Cross Country set to begin season at Belmont Opener

Women’s 4k at 5:30, Men’s 5k at 6 p.m.

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. -- The Middle Tennessee men’s and women’s cross country teams will begin their 2011 seasons when they head to Nashville to participate in the Belmont Opener on Friday evening.

The women will run a 4k race beginning at 5:30 p.m. CDT and the men will follow with a 5k at 6 p.m. Both races will take place at Vaughn’s Creek Cross Country Course at Percy Warner Park.

Joining the Blue Raiders in the field will be host Belmont along with Tennessee, Vanderbilt, Kentucky, Lipscomb, Austin Peay, Kennesaw State, UT-Martin and Brescia. Middle Tennessee’s men’s team took home the title at last year’s meet while the women tied for fifth-place.

After backing up its first Sun Belt Championship in 2009 with a runner-up finish a season ago, this year’s men’s squad will have a completely new look. The Blue Raiders have only one returnee – sophomore Keith Davis – from the 2010 team and must replace 2010 Sun Belt second runner-up Festus Chemaoi.

“We will see what we can do, beginning with this weekend’s meet,” said cross country coach Dean

Hayes. “We hope to put together a strong performance on Friday.”

The men will benefit from the addition of senior Justus David. The 2010-11 Sun Belt Indoor Trackman of the Year will take part in cross country for the first time this season after running track for the Blue Raiders last year.

“Justus David is an extremely talented runner,” said Hayes. “He will have no trouble adjusting to running cross country for us.”

Transfers Lyle Haywood and Robinson Simatei will aim to bring experience to the team. Haywood comes to Murfreesboro after spending two years at SUNY Delhi where he helped the Broncos claim back-to-back NJCAA cross country national championships. Meanwhile Simatei spent last season running track & field at Texas Tech.

The Blue Raiders will also hope to get contributions from freshmen Vincent Bett and Silas Taiget.

“Both Vincent and Silas have the talent needed to succeed,” Hayes said. “They will get better as they get a chance to run more and gain experience.”

On the women’s side, the Blue Raiders will be led by the sophomore trio of Deanna Brasz, Autumn Gipson and Rachel Islam.

Brasz posted three top-five finishes last season and ended the year in strong fashion with a ninth-place finish at the Sun Belt Championships. Gipson, meanwhile, rebounded from a slow start in 2010 to finish the year with a season-best 18th-place finish at the conference championship. Islam will aim to build off an up-and-down freshman year in which she claimed two top-25 finishes including finishing 14th at the UTC PowerAde Invitational.

“The goal for this season is simply to run competitive races and to improve upon last year’s performances,” said Hayes.

Junior Stephanie Smith returns as the veteran of the women’s squad. The Aurora, Ontario, native notched her best finish of the season at the 2010 UTC PowerAde Invitational where she placed 13th.

“After battling injuries throughout her career, Stephanie appears to be completely healthy,” Hayes said. “She has an opportunity to be a big help to us this year.”

Like the men’s team, the Blue Raider women will feature several newcomers led by sophomore Lucy Kapkiai.

“Lucy looks like she has the ability to be very good,” said Hayes. “We hope she can provide us some strong performances this season.”

Follow the Blue Raider men’s and women’s cross country teams on Twitter @MTTrackField and on Facebook at the MT Track & Field page. Also, stay up-to-date on the teams on their new blog, which can be found linked on the Track & Field page on GoBlueRaiders.com.