

Cauthen excited about defensive approach

Returns all four starters up front

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Now in his second year on the Blue Raider coaching staff, Joe Cauthen was moved from coaching linebackers to coaching the defensive line in the off-season realignment of the defensive coaching staff. He was special team's coordinator in 2011, and will retain those duties this fall. He came to MT from Valdosta State where he was the defensive coordinator for four years. During that time, his defenses earned national rankings in total defense, pass defense, rushing defense, and scoring defense, and helped the Blazers win two national



championships. GoBlueRaiders.com talked with Coach Cauthen about his new assignment, and his impressions of spring practice and other phases of the game as Middle Tennessee prepares for the 2012 football season.

GBR.com: As coach of the linebackers last fall, you worked with the defensive line in schemes and game plans. How much difference is there in actually coaching the linebackers and then coaching the defensive line? "I have coached defensive line before, so it wasn't that much of an adjustment at all. I've been in the middle of the defense for several years, but I have always been close to the front (of a defense). When you've done it a long time, it is just a matter of making sure you are doing what fits, and what you are trying to do schematically." **GBR.com:** You have all four starters returning up front. How is that process going? "We have a lot of good players. We are still a young football team, and we are definitely a young defense. However, while that is good for the future, it's not like we don't have any experience, because we have a lot of guys that have played. We are talented enough to win up front, and I think we will." **GBR.com:** Size has been a problem in the past, but some of the players coming back have bulked up and look bigger and stronger. It would appear that the new weight room regimen is working. "That is a constant deal, and a battle between two important areas. How much do you run them to get them in shape? That can be counter-productive to someone gaining weight. Coach (Jason) Spray is doing an excellent job with our guys, and I think when the season starts, they will be in top physical condition." **GBR.com:** How is working with new co-defensive coordinator Tyrone Nix? "It's

good. I am excited about what he is bringing to our defense. Obviously, he has done it in a lot of good places, and done it at a very high level. I think football is football, regardless of the level, but he has had an opportunity to be around a lot of good people, and he has a great knowledge of the game. I am actually more familiar with what he does defensively than I was before. We have had some really good conversations.” **GBR.com: Have there been a lot of changes to the look of the defense?**“We are going to be a little different. To the fan in the stands, it is going to look very similar. We are still a 4-3 defense. Football is blocking and tackling, and getting off blocks and so forth, but there are different ways to approach it. Up front, our goal is to be more attacking at the line of scrimmage, as opposed to what we have done in the past.” **GBR.com: It’s no secret that the defense had some problems last year, in different areas. In what areas has improvement been made the most?**“We were really young and inexperienced at linebacker last year, and I think those guys will be a lot better simply because they have another year under their belt. Coach Nix has really simplified a lot of stuff for our guys, and that should allow us to play with a lot more freedom of thought. How much difference will that make? I think it will be a 180 degree turn from what we were a year ago.” **GBR.com: As special teams coordinator, talk about changes there.**“First of all, there have been some rule changes, particularly with the kickoff and kickoff returns. Basically, we are going to the NFL rule. The ball will be kicked off from the 35-yd line instead of the 30; the defenders cannot be any deeper than the 29-yard line, they have to have a foot on the 30, which eliminates the running starts on kickoffs. And touchbacks will be brought out to the 25 instead of the 20. I think where we are going with this is eventually the elimination of the kickoff. In other areas, Coach (David) Bibee does a great job with the punt team and Coach (Steve) Ellis does a great job with the punt return team. We need to get the right people back there in our return game to make sure that we have a chance to put the ball in the end zone.” **GBR.com: Is there more experience on special teams this year?**“I think there will be, from the standpoint of guys understanding what special teams mean. We had a lot of young players on special teams last year, so a year of experience will help them as well. Our kicking situation is probably an area of concern. Right now we have a transfer from Carson-Newman who kicked in the spring, and it’s his job to lose, but we also have some walk-on’s coming in that will be competing and trying to take that job. We will also have a new long-snapper, a freshman from Hoover High in Alabama. He is really good, and we are excited about him.” **GBR.com: Your primary recruiting area is south Georgia, an area you know well. How are relationships there progressing?**“They are good. We got a corner from Brunswick that should help us, but actually a lot of my recruiting was in California last year. I got heavily involved out there, and we picked up some guys after signing date that I was able to help in signing. The recruiting part has been fun. It’s a great challenge, and I am enjoying it more. There are a lot of good players out there; it’s just making sure we find the right ones for us.” **GBR.com: Any final thoughts about the upcoming season?**“I am excited about the upcoming season. The people outside don’t know yet, but we are going to be a totally different team. Coach Stock has done a great job of putting this staff together. With the addition of Coach Nix and Coach Spray, I think there are going to be dramatic changes in how we play. People are not going to look at us like they did last year.”

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