Soccer opens practice this week in pursuit of title defense

Blue Raiders play host to SBC Championships in November

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - The Middle Tennessee soccer team officially begins 2011 preparations with technical tests at 7 p.m. Wednesday looking to defend its Sun Belt Tournament title from last fall which lifted the program into its first NCAA Tournament. The team will then conduct agility/dribbling/turning tests Thursday night before the first official practice at 7 p.m. Friday at Dean A. Hayes Track and Soccer Stadium.

"We are excited about getting back onto the practice field and begin training," head coach Aston Rhoden said. "Last season was magical, but we know that is in the past and will not mean anything going forward unless we put forth maximum effort this fall at all times."

Middle Tennessee enters 2011 with eight starters and 14 overall letterwinners returning for Rhoden's 10th season. Already the program's all-time winningest coach, he won his 100th game as the Blue Raiders' mentor last October.

Six seniors anchor this year's squad, including goalkeeper and tri-captain Rebecca Cushing. In just two seasons in the MT uniform, she has become the program's all-time leader in wins (25) and ranks among the career leaders in several categories. She was tabbed the Sun Belt Tournament Most Outstanding Player after guiding the Blue Raiders to the championship crown.

Joining her this fall in their final campaigns will be forward Shan Jones, midfielder Laura Lamberth, forward Luisa Moscoso, defender Elisabeth Sikes and midfielder Hope Suominen. Jones is a two-time All-Sun Belt First Team honoree and was the 2008 Sun Belt Freshman of the Year.

More experience returns in the junior class, led by fellow captains midfielder Paige Goeglein and forward Whitney Jorgenson. Goeglein netted the clinching penalty kick scores in the Sun Belt Tournament semifinals at Western Kentucky and in the final versus No. 15 Denver, while Jorgenson had a breakout year with seven goals, the most of any returner, to garner All-Sun Belt Second Team accolades.

Joining the duo as third-year players will be defender Allison Stallard and a pair of redshirt juniors, Charity Blair and Regina Thomas. Thomas also had a breakthrough season last fall, netting five scores, on her way to earning All-Sun Belt First Team honors.

Only two true sophomores are on this year's squad, defender Maddie Harper and midfielder/forward Jessika Oseguera. Both players saw extensive action during their inaugural campaigns and will be counted on to continue their progress in their second year.

Jessica Gilchrist, a redshirt sophomore, returns between the pipes as support to Cushing after a preseason injury last August sidelined her the entire year. Also returning from a 2010 preseason setback is redshirt freshman Greta Jochmann, who has yet to see game action with the Blue Raiders. Both players did compete during the spring season.

A host of newcomers join the MT program this fall, including nine freshman and one junior. The lone non-rookie is midfielder Kaci Kratch, who is transferring into Middle Tennessee after stints at UCF and Polk State.

She will be joined by freshmen defender Kelsey Branstetter, defender Allison Daniels, midfielder Melisa Erturk, midfielder Emily Hartshorn, defender Becky Pedro, defender Ashley Reveiz, midfielder Kelsie Roberts, forward Katinka Stenberg and midfielder Paige Terlizzi.

The Blue Raiders will start with an exhibition match at Belmont Sunday, August 14 at 6 p.m., before playing host to Dayton at 7 p.m. Friday, August 19 in the season opener. Middle Tennessee is also the host institution for the 2011 Sun Belt Championships, to be held November 2-5 at Dean A. Hayes Track and Soccer Stadium.

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