

Raiders, Warhawks set to battle in the 'Boro

Kickoff set for 2:37 PM Saturday

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MURFREESBORO - One of the strongest attributes that Middle Tennessee Head Coach Rick Stockstill brings to the football program is his ability to keep his teams on an even keel, not letting them get too pumped up after a win, or down after a loss. Following the Blue Raiders 49-28 thrashing of Georgia Tech in Atlanta last Saturday, Stockstill will have a challenge on his hands when the Blue Raiders host ULM in the biggest Sun Belt Conference game of the young season.



Kickoff is set for 2:37 PM at Floyd Stadium and it is also Homecoming Weekend at Middle Tennessee with all of the reunions, events and parades. Interest in seeing the rapidly-improving Blue Raiders has measurably increased this week. Varsity Club Director Jim Simpson reports that former MT football players will be returning to campus in record numbers on game day.

The game will be televised live over the Sun Belt Network (locally on CSS and ESPN3) with Tom Dore (play-by-play) and Cole Cubelic (color) in the booth and Barbara Jordon on the sidelines. Veteran Chip Walters will handle play by play for the Blue Raider Network, with former Blue Raider and NFL quarterback Kelly Holcomb providing expert analysis. Their broadcast can be heard over Nashville Flagship station WNSR 560 AM, as well as Murfreesboro flagship stations WGNS 1450 AM and WMOT 89.5 FM.

Middle Tennessee (3-1) and ULM (2-2) have been the surprise teams of the first month of the season, with the Blue Raiders having won their last three games by increasing margins, and ULM having beaten Arkansas, taken Auburn into OT on the road, losing to Baylor by five, and last week blasting Tulane, 63-10. While ULM is more of a veteran team, MT is coming on strong as the large number of talented underclassmen gain game experience. The Blue Raiders are one of the youngest teams in the NCAA, with only 11 scholarship seniors on the roster.

A steadily increasing point production by the offense has been one of the keys. The maturation of junior quarterback Logan Kilgore, along with an improved running attack, some acrobatic receivers who also know how to block, and an offensive line that has been effective in both the passing and

running games, has jelled the Blue Raider offense.

The defense has been much more physical, much more aggressive, and is improving every week. And, to the delight of Blue Raider fans, the blitz is once again an important part of the defensive scheme.

But this is October, and ULM is just the first of four Sun Belt games and a road trip to unbeaten Mississippi State over the span of the next 27 days. Focus is imperative, especially against ULM junior quarterback sensation Kolton Browning, who runs and throws with equal skill.

"Browning is a really good quarterback, and we will have to do a tremendous job of containing him," noted Stockstill. "He is a dangerous runner as well as a passer, and he has really good skill people around him. He will get a lot more passing yards than Logan will because they throw the ball more than we do, probably 40-50 percent of the time. We have to be ready to handle that, and, as always, we have to be sound in the kicking game."

Cornerback Kenneth Gilstrap, who made a key interception in the second half against Georgia Tech, also respects Browning. "He knows how to keep drives going. If his team needs a first down, then he finds a way to make that play. To me, that is the biggest thing he does well."

Gilstrap also touched on the attitude of the team as the ULM game approaches. "We worked hard in practice this week because we know that if we don't play well and win again, people will say that we aren't really that good, and nobody on the team wants that."

Stockstill's instruction to his team to "put the Georgia Tech game behind us and focus on ULM" did not keep individual honors from flowing in as a result of the impressive showing against Georgia Tech.

Senior running back Benny Cunningham was named the AT&T All-American National Player of the Week and the Sun Belt's Offensive Player of the Week for his incredible performance (217 yards rushing on 27 carries, five touchdowns including a 60 yard burst up the middle, the longest of his career). He was also named National Runningback of the Week by College Football Performance Awards and SBC Offensive Player of the Week by College Sports Madness. Cunningham also earned a helmet sticker from ESPN.

He was joined by true freshman linebacker T.T. Barber as the Tennessee Sportswriters Associations Offensive and Defensive Players of the Week. Barber made 11 tackles, ten of them solo stops, had two tackles for losses and forced a fumble.

No awards were handed out to the Blue Raiders young (one senior) offensive line for the Georgia Tech game, but perhaps they should have been.

The Dandy Doziers consistently pushed the bigger Yellow Jacket D-line back and opened big holes for Cunningham and other running backs. For the fourth consecutive game, they allowed no quarterback sacks, although they were officially charged with one when receiver Kyle Griswould caught a pass near the sideline, and then threw the ball away to avoid a loss.

Defensively, the swarming Blue Raiders have begun to resemble the 2009 New Orleans Bowl champions with sacks and pressure, as well as delivering hard hits. Defensive scheme-caller Tyrone

Nix has them hungry and motivated, but Browning and his talented receivers will be the strongest test yet for a young defense that starts only two seniors.

The Sun Belt Conference is noted for producing strong teams that were not expected to compete for the title in pre-season polls, and Saturday's game features two such teams. The eyes of the Sun Belt will be on this one.

Following the ULM game, Middle Tennessee will go on the road for the next pair of games, at FIU on the 13th, and at Mississippi State on the 20th. The next home game will be Oct. 27th as MT hosts North Texas on "Salute to Armed Services/Veterans Day".

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