

Talented infield returns for 2012

All-SBC honoree LaRue will look to lead the way

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GoBlueRaiders.com is previewing the 2012 Middle Tennessee baseball season, which is set to begin on Friday at Reese Smith Jr. Field.

Today, we focus on the infield.

The infield was a primary strength of Middle Tennessee baseball last season, and 2012 looks to be no different as the majority of starters are coming back for another year.

"I think we're set with what we're going to do at second, third and short," head coach Steve Peterson said. "If I'm a pitcher on our team, I'm thinking that, 'We're going to get outs if I throw ground balls.'" Peterson has reason to be confident, after seeing the Blue Raiders convert on a Sun Belt-best 64 double plays in 2011, marking the third consecutive year that MT has led the conference in the category. If Middle Tennessee is to keep up those numbers, it will likely fall into the hands of Johnny Thomas, Ryan Ford and Hank LaRue. The trio started nearly all 55 games in



2012, and look to be set for a strong year both defensively and offensively. Thomas led the group with a .953 fielding percentage and a team best 143 assists. Offensively, the Kenner, La., native posted a .268 batting average with eight stolen bases and 27 runs. Ford is entering his third season as the regular starter at short after posting strong defensive campaigns in each of his first two. The Knoxville product improved dramatically last season at the plate, hitting .281 with 21 runs batted in a year after posting a .201 average. "Ford is a Bucky Dent-type shortstop," Peterson said. "He doesn't do anything flashy, just makes plays. He is a pitcher's best friend because he makes the routine plays. He's also improved quite a bit offensively and gotten a lot stronger in the weight room." The

potent offensive force of the group will likely remain LaRue, who took home All-Sun Belt Preseason honors last week due in part to earning Second Team accolades in 2011. After hitting .306 and leading MT in both walks (37) and steals (9), LaRue became the first freshman to garner the all-conference distinction since Bryce Brentz in 2008. Defensively, LaRue's .929 fielding percentage ranks second among returning third basemen in the Sun Belt. The other two starting spots are still in contention going into the final part of preseason, with a pair of talented players battling at each position. Dain McNabb, who received a significant number of starts at catcher last season, has been facing stiff competition from one of MT's prized recruits in freshman Michael Adkins. "McNabb got a lot of experience last season, but Adkins really has a lot of talent, even as a freshman," Peterson said. "I think time will evolve one of those guys." McNabb started 25 games last season, hitting .221 with nine runs batted in and 11 scored. Adkins enters his first season in Murfreesboro after picking up All-Region honors twice while playing for Hillgrove High School in Powder Springs, Ga. With Justin Guidry expected to spend the majority of his season in the outfield, the competition at first base has boiled down to a junior vs. a newcomer as well. Dalton Henzman is set to move to first after featuring in a limited outfield role his first two seasons. A former standout player for Lexington Christian Academy in Lexington, Ky., Henzman aims to improve his .181 average from a year ago. Ethan Williams will be looking to make an impact in his first year after transferring from Columbia State. The Erwin, Tenn., native hit .376 with eight home runs, 44 RBI and 45 runs scored in 2011. "At first base, I'm looking for a guy who can swing the bat," Peterson said. "If Henzman and Williams are both swinging the bat, then they'll both be in the line-up with one as a designated hitter. Williams is left-handed and Henzman is right-handed, so we'll also have to answer that question as the season goes along." Other players looking to contribute to the infield include utility player Robert Lawrence and catcher Connor Tracy as well as newcomers Austin Bryant and Clint Ambrosch. Lawrence made 11 starts last season, primarily as a second baseman, but he spent time working at third base as well during the fall camp. The junior hit .238 last season with three runs batted in and five scored. Tracy has mostly served as a bullpen catcher for his first two years in Murfreesboro, and the redshirt-sophomore made only one plate appearance in 2011, going 0-for-1. Bryant is in his first year on campus after earning all-district honors at Columbia Central High School, and junior college transfer Ambrosch was a two-time conference player of the week honoree for Motlow State last season.

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