Infield to anchor softball defense in 2011

Five starters return from 2010

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - With five returning players having started 30 or more games in 2010, the Middle Tennessee Softball infield will be the backbone of the team's defense in 2011.

Upperclassmen starters, Kaycee Popham, Kandra Singleton and Brittney Banania, all return and will play important roles both on the field and at the plate. Sophomore Kristi Maquez returns to third and utility player Jessi Couch has experience having started at three different positions in 2010.

Popham remains a rock at first base. Last season, the Rockmart, Ga., native started all but one game at the position and led all starting infielders with a fielding percentage of .974. With more than one head-turning play in 2010, Popham will make a handful of impressive snags off the shots of bat as well as getting routine outs for the Blue Raiders.

Head coach Sue Nevar said, "Defensively, Kaycee has one of the best gloves in the conference. She is very athletic defensively and is smart reacting to the different batters we will face."

However, Nevar is looking for consistency at the plate as well as the field from Popham. With an average of .264 and 18 RBIs, she showed glimpses of greatness last season. If she can drive in runs on a game-to-game basis, the team will move closer to the season goal of competing for a conference crown.

Nevar commented on improving team consistency at the plate from player to player, "This year everyone is more in-tuned to improving hitting, whereas last year certain people were hesitant to make changes. It was obvious at the end of the season those who were willing to make the adjustments. Everyone is doing better and being a student of the game."

Freshman Shelby Stinnett will backup Popham. In fall ball, Nevar was impressed with the first-year player's ability to defend and drive in runs.

Arguably the deepest part of the MT lineup, the middle-infield returns three players who gained significant game time experience in 2010. The unit is led by Banania at shortstop. The San Pedro, Calif., native has great range and posted a .920 fielding percentage and team-leading 129 assists a year ago. Banania will be sidelined in the early parts of 2011 because of knee surgery. Freshman Nina Dever is expected to start in her stead.

"Brittney should be back at full-strength for us by conference time. She is the glue of our infield and the communicator with the outfield. She has had good pop in her bat so far this spring."

Singleton will start second. A heady player, Singleton's speed and intelligence make her a major factor in the field and at the plate. The senior's ability to get on base will be the key to her maintaining a spot in the starting lineup. She posted a .261 on-base percentage last season.

Couch is the most versatile player on the team roster, having the ability to start at any position, except pitcher. Originally a catcher, the Lebanon, Tenn., native stepped in last season when Singleton went down with injury. Couch's power can drive in runs and put the ball out of the park.

Freshman Kayla Toney will initially play primarily as backup for Banania and Singleton. A strong arm and lefty power are the tools she will use to get into the lineup.

At third, Marquez has worked tirelessly in the off-season to improve after an up-and-down freshman

season. A converted short stop, the sophomore battled through difficult games, but made a handful of spectacular plays at the corner. The Del Ray Beach, Fla., native was third on the team with five doubles. Nevar is very confident in the improvements made.

"Kristi saw it all last year. It is very difficult to move from playing short your whole life to sliding over to third. She has worked harder than anyone on the team improving her swing and is really looking smooth."

Fellow sophomore Kailey MacDougald will back up Marquez after playing in just one game in 2010.

"I think we are very sound defensively in our infield. They have played together for over a year and we have backups who can play and produce. A lot of our starting roles will boil down to who is getting it down at the plate."

The 2011 Middle Tennessee Softball team previews will continue tomorrow with the outfielders. Stay tuned to GoBlueRaiders.com and twitter.com/MT_Softball for team updates and coverage throughout the 2011 season.

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