

It's Championship Week

Raiders face Red Wolves for outright SBC title on Saturday

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Head Coach Rick Stockstill

"We have a great opportunity this weekend, playing Arkansas State for the Sun Belt Championship. There are probably not a lot of people on the outside who thought we'd have the opportunity to do this except the people in that locker room. I'm really proud of this team and the effort they've played with this year to get to this point."



"Arkansas State's a really good football team. They're very explosive on offense. They've got a really good quarterback who has started and won a bunch of games. It's all built around him. He throws the ball well, runs the ball well. He's a very smart football player and does a good job protecting the football. He's a tough kid. To me, he's the reason they've had the success they've had the last couple of years offensively. They have a good running back next to him, good skill guys at wide receiver. They're offensive line is good. Their defense is right up there at the top in most of the categories. They're fast and athletic, and good in the kicking game. It's a good football team we're playing. I hope when they're doing their press conference down there, their coach is saying the same thing about us because we have a good football team too. I'm excited to get this thing started and get down there and play."

On the potential to win MT's first outright Sun Belt title: "That's important, obviously. Winning this game or winning this outright championship is not going to validate anything. We want to win the game because we want to win the championship. We'll let the people on the outside say 'Hey, that's the first outright championship.' The bottom line to me is I want to win this game and this conference championship for these players."

On players stepping up due to injuries: "The people who are stepping in due to injuries are good players. I'm happy for them because they're having success. If Benny Cunningham had stayed healthy, Jordan Parker would just be a name to you guys. He probably would have been redshirted. So you're getting an opportunity to see how talented he is. The same thing happened with other positions on the field. When Tavarres Jefferson went down, and then Marcus Henry went down, Christian Collis, Kyle Griswold, and Reggie Whatley had their roles expanded. There have been so many people that have gotten an opportunity to play a little bit more because of some of the injuries we've had. It's like every coach will say when somebody goes down; they're not going to stop the

game. We have to play this Saturday and it's an opportunity for somebody to step up. They've got to do a good job preparing themselves mentally and physically and go out there and play. We have to make sure that we're not doing too much, from a schematic standpoint that they can't handle."

On the talent level of Arkansas State: "I think, if you look at it on paper, I don't know if you say they're more talented. They're scoring more points a game than we are. They're giving up a smidgen less points a game than we are. They're leading the league in rushing and up there in the passing and all that stuff. If you look at it that way, on paper, it looks like they're the better team. The better team, the more talented team, doesn't always win. The team that plays the hardest and smartest, with those intangibles, gives you the best chance to win. They're a favorite, but that doesn't faze us. We're going to go down there and expect to win. We got a lot of guys who are hurt and aren't going to play, but we still expect to win."

On being a perceived an underdog Saturday: "I think we relish that role. It's more of a challenge. No one expects you to win. They think they're going to beat you by two touchdowns. You're down there playing on their home field. You have to ride a bus five and a half hours to get there. Everything's stacked against you. You can't win this game. We just use that as more motivation to go down there and prove people wrong."

On 2012 being a great season: "To me, if you closed the door today and ended the season today, I'd look every one of those players in the eye and tell them it was a great year. You had a great year. But it's not over yet. We still have two games left. I said it a month ago, there's still a lot of meat on that bone. We're going to try to get a big chunk of that this weekend. We'll reflect on this year when it's done. I'm extremely proud of this team. I love this team. I love every one of them. I love their attitude and how hard they work and compete at everything they do."

On the importance of winning the turnover battle Saturday: "I definitely think, for us to win this game, we have to win the turnover battle. I don't think we can tie. We have to win the turnover margin and if we can do that, we give ourselves a chance to win."

On MT's road success this season: "I think we're a confident team going on the road. I think our team ought to be confident because we've been on that bus before and traveled and we've gone on other people's home turf and won. It's not like we haven't done it before this year. We're a very mature team and when it's time to play, whether home or away, their mindset is exactly where I like it."

On the status of Craig Allen: "He got home from the hospital last night. He's good. He said he's going to play this week and I told him we're going to slow down a bit on that one. His spirits are great. We're all just so thankful that he's going to have a full recovery."

On the success of the running game: "We've missed Benny (Cunningham). A lot of the credit goes to everybody, starting with the offensive line. I think they've done a great job. I think our receivers have done a great job blocking on the perimeter. I think Logan Kilgore has done a great job getting into better plays at the line. Obviously, Jordan Parker has done a great job of running and breaking tackles. He gets better each week of not dancing back there like he did earlier in the season. He's not trying to change direction and do all that stuff. He's a downhill runner. He's putting his foot in the ground and getting what he can get. The credit goes to a lot of the people involved in our offense, not just Jordan."

On the Sun Belt Championship coming down to one game: "I'm really excited about this game. I'm excited for these players. You think about it - the last regular season game of the year, you're playing for the championship. It's hard to play for championships. For these guys to get the opportunity to play for the championship, we've had to win the last four games to get to this point. We had to beat North Texas and Western to get to this point, then South Alabama and Troy to get to this game. It's going to be a lot of fun. It'll be exciting. I'm just happy for these players to have this opportunity."

LOGAN KILGORE: This game is big for the program. It's exciting to be able to play for the title, it's what we have worked for every week for the last year. We come in every week and say we are one step closer to our first goal and after beating Troy that is pretty much our last step, and now it's do or die. I am excited for the whole program, about how young we are. It's been a team effort, and it's all going to work toward this one game.

(On this being the first winner-take-all championship game in the Sun Belt): It feels great. My whole career, it seems like we are always waiting to see what someone else does, and if so-and-so beats them. Now, we've done what we had to do to control our destiny. This is championship week (across the nation) and it's exciting, and it's fun to be a part of it.

(On preparing for a high scoring game against ASU): Every time you feel like it's going to be one way, then it seems to be the other. Who knows? We are such a complete team that we can go in any direction. Against Troy, our defense did a great job of keeping us in that game. Troy had our number a little offensively. Special teams have done a great job all year, and we need to do a better job of taking advantage of field position. We have gone on longer drives, and seem to do better when we are backed up.

(On being in underdog role): We were an underdog coming into the season, and you see what happened there. We were a 21-point underdog at Georgia Tech, and you saw what happened there. We were a 10-point underdog going to Western, and you saw what happened. We like being the underdog.

(Going from 2-10 last year to playing the defending Sun Belt Champions on the road for the title this year, does it make it any sweeter this game, knowing how far you had to come to get here?): It is sweet, and it is a big turnaround, but like we said coming into the season, we buried last year. Winning the New Orleans Bowl in 2009 didn't do anything for us in 2010. And playing in the GoDaddy.com Bowl in 2010, didn't do anything for us last year. This is a whole new team this year, and we are even different from week to week, it seems like we are a different team this week with all of the injuries and everything else.

You want to test your team early with non-conference teams, and that is what we did. If we wanted four blow-outs, we'd schedule differently. We obviously scheduled to challenge ourselves, and we had some good challenges, but they had nothing to do with our first goal, and that was to win our conference. That is why it is so big every week when we play our conference games.

OMAR McCLENDON: (On young guys stepping up when others were injured). I am very pleased to see that. It seems like we had a defensive tackle go down every game, and guys fill in and they play. Jerrold Frazier and J. D. Jones, both freshmen, have played a lot of snaps. Guys are working their pants off in practice and paying attention to what is going on with the starters, just in

case they have to go in the game. It all starts in practice, and those guys pay attention in practice."

(On Troy HC Larry Blakeney's comment that Arkansas State had a better team "on paper", but that Middle Tennessee had a team chemistry that counts as an intangible asset): It is just heart, guys fighting for each other, playing together. During the Troy game, I asked Kevin Byard to get me a pick, and he got a pick and took it to the house. Then after the game, he told me this game was for me (one of two seniors on defense). We fight for each other, the defense fights for the offense, the offense fights for the defense. We hold each other accountable, and we are going to play for each other."

(On being a "conservative" defense): It doesn't matter what kind of defense you want to call it. Our job is to hold the other team's offense to one less point than our offense scores. We can win 3-0 or 50-49, it doesn't matter to me as long we get the job done. We are a junk-yard dog team. We get after it every day in practice, we are always physical. It doesn't matter who we play, or what time it is. We ignore all the outside noise. We are a jelled team that knows we have to do whatever it takes to get the job done."

(On injury to high school buddy and teammate Craig Allen in Troy game): It hit me hard, we went to high school together, got recruited together, and have done a lot of things together. I expected him to bounce back up, he's that type that is always hyper, always moving around. You are looking at him, and you don't see his legs or feet moving, and you are thinking, "come on Craig, get up, quit playing and get up", and then you see the ambulance come on the field and that was my breaking point. It hit me that he was not going to get up. It hit home with a lot of the guys and that just goes to show the love that we have for each other, and that this is truly a brotherhood that we share together."

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