Volleyball looking forward to NCAA opener

Blue Raiders will take on Louisville on Friday

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WEST LAFAYETTE, Ind. - The Middle Tennessee volleyball team will begin their 2010 NCAA Tournament journey on Friday, taking on Louisville in the opening round of the event at Holloway Gymnasium on the campus of Purdue University in West Lafayette, Ind.

"This is a tournament-tested squad, and I have a pretty good gauge for where our team is right now," head coach Matt Peck said. "We had an outstanding practice today, and it shows me that the girls are in game mode. I would be surprised if we didn't play well tomorrow."

The Blue Raiders are playing in the NCAA Tournament for the fifth consecutive season, and currently hold a 3-1 mark in the first round under the direction of Peck. Two of those three victories have come at the expense of Louisville, who will be entering Friday as the Big East Tournament champions.

Middle Tennessee (29-5) boasts of championship credentials as well, taking home both the Sun Belt regular season and tournament crowns.

Middle Tennessee is also riding a 12-match winning streak and have won 26 of the last 27.

Louisville presents an interesting match-up to the Blue Raiders. The Cardinals currently rank as one of the best blocking teams in the country, and Middle Tennessee features one of the more efficient attacks in the country, ranking among the top 15 nationally in attack percentage for much of the season.

"I think we'll see some different things tomorrow," Peck said. "I think that when we're running our system, we're a very hard team to defend, and I think it's going to come down to serving and passing. I look for a pretty good match tomorrow, and I'm really curious as to how it plays out."

The Blue Raiders are led by Sun Belt Player of the Year Izabela Kozon with 450 kills at a Sun Belt-best 4.05 per set clip. The senior has been a consistent force offensively, tying a conference record with five SBC Player of the Week awards and the SBC Tournament Most Outstanding Player honor. Kozon's also been a stout defender and is second on the team with 240 digs and 59 total blocks.

In NCAA Tournament play, Kozon also holds one of the best résumés in school history. As a freshman, the native of Warsaw, Poland, earned All-Penn State Region honors after helping lead Middle Tennessee to the 2007 Round of 16. In six career matches, Kozon has 88 kills, 74 digs and 11 blocks.

Aside from Kozon, both Maria Szivos Ashley Adams earned First Team All-Sun Belt accolades. Szivos, in her first season with MT after two years at New Orleans, has recorded 279 kills and 38 service aces this year to complement her 137 digs and 66 blocks on defense. Adams is second on the team in kills with 295, averaging 3.11 per set, which ranks among the best in the Sun Belt.

Both Stacy Oladinni, a Second Team All-Sun Belt honoree, and Lindsay Cheatham form a remarkably efficient duo offensively in the middle. Oladinni holds the edge in kills with 228 at a .328 rate, but Cheatham holds the best attack percentage in the conference at .390 with 207 kills.

The freshmen setting duo of Morgan Peterson and Angela Peyton might be one of the more interesting storylines of the tournament, as each will be playing in their first NCAA Tournament. Peterson, who redshirted last year, gets the majority of the time on the front row and has 660 assists, and Peyton, a true freshman, plays on the back row and holds the team lead with 790 helpers.

Defensively, Middle Tennessee's prowess has been at the net, led by the play of Oladinni and Cheatham. Oladinni finished first in the Sun Belt in blocks per set, averaging 1.14, and Cheatham was third at 1.01.

Brynne Henderson has anchored the reception game with 436 digs, averaging 3.52 per set. Kendall Howard, another freshman for the Blue Raiders, has also impressed, with 215.

Middle Tennessee and Louisville will each begin play at the 2010 NCAA Tournament on Friday at Holloway Gymanasium. Match time is set for 4 p.m.

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