Blue Raiders set for pair of in-state battles

Baseball to play at Tennessee Tech on Tuesday and host Vanderbilt on Wednesday

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - The Middle Tennessee baseball team will take a short break from conference action this week with a pair of meetings against in-state foes, beginning with the annual trip to Cookeville to take on former conference rival Tennessee Tech on Tuesday and closing out with Vanderbilt's yearly trip to Reese Smith Jr. Field on Wednesday. The Blue Raiders (23-18) will be looking to replicate their previous successes against TTU after dropping two out of three at ULM over the weekend. MT is 42-20-1 against the Golden Eagles under the direction of head coach Steve Peterson, a number that improves to 17-4-1 since leaving the Ohio Valley Conference for the Sun Belt in 2001. The two sides met earlier this season as an eighth inning two-out rally pushed the Blue Raiders ahead for a 3-1 decision at Reese Smith Jr. Field. After giving the Eagles a 1-0 lead in the first, Dain McNabb helped tie things up in the third after leading off with a double and later scoring. Johnny Thomas and Hank LaRue came up big late with back-to-back doubles in the eighth to push home the deciding runs, and the trio of Nick Montgomery, Joey McClung and Paul Mittura tossed six shutout frames in relief to secure the victory. Last season's game at Bush Stadium in Cookeville also featured a dramatic late MT victory. Thomas and LaRue played a vital role once again, combining to score five runs to lead the Blue and White to a 10-6 victory. With the game tied at 6-6 in the top of the eighth, former Blue Raider and current Atlanta Braves farmhand Will Skinner homered to give MT the lead for good, and Thomas and LaRue accounted for two of the three runs in the following inning to put it out of reach. Kooper Kessler will get his first career start this time around, and he'll be looking to silence a TTU line-up that is hitting .303 this season. The freshman has made 11 appearances, pitching 12 innings and boasting of a 1-1 record. The Golden Eagles are entering the evening with a 17-22 record overall, but a 12-9 mark at Bush Stadium. On Wednesday, MT will be looking to break through against Southeastern Conference foe Vanderbilt, who has won six straight meetings since dropping a 5-4 decision to the Blue Raiders in the 2009 NCAA Louisville Regional.

MT is 16-34 vs. the Commodores under Peterson. The Blue Raiders ventured up to Nashville last week for the first of the annual two-game set, but couldn't overcome spotting the Commodores a four run lead in the first inning, eventually losing 5-1. Last season's meeting in Murfreesboro saw then-top-ranked VU struggle with the MT pitching staff before ultimately breaking through with a run-scoring two-out double in the sixth, handing the eventual College World Series participant the 1-0 victory. Nathan Foriest and his 3.32 ERA will get the start on the mound, just the second of his career. VU is coming into the game with an 18-22 record with just two wins in 13 road games. The game will also serve as Faculty and Staff Appreciation Day at the ballpark, and the Blue Raider basketball team will be honored as well. The team will be signing autographs from 5:30-6:30, and 2012 Sun Belt Player of the Year LaRon Dendy is slated to toss out the ceremonial first pitch. Both games are slated to begin at 6 p.m.

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