

Raiders seek to regain momentum vs. FIU

Panthers speed will be a challenge

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MURFREESBORO - Losing focus and changes in momentum are, unfortunately, the pitfalls of having young football teams, and Middle Tennessee is no exception. Try as they may to keep their team on a steady climb of improvement, coaches know that there will almost certainly be a back-step or two during the season.



For the Blue Raiders, it was a euphoric win two weeks ago over Georgia Tech in Atlanta, only to be beaten last week by ULM in their Sun Belt Conference opener.

Now, with their feet firmly back on the football field, and the Blue Raider coaching staff having their full attention, Middle Tennessee will go on the road to battle an FIU team that Head Coach Rick Stockstill believes has the best defense that his Blue Raiders will have faced so far in 2012. It is also a team that won in Murfreesboro last fall, 31-18.

Kickoff is set for 5:00 pm Central, and is the Homecoming Game for FIU. The game may be heard live on the Blue Raider Network with veteran announcer Chip Walters doing the play-by-play, and color analysis will come from former MT/NFL quarterback (and Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame inductee-to-be) Kelly Holcomb.

The broadcast of the game may be heard over Nashville flagship station WNSR 560 AM, as well as Murfreesboro flagship stations WGNS 1450 AM and WMOT 89.5 FM. There will be no television for this game. Also, a free video feed of the game will be available at FIUSports.com.

Stockstill believes his team wasted no time in re-focusing their attention to FIU, and while it is a very important game, the reason is not the way his team played against ULM. It is because both Middle Tennessee and FIU need a Sun Belt Conference win now.

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"We are 1-1 in the conference so this is a critical game for us. They are 0-2 in the league and playing at home, so it is a pretty big game for them as well," said Stockstill. "They get back some injured offensive players this week, including their quarterback, and they will have their whole arsenal of weapons available. I think it will energize their whole team.

"We'll get their best effort because their backs are against the wall, but they are going to get our best effort, too."

While road games are hard to win in any league, Stockstill was quick to point out that the Blue Raiders have had success on the road this year. Instead, he was more concerned about the hot weather in south Florida this time of year.

"It is important to win on the road, but we have been on the road twice this year already, at Memphis and at Georgia Tech, and we won both games. We are a mature group, and we can handle that part of it."

Stockstill pointed out that when Middle Tennessee played at FIU in 2010, it was later in the season, and much cooler, but that this weekend's forecast was for weather much like Tennessee has in late August or early September.

"It is going to be a lot hotter down there this time. You have to prepare your body for it. We have worked on that all week. You can't prepare for the heat on just Thursday or Friday."

The team speed of FIU, especially on defense has caught the eyes of both Stockstill and quarterback Logan Kilgore.

Stockstill believes that the FIU front four can play for anybody.

"They have a 6-9, 270-pound defensive end (Paul Crawford) that has played for them for three years. They are also fast. They can run down wide receiver reverses from the backside, and they can run down stretch plays from the backside, but their whole defense is fast.

"Their corners are going to come up and challenge us with man coverage, and see if we can win one-on-one matchups."

What Stockstill didn't point out is that Crawford is not the best defensive end on the Panther front line. That honor goes to senior Tourek Williams, a 6-4, 262-pounder who was named the SBC pre-season Defensive Player of the Year. He is one of four FIU defenders to be named on the first team.

Kilgore recognizes the challenge that the speedy Panther defense will present.

"You can see it on film. All 11 of those guys can run. We are going to have to do a really good job of sticking on our blocks and securing the ball in the open field because we know that someone is going to be right behind us," said Kilgore. "Ball security is going to be very important.

"Their defense is more like our defense than ULM's was; the schemes are very similar. They are going to get after us, and it is going to be a great challenge."

Perhaps the biggest challenge will be to get the Blue Raiders potent ground game re-established. Against Georgia Tech, MT rushed for 264 yards, with senior Benny Cunningham garnering national

accolades with his career-high 217 yards and five touchdowns. Against ULM, Cunningham was held to 62 yards on 14 attempts, but did score twice.

"There is no question that Benny makes our offense go," noted Stockstill. "He is a power runner that opens up the middle to take the pressure off of our passing attack."

This will be the eighth meeting between the two teams, with the Blue Raiders winning four of the previous seven. Middle Tennessee will stay on the road for a game at Mississippi State on October 20th before returning home for an SBC contest with North Texas.

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