Blue Raiders eye strong finish to magical season

MT battles Arkansas State for Sun Belt title

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Looking to cap off the week on another high note, Coach Rick Stockstill's Middle Tennessee Blue Raiders travel to Jonesboro to play Arkansas State in a winner-take-all battle for the outright championship of the Sun Belt Conference. Arkansas State is the defending SBC champion, while the Blue Raiders, who have shared two titles in the past, can win their first outright crown. Both teams are 8-3 overall and 6-1 in Sun Belt games.

The game will be played on Saturday afternoon with kickoff set for 2 pm in ASU Stadium. It will be televised on ESPN3 online and will be broadcast over the Blue Raider Network (BRN) with Chip Walters doing the play-by-play and Kelly Holcomb handling color commentary.

BRN affiliates are Nashville flagship station WNSR 560 AM, and Murfreesboro flagship stations WGNS AM 1450, and WMOT 89.5 FM.

Twitter updates may be followed @mtathletics, while live stats and web audio are available on GoBlueRaiders.com

The two teams enter the game from opposite directions. The Red Wolves of Offensive Guru Gus Malzhan were picked, along with FIU, to be the most likely to battle it out for the SBC title and the automatic bowl bid that goes with it. MT quickly rose up from the bottom of the pre-season prediction ladder.

Blue Raider quarterback and total offense leader Logan Kilgore, who did not play last year in the Red Wolves 45-19 win in Murfreesboro, is ready to play in his first championship game.

"It's big for the program, it's exciting to be able to play for the title, it's what we have worked for every

week," noted the red-shirt junior quarterback. "We come in every week and say that we are one step closer to our main goal. After beating Troy, that is pretty much our last step, and now its do or die. Now, we have done what we had to do to control our own destiny. It's championship weekend all across the nation and it's fun to be a part of it."

MT has gone from a 2-10 record last year to a possible 9-3 in 2012, one of the biggest turnarounds in the nation this year. Kilgore noted that at the start of the 2012 season, the team had a ceremony and buried all aspects of last season.

"This is a whole new team this year, and we are even different from week to week," said Kilgore. "It seems like we are a different team every week with all of the injuries and everything else."

Defensive end Omar McLendon, one of only two seniors on the Blue Raider defense, is pleased with the way young players have stepped up when others have been hurt.

"It seems like we have had a defensive tackle go down every game, and guys fill in and they play. Freshmen Jerrold Frazier and J.J. Jones have both played a lot of minutes."

Opposing coaches have commented on a big intangible that has propelled the MT defense to be better than anyone expected. Mclendon called it "heart, guys fighting for each other, playing together." He gave a prime example.

Midway through the fourth quarter of the win over Troy last week, McLendon's high school teammate and best friend, linebacker Craig Allen, was injured and taken off the field. At the time, Troy was leading 21-16 and driving for another score.

McClendon told red-shirt freshman safety Kevin Byard that the team needed another interception, and a couple of plays later, Byard picked off his second pass of the game and returned it 77 yards for the winning score. Kilgore's pass to Jacob Corbaley for the 2-pt conversion sealed the final score.

Byard parlayed his second pick of the day, along with a forced fumble, a pass break-up and six tackles into Sun Belt Defensive Player of the Week honors this past week.

Middle Tennessee has one of the best road records in the nation, with a 5-1 mark away from home, including key Sun Belt victories at FlU and Western Kentucky. The biggest of them all, however was the 49-28 win at Georgia Tech, who will play for the Atlantic Coast Conference title this weekend and a berth in the Orange Bowl.

All of those wins were "paybacks" for Blue Raider defeats in 2011. Home wins over North Texas and Troy were also paybacks. The only two teams on the 2012 schedule to avoid the revenge--minded Raiders are Mississippi State in Starkville and ULM in Murfreesboro.

Kilgore waived off the point spreads as meaningless. In fact, he relishes the underdog role.

"We were picked at the bottom of the league in all the preseason polls, and you see where we are now."

Overcoming injuries has also been a strong trait for this 2012 Middle Tennessee team. When senior tailback Benny Cunningham went down in the opening game, two newcomers in Jordan Parker and Drayton Calhoun stepped up to rush for 100 yards each. Three games later, Cunningham again

went down for the season. Since then, Parker has closed in on the MT freshman rushing record and has nearly averaged 150 yards rushing in each of his last three games.

The offensive line has been a major factor in the success for the Blue Raider lineup this season. Anchored by center Micah James, juniors Josh Walker and Jadareius Hamlin, sophomore Isaiah Anderson and freshman Darius Johnson, the front five have used new techniques to bolster the running game.

This will be the 14th meeting between the two schools over a period of six decades. MT holds a 9-4 edge over the Red Wolves, but ASU has won the last two games. MT is 3-3 all-time in Jonesboro.

Regardless of Saturday's outcome, both teams are expected to be handed bowl invitations within the next two days.

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