Coach Insell transcript from Sun Belt Media Day

Blue Raiders prep for eighth season under his tutelage

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee head women's basketball coach Rick Insell spoke media memebrs from around the Sun Belt on Tuesday morning. The transcript is included below.

On the expectations for the upcoming season

"We're excited about this year. The Sun Belt Conference is tough as it always is with UALR, Arkansas State, and you can go right down the line with South Alabama, FIU, ourselves, WKU, North Texas . They all have good teams. It's going to be another tough year inside the conference, and looking at everyone's schedule, most of the programs have a pretty good nonconference schedule. It's going to be good for the conference if all of us go out and win a game or two in those nonconference slates. It's going to be exciting. We're looking forward. We have everyone back from last year's team that won 26 games. That's one of the things we've been building on in our practices is the fact that we're going to have to go out and play hard to come up with the same kind of season we had last year. The early part of the season is very important to us. Winning those games early before you get into the conference season sets a precedent for you to get an at-large bid in case something happens like what happens last year when we lost in overtime to UALR in the finals. We were still able to get into the NCAA Tournament. We're excited about this year and this team."

On having five returning starters from last year's team

"What we're trying to do with all five starters coming back is to take their mental process of their game to another level. Chemistry and the mental toughness that we kind of lack when we get in the NCAA Tournament is something we have to build on. That's kind of what we've been doing in the early part of our practices is talking about that every day, what we need to do, when we need to knock down shots and when it counts. That's very important early and it's very important to this team

that we go out and have some chemistry and have a mentally-tough schedule."

On the non-conference schedule

"We're going to have to win some of our non-conference games. We have a good non-conference schedule with Kentucky, Tennessee, South Dakota State and Xavier. Then you have Tennessee Tech and Austin Peay. We've got to win some of those games early, and if we do it's going to set the table for a great season. Then you have the WNIT and in it you have Kennesaw State and the winner of the Grambling/Memphis game. We could possibly play Iowa if they go through and possibly North Carolina or Delaware if they win through. We've been telling our young ladies the fact that in the last four or five years the team that has won the WNIT tournament has gone on and won the NCAA Tournament. You know, why not us? Why couldn't that happen to someone like Middle Tennessee? Every year on the men's side you see someone come through like that. I think you have some good teams this year in the likes of Green Bay, Delaware and Middle Tennessee. We maybe have a couple more teams in our conference that have a chance to have breakthrough years and do something special."

On how to build up on the tough losses from the NCAA Tournament the past few years

"The last three years we had some tough losses. We felt like we were better than Michigan State and lost to them by one. We felt like we were better than Mississippi State and lost to them by one or two. Last year, when we played Vandy I felt like we were as good as Vandy and I think so did some of the coaches around the country. We got there and we had a couple open-floor turnovers and the momentum changed from us. It was a tie ballgame and they knocked down some open shots and we didn't. They deserved to go on and play. Do I think they were 14 or 15 points better than us? No, I don't. But, they were at that point last year in the season in the NCAA Tournament. Have we used it for motivation? Yes. We've mentioned it every day in practice. That's what I'm talking about in getting mentally tough. We've got to be able to make those shots, create those turnovers and take the charges. Get crucial rebounds in the tournament and you're going to advance by doing that."

On if the preseason Top-25 rankings adds pressure to the team

"I don't really think it puts any pressure on the coaching staff and the girls. Young ladies, at this point on the collegiate level, got a lot more on their minds than playing basketball. It helps us in selling our program, it helps us in selling the Sun Belt Conference and helps us in recruiting. When you can go out and say you're mentioned in three different magazines - Athlon, Street & Smith's and Lindy's - and you're regarded as one of the top-25 preseason programs in the country, it helps. We use that. It also helps the Sun Belt Conference anytime we can get any type of publicity like that for one of our programs. I've been preaching since I've been here, we need to be talking about more than one. We need to be talking about three or four of our Sun Belt Conference programs because when you look at some of the big games that our programs in our conference have won in the last year. You can go back and there are some other big wins that's taken place over the last three years. The more we can win like that, the more we can get our teams in these early preseason magazines. Then hopefully, get into the USA Today Top-25 and the AP Top-25."

On being predicted to finish first in the Sun Belt East

"I think our kids would have been upset if we weren't picked first. I think they expected that. We looked forward to that coming out. We felt like we probably should be ranked the number one team

in the East. However, you look at FIU and South Alabama, they've got kids coming back. We had three great games last year with FIU and I don't expect anything different this year. South Alabama is as athletic and as well-coached as any team you'll play out there. It's no shoe-in. We got to go out and win it. That's what playing the schedule is all about. Icelyn (Elie), Ebony (Rowe) and Kortni (Jones) have been coaches on the floor in this early part of our practices. We're running a press set and I'll look on the other end and Ebony has one of our newer kids down there explaining why's she's done this and this is what you need to do. It's like having another coach on the staff. These seniors have been in the system for three years. Ebony has been in the system for two years and those three have been in the fire in many hostile environments and close games. It's the mental toughness they're preaching and as a coach you enjoy seeing that. You enjoy seeing your players grow up right in front of your eyes. In those close games, it comes down to one play to break momentum or gather momentum."

On having three players selected first team preseason All-Sun Belt

"I was surprised that all three made first and I wasn't surprised because that's probably how I would have voted if I could vote for me own players. I've said this all along, I'm going to vote for who I think are the top-five players in the conference. If all five of them come from FIU, they're going to get my vote. If the top-four are from UALR, they're going to get my vote. I've been that way since I've been here at Middle Tennessee and I've been that way all my life. I wasn't surprised because the coaches we got in our conference are well-versed in basketball. That preseason thing doesn't mean anything. You got to take it from there and go all out. It puts some pressure on them when they walk out there and I'm going to mention it to them. It is a little pressure from me to them that they're carrying that badge and need to cherish it."

On the new head coaches in the Sun Belt

"It's going to be different. We've got some new coaches and it's going to make it a little tough on knowing what their philosophies and strategies are. You have to go through at least one round and study a lot of film to know what they believe in and what they want to do. That's something that's going to be a little different. It's going to mean a little more work for us guys that have been in it a good while. I pretty well know what Cindy Russo is going to do at FIU just like she knows what I'm going to do. And I know what Rick Pietri is going to do at South Alabama. They've got ways that they do things and they're going to do them and that's what I believe. It's going to be interesting to see what's going to happen with our new coaches and it's going to motivate those new coaches to come in and say look there's a new sheriff in town. It's not going to be like it used to be. Troy's going to compete for a title. North Texas is going to compete for a title. Western has competed before, but you have Michelle Clark-Heard there and I'm sure she's bringing in her philosophies and she's going to compete for a title. All of us oldie-goldies have to be on our toes."

On helping the Blue Raiders reach an elite level

"When Dr. Sidney McPhee and Chris Massaro hired me eight years ago, one of the things I talked about when I sat down with them was to take this program to another level. That other level is the Elite Eight and trying play for a National Championship. I haven't backed off of that. I told them we were not going to have it happen overnight, but it was going to be done. I don't know that I'll ever do it, but I'm trying to lay the foundation for whomever the next person who comes in and it'll be easier for them. Maybe not easier, but simpler for them to take that foundation and go to that next level.

That next level is getting to a Final Four and that will be done by someone in our conference. I think this team is very athletic. I think we shoot the ball well at times, play pretty good defense at times. That team with Alysha Clark, Brandi Brown, Jackie Pickle, Ann-Marie Lanning all scored over 1,000 points each. That team could score, but they were not as athletic as this team or could run the floor like this team. They could shoot the basketball, so it's kind of a different type of team. I think they can be as dynamic as those teams and I hope our fans will get behind this team as they did those teams. I don't know we have an Amber Holt or Alysha Clark, but we've got some young ladies that have a chance to finish off some great careers here at Middle Tennessee."

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