Lot on the line as MT battles Troy

Raiders will honor 16 seniors

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MURFREESBORO - The rivalry between Middle Tennessee and Troy is one of the strongest and most intense in the Sun Belt Conference. A conference championship and/or a bowl bid have been on the line nearly every year. Both teams rank among the top three in all-time Sun Belt Conference wins.

This year will be no different, with Middle Tennessee (7-3 overall, 5-1 in Sun Belt) currently trailing league-leading (and next week's opponent) Arkansas State by half a game and awaiting a bowl bid. Meanwhile Troy (5-6, 3-4) will be trying to become bowl-eligible with their sixth win, and prevent Troy Coach Larry' Blakeney from having back-to-back losing seasons for the first time in his 22 years with the Trojans.

The game will kickoff at 2:30 PM on Saturday in Middle Tennessee's Floyd Stadium, and will be shown live on ESPN3, as well as being broadcast live over the Blue Raider Network(BRN).

The BRN broadcast team of Chip Walters (play by play) and former Blue Raider and NFL quarterback Kelly Holcomb (color analysis) will do both the BRN and ESPN3 games in a live simulcast. BRN's Nashville flagship is WNSR AM560, and the Murfreesboro flagship station WGNS-AM 1450 with sister FM stations 100.5 and 101.9, plus WMOT-FM 89.5.

Although a couple of the games in the Sun Belt series between the two schools have been one-sided, most have come down to the final quarter. A prime example is the first time that a Stockstill team faced Troy, in his initial season in 2006. In Murfreesboro, Troy scored twice in the final two minutes, the last one with 14 seconds left to play, to take a 21-20 win. It remains the closest game between the two teams in the FBS series. Despite the loss, the Blue Raiders did play in the Motor City Bowl in Detroit a month later.

The game in Troy last season was also a nail-biter. Blue Raider quarterback Logan Kilgore lit up Larry Blakeney Field with 415 yards passing and five touchdowns, with all five TD passes going to different receivers. Still Troy defeated the Blue Raiders, 38-35, thanks in large part to a 62-yard fumble return for a TD in the second quarter.

When asked how much, if any, importance was placed on the fact that he had never coached a winning team against Troy in six tries, Stockstill simply smiled and said, "They haven't played this team yet."

Middle Tennessee, with only five home games this season, will honor one of the smallest groups of seniors ever as they play on Horace Jones field for the last time on Saturday. They include 10 scholarship seniors, and five walk-ons. Among those being honored in pre-game ceremonies are Anthony Amos, Benny Cunningham, Kendall Dangerfield, Robert Hogg, Micah James, Carlos Lopez, Kennedy McGruder, Omar McLendon, Kevin Mix, Jeff Murphy, Kevin Pope, Juno Prudhomm, Marcus Thurman, Harold Turner, and Vincent Van Horne.

Center James and wide receiver Amos is the duo of offensive starters, while tackle Dangerfield and end McLendon are the only senior starters on defense. Lopez is the lone senior in the kicking game.

"We don't have a lot of seniors, but the ones that we do have mean a tremendous amount to me," noted Stockstill. "Just what these guys have sacrificed in the last four years that they have played here, and everything they have meant to me personally, this university and this football program.

"I am extremely proud of them, and for them to be able to go out now and say that they went to three bowl games in four years is a tremendous accomplishment for them."

Troy has put up incredible numbers in their last three games as veteran quarterback Corey Robinson has thrown for over 415 yards per game in their last three outings, against Tennessee, Navy and Arkansas State. The Trojans have scored an average of 41 points in these three games, and will severely test a Blue Raider secondary that has been depleted by injuries. With both Kenneth Gilstrap and Jared Singletary out with injuries, MT will use three walk-ons in its two-deep defensive plans.

"You just go to the next guy," replied Stockstill when asked about combating Troy's potent passing attack. "Some of these guys will play more against Troy than they have ever played in a game before. The other guys around them are going to have to raise their level of play to get more pressure on the quarterback. Coach Bibee (safeties) and Coach Ellis (cornerbacks) will have them ready to play."

Defensive end Omar McLendon (one of only two seniors on the Blue Raider defense) knows his teammates will step up.

"The defensive line will step up, just like the secondary would step up if we had injuries on the front line. As much as Troy throws the ball, we are going to have to get pressure on the quarterback anyway, so the DB's can get picks."

Stockstill pointed out that "Troy is a very explosive team on offense, not just the passing game. We have to do a good job of eliminating the big play, and putting some pressure on the quarterback with our guys up front. Defensively, they look about the same as they always do. They've got a lot of junior college guys up front and in the secondary. They are very athletic, so they are playing good on defense. "

In addition to not giving up the big play, and putting added pressure on the Troy quarterbacks, the Blue Raider offense will need to control the ball to keep the Trojans off the field.

Freshman Jordon Parker, who has really stepped up since Cunningham's season-ending injury, and LSU transfer Drayton Calhoun who sat out last season, have never played a down against Troy, but will be counted on to keep the Blue Raider offense both versatile and unpredictable. Parker has 303 rushing yards in the past two games, and needs only 99 to set the MT freshman rushing record. Calhoun racked up 104 yards rushing against FAU, and has provided the Blue Raiders with a solid 1-2 punch since Cunningham went down.

Senior Anthony Amos will close out a great two years at Middle Tennessee. The former walk-on has grabbed national attention on two occasions so far this season with performances against Georgia Tech and FIU, both on the road.
In the 49-28 win at Georgia Tech, Amos opened the Blue Raider scoring with an acrobatic one-handed catch of a Kilgore pass in the back of the end zone that made virtually every highlight video that weekend, and was No. 2 on ESPN's Top Ten Plays of the Day.

Against FIU, Amos caught eight passes for 148 yards in a 34-30 Blue Raider win in their first game without Cunningham.

Kilgore and Amos have hooked up for nine scoring passes and 929 yards so far this season. Amos needs only 71 more yards to become the second 1,000-yard receiver in a single season, trailing only Kerry Wright, who did it twice.

While Middle Tennessee will conclude the home part of its 2012 schedule, two huge games remain to be played. The Blue Raiders will play Arkansas State (who has a bye week) next weekend for at least a share of the Sun Belt Conference championship in Jonesboro at 2 PM. Middle Tennessee and Arkansas State are the only two teams that can win the league title outright. Everyone else has a least two losses.

"We have put ourselves in a position to win the Sun Belt Conference title with two games to go, and that has been our main goal since the end of last season," noted Stockstill. "It is out there for us."

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