totals tabulated by the J.W.Anderson & Associates accounting firm in Lubbock, Texas. A full list of the Wallace Watch Preseason List may be found at www.collegebaseballfoundation.org.

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