

Blue Raiders will have a number of new faces in 2011

Team to open season with Portland on Friday at 3 p.m.

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. -

It's a good thing that Middle Tennessee's long-time baseball coach, Steve Peterson, is an eternal optimist. Otherwise, he might take offense to his team's pre-season pick to finish seventh in the Sun Belt Conference this spring, and the fact that no Blue Raider was named to the preseason All-league team. Still, the sun may shine in Murfreesboro more often than some might think. Peterson is high on three transfers, and some incoming freshmen, and he knows that these players will have to produce if the Blue Raiders are to make a strong run at the Sun Belt championship. Jay Morris and Johnny Thomas transferred from former Sun Belt member New Orleans, who dropped from Division I at the end of last season. Thomas will start at second base, while Morris will start at either first base or



in the outfield. The other transfer is Matt Drake, a two-way player via Wallace-Hanceville JC. Drake will pitch, although his fall progress was hampered by an injury, and is a switch-hitter that can play several positions. He will also be used as a designated hitter. Several freshmen could also have a big impact on the team this spring. Ryan Stevens, from Murfreesboro's Riverdale High School, has proved to Peterson that he is the best centerfielder, but questions always remain about how freshmen will hit collegiate pitching. Stevens will have to show Peterson that he can. Peterson has stated that a freshman will start at third base, but he hasn't yet decided whether it will be Hank LaRue from Evansville, Ind., or Keaton Baker, who could also pitch, from Memphis. "Hank is probably a little ahead right now," noted Peterson. "He's a switch hitter, and he doesn't have that

typical up-and-down mentality that you see in a lot of freshmen. He's pretty level-headed, and he makes the routine play, and that's what I'm trying to give my pitching staff." "He will follow in the footsteps of Rawley Bishop and Tyler Burnett, who played that position the last two years, and both of those guys are in the pros now, so he'll have some big shoes to fill." While transfers and freshmen will bring the new faces to the team, it will be the veterans that Peterson will put most of his trust in. The name of the game has always been pitching, and Peterson feels he has three definite starters in senior Eric Gilley and sophomores Daniel Palo and Hunter Atkins, although he has not decided yet on what order they will pitch. "What I have big questions on is the next group, trying to find a fourth and fifth starter for mid-week games, and how we are going to use our bullpen. You are going to see a lot of pitchers early in the season as we sort things out." Peterson said. Middle relief is going to be a question mark again this year, and Peterson is hoping a closer will evolve early. "Sometimes your closer is by committee, when the last guy in middle relief is it." Candidates for closer as well as for mid-week starters include Brandon Hall, Joey McClung, Nick Montgomery, Judd Stoltz and Brett Wilson. Peterson thinks the best candidate for closer right now is senior Hunter Dawson, who had some experience last year. "What he lacked was consistency. You have different kinds of closers, even in the big leagues, but what they all have in common is that closer mentality of 'give me the ball, and I have a pitch that I know I can get you out with, if I execute it.' Hunter has shown that he can throw strikes, and be consistent with his pitches." After Dawson, it is a committee of middle relievers, and Peterson will just wait and see what happens. "Overall, the facet of our game that I am most pleased with right now is our defense, and that starts with our catcher." declared Peterson. "I have been very pleased with the way senior Tyler Acker has handled the pitching staff. He seems to have the respect of the staff, and they listen to him. He's a great athlete, but he's had problems staying healthy in the past. "There is going to be a huge bull's-eye on him this year, how he handles the staff, as well as what he does behind the plate. I have to be careful that I don't wear him out, simply because of his history of being injury-prone." Backing up Acker behind the plate will be sophomore Dain McNabb and freshman Trent Miller. McNabb is currently the No. 2 catcher, but Peterson feels like Miller is coming on. "Miller swings the bat pretty good. He is going to be a really good player, but he is not there yet." At shortstop, sophomore Ryan Ford will again be backed up by r-sophomore Robert Lawrence, but Thomas can also play shortstop as well as second base. "Ford is a Bucky Dent-type shortstop, not a real fancy guy, but he can make all the routine plays and will mix in some great plays. He's got quick feet and a strong arm." said Peterson. Justin Guidry and Will Skinner will provide the punch in the middle of the batting order, hitting in the three and four spots. Guidry, a junior, was All-Region last year as a designated hitter, and will again pitch and play first base, or in the outfield. "The bottom line is that his bat will be somewhere in the lineup." Peterson declared. "Skinner can hit the ball out of any park, so if we can build our lineup, get Guidry or someone else on base, and find someone to hit in the No. 5 spot, then they have to pitch to Skinner. He will be our right fielder and clean-up hitter." If Guidry is the DH, that gives Peterson three or four guys in the regular lineup that can come in and pitch. The third baseman could come in to pitch; the first baseman can come in and pitch. The DH can come in and pitch. The leftfielder can come in and pitch. Peterson makes an interesting point in this regard. "The opposing coach, if he gets beat, is really going to be upset because he is going to think he got beat by a bunch of second string pitchers, and that's not the case at all. These guys are quality pitchers that happen to play other positions as well." Peterson believes the Blue Raiders will be a solid defensive team, in some ways better than last year's team. Offensively, the team should hit about what they hit average-wise, but not with as much power. "You won't see the power that we had the last three years. The numbers that we put up the last two years, you're just not going to have that consistently. Those guys have moved on." noted Peterson. "But that's not to say that we don't have people that can hit it out of the

park, because we do." According to Peterson, a lot of what the Blue Raiders do on offense will be dictated by the team's pitching. "We've always been able to sacrifice a runner over, or play for one run late in the game, and you might see more of that this season. I've never been a big sacrifice bunt guy, especially early in the game. I'd rather go to a hit and run, or a stolen base. "Because of the power we've had the last three years, I was hesitant to steal. I think you will see us run a lot more this season. Peterson believes a good leadoff hitter can make a big difference in a team's offense. "We have some guys with the God-given ingredients, but they have a devil's mentality. They are not as patient as you want a leadoff man to be. They are very impatient, just like the devil." explained Peterson. "They have good knowledge of the strike zone, but they need to learn to take a few more pitches. They need to develop that mentality of fouling off pitches with two strikes, of battling, and things like that. "We have guys that can put the ball in play, and can run and steal bases. The goal is to have somebody on base when you get to your three, four and five hitters." Peterson knows that the Ohio Valley Conference schools on the schedule are going to be very good. "Jacksonville State has usually been either the league champion or the tournament champion, and they are going to be very good again. Tennessee Tech has just had two of the best years they have had in a long time, and will have another outstanding ball club. Austin Peay had a lot of injuries last year, but they are all healthy now and ready to play." "And we have Vanderbilt and Tennessee home and home again, and we are going to Kentucky. Belmont is going to have one of their best teams, and Lipscomb is going to be much improved. They had a rough year last year, with a lot of injuries, but I don't see them down very long. Memphis and Southern Illinois are again on the schedule for a pair of two-game series." Louisiana Tech will be on the schedule this year after a ten-year absence, with three games in Ruston, and they will come to Murfreesboro in 2012. We have 29 home games, so hopefully that will help us." Florida Atlantic, Florida International and Louisiana are the top three picks in the pre-season poll, and Peterson knows they will be tough. Western Kentucky is also picked higher than the Blue Raiders. "The Florida schools are getting nationally ranked, and Lafayette is always tough. Western has a lot of guys coming back, including a proven closer. The Sun Belt is going to be like it always is, very, very tough. It's a tough league to play in, one of the top six or seven leagues in the country". To make the schedule even tougher, to make up for the games each team will miss by New Orleans dropping out of the league, everybody will now play their closest conference opponent in a home and home instead of just once each spring as in the past. "Our primary rival is Western, and they are always good, and now we play them twice. We open the conference season up there, and close it here with a three-game series the week before the conference tournament starts. It should be very exciting for our fans." Peterson predicted. Middle Tennessee will open the 2011 season with a three-game series against Portland beginning on Friday, Feb. 18 at 3 p.m. at Reese Smith Jr. Field. Duane Hickie and John Callow will have the call all weekend on WMTS 88.3 and live stats will be available on goblueraiders.com. Baseball alumni who would like to join the Dewon Brazelton Alumni Suite for the 2011 season need to contact Pat Fones at pfones@mtsu.edu. Alumni must have a ticket to the game and a membership to enter the Dewon Brazelton Alumni Suite during home baseball games at Reese Smith Jr. Field.

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