Watts talks about his receivers

Jefferson, Amos lead group

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Blue Raider wide receivers coach and recruiting coordinator Justin Watts came to Middle Tennessee as one of Coach Rick Stockstill's initial staff members in 2006, and is the only one that still has the same responsibilities. Watts was a highly-rated high school quarterback in South Carolina, and was successfully recruited by Clemson, where he was moved to wide receiver and coached by Stockstill. Because of a medical red-shirt season, he was part of five bowl teams at Clemson. After two years as a GA at Clemson, he coached WR's at Chattanooga, where he had two players lead the league in receptions in three years. Among his first recruits at MT was highly-touted receiver Desmond Gee. As a true freshman, Gee led the team with a 16 yard-per-catch average, and scored on a 73-yarder against South Carolina. GoBlueRaiders.com recently talked with Watts about his thoughts on the upcoming season:

GBR.com: When you went to Clemson, were you recruited as a quarterback or wide receiver? I was recruited as a quarterback, but when I got there I saw that my talent was not good enough to play quarterback on the major college level, but I wanted to contribute, and I went to Head Coach Tommy West and asked him if I could move and he nicely obliged me. I had played some WR in high school, and had played football all my life with my father, so it wasn't new to me. And having a position coach like Coach Stockstill there to help me made it pretty easy.

GBR.com: Matt Moore, who came here from Texas Tech, has taken over the tight end position this season as well as the offensive tackles. How much interaction is there between the two of you? We talk about everything in our offensive staff meetings, blocking schemes, routes, how much time we each need during a practice session. His guys may be working on blocking schemes while Coach Faulkner and I are working on routes with the quarterbacks and receivers. We are also finding out what each player's individual skill set is.

GBR.com: The power running game is returning to Blue Raider football. How does this mesh

with your wide receivers?It lets them know that they have to be tough guys, willing to throw their body around for the betterment of this team. That is how they are going to get on the field. Everybody drops a pass every now and then, but a guy that won't be physical and block won't have a spot in this offense. They understand that, and they find that they are taking pride in their blocks, just like they would a reception. They also understand that the offensive line will get ten yard gains, but a block by a wide receiver can be an 80-yard run. It's the blocks downfield that will spring someone for a big-time play.

GBR.com: How much do your wide receivers enjoy playing in Coach Faulkner's wide-open offense? They enjoy coming to practice because of the offense that we do run, and they understand that it's our job as coaches to get them the ball in space. We tell them, "if you get the ball in space and make the defense miss, then we recruited right. If you get tackled, we recruited wrong." We have laid down the challenge to them, and I think they are excited about how we have come together as a team. We are going to throw the ball downfield, and guys are going to have to win one-on-one battles.

GBR.com: Do we have any players that can make a defender miss and score a long touchdown?Each kid is a little bit different, and that goes back to us finding out what they do best. Some guys run routes better than others, some block better than others, and some can make tacklers miss better than others. Take Reggie Whatley for example. He's got to be able to turn a three-yard pass into a 15-20 yard gain, and he understands that is his role in this offense. Then there is Kyle Griswould. He's not quite as quick as Reggie, but he's a strong, physical runner and he's a guy that has to break arm tackles. And Tavarres Jefferson, you go back and watch tape, and the first guy never tackles him, so we want to put our foot in the ground and get north and south. Some guys like to dance around when they catch the ball, but as fast as defenses are today, they will catch you if you don't go.

GBR.com: As a whole, rate this group of wide receivers as blockers. Coming out of spring, I am very pleased, because blocking is a pride thing, and right now we have a very unselfish group. That wasn't always the case last year. Fans will notice how many screens we will throw. Those things aren't positive unless the guys are willing to lay it on the line for each other. In team meetings now, a big block is regarded the same as a big catch.

GBR.com: You have already discussed some of your returning players. Let's finish that area first, then talk about your newcomers. Anthony Amos came here as a walk-on and has earned a scholarship. I couldn't tell you how many catches he had last year, and he probably couldn't either. He is a kid that works hard in the weight room, busts his tail doing everything we ask of him, and that's why he was awarded a scholarship. We are looking for big things out of him this year. We are excited about his big-play capability. He's not a 4.4 guy, but he has great skills in catching the ball. He was the one that caught the winning pass against Memphis last year. Behind him is Arthur Williams, who hasn't had a chance to contribute because of injuries, but we are looking for big things out of him this year. At the "Y" position is Tavarres Jefferson, who missed some of spring practice because of basketball. He is an experienced, smart football player. He really understands the game, played QB in high school, has been a leader for this group, and is showing them what accountability is. Whatley and Griswould will be our "H" guys, a position that is half running back and half receiver. Harold Turner has had an up and down career, but he had a solid spring, and is a quick, explosive young man.

GBR.com: Now, critique your new receivers. Christian Collis is a red-shirt freshman who is listed as our starter right now at “X” receiver. He has good size and the body type you are looking for, six feet, 200 pounds, and he works as hard as anybody. He understands that hard work is what will get him on the field as a freshman. Jeremiah Bryson, another red-shirt freshman, is in the mix with Whatley and Griswould at “H”, and can move from there to running back if need be. Coach Brock (running backs coach) and I will probably fight over him in staff meetings. We’d love to have him, he’s just got to become more consistent. He is another guy that can do some explosive things when he gets the ball, and fans around here are already familiar with him since he starred at nearby Smyrna High School. Marcus Henry is a junior college guy with three years of eligibility, but he landed on his shoulder on the first day of spring practice, and missed most of the spring. He was able to come back for the last five practices. He is big and physical, runs well, he doesn’t mind contact, and we need to get the ball to him. Vincent Van Horne, a red-shirt senior, is right there with Marcus, and it’s time for him to step up.

GBR.com: You coached Desmond Gee here for four years. Who is the closest guy to Gee on the team now?Reggie Whatley. He can play with most teams as both a receiver and a running back. Whatley is probably the fastest person I have been around, and I am talking about guys I played with. He can pick ‘em up and put ‘em down with the best of them. He reminds me of Desmond because he walks around with a smile on his face all the time.

GBR.com: What does a healthy Benny Cunningham mean to this offense? Right now, he is the heart and soul of our offense. There are guys that work like him, and there are guys who believe they are working as hard as him, but most guys aren’t. Benny is working like he wants to do this for a career. He is also a vocal leader. A lot of guys will work hard, but they are quiet. Some guys are good talkers, but they don’t work as hard. Benny has guys believing him when he says we are going to do this. They will follow him. That’s better than any play you can call, or any speech that Coach Faulkner can make to the offense. As far as him missing about half of the season last year, it’s hard to throw the ball against two high safeties, and that’s what we faced every snap when Benny went out. With Benny back healthy, and the power running game we have implemented, we are only going to face one high safety, and then it becomes man on man. It puts us in a better position to run the football.

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