Season Preview: Pitchers and Catchers

Blue Raiders return two of three weekend starters

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This is the first of a three-part series highlighting the 2013 Blue Raiders. Part one discusses pitchers and catchers. Middle Tennessee opens the season on Friday at 3 p.m. vs. Ball State at Reese Smith Jr. Field.

Middle Tennessee returns 2-of-3 weekend starters from a solid rotation a year ago. Sophomore Johnathan Frebis and senior Hunter Adkins return to the mound eager for their first starts. Head coach Jim McGuire feels having these two guys in the regular rotation gives his team, and himself, confidence right away.

Adkins started 15 games a year ago, serving as the primary Friday starter. He posted a 5-6 record with a 5.75 ERA. The Signal Mountain, Tenn., native was second on the team in innings pitched with 76.2. His season was highlighted by a complete game shutout against Ohio where he struck out four and walked no one. He was later named Sun Belt Pitcher of the Week for his efforts. Adkins, because of his years of experience on the mound, will get the nod to start the opening game Friday.

Frebis is set for his first start after a sensational freshman campaign. Last year, Frebis was named Freshman of the Year in the Sun Belt Conference, named to the Louisville Slugger Freshman All-American team and is a Preseason All-Sun Belt selection for the upcoming year. The former Riverdale High School standout was the workhorse for this team a year ago pitching 81.1 innings and leading the team in strikeouts with 61.

"He had some huge wins for us and pitched some big innings, and I think people saw that throughout the conference," McGuire said. "He's a tremendous competitor."

Junior transfer Zac Curtis will complete the weekend starting rotation, set to pitch Sunday's series finale. Curtis joins the Blue Raiders after spending time at Volunteer State Community College where he posted a 4-2 record with a 3.80 ERA. As a freshman, he earned conference Pitcher of the Year honors and was a first-team all-conference selection.

The bullpen looks to be a strength for the team this year as each guy has spent time on the mound. Junior Paul Mittura and senior Joey McClung threw a ton out of the pen last year. They each spent time closing some games but McGuire isn't ready to go with a set closer just yet. It will be a matchup type situation or a feel to start the season.

"To this point, Mittura gets the nod to be a true closer type guy and McClung could be a bridge guy to get to him before it's over with," stated McGuire.

They combined for 78.2 innings pitched a year ago out of the pen.

Senior Jordan Cooper has thrown well and could see a start as early as next week. Cooper transferred from Walters State Community College a year ago and saw 14 appearances with eight starts on the mound. He posted a 2-3 record on the season. Cooper is a guy, because of his experience, that will likely see action out of the pen on Friday.

Senior Daniel Palo and sophomore Keaton Baker have each pitched their fair share of innings. Palo has been a starter in the past, making 17 appearances last year with a 1-1 record. Due to some minor arm issues, McGuire is focused on getting his stamina and strength built up and ready to play.

"Palo and Cooper are going to be the two main guys that will be a big part of the success or failure of the pitching staff," McGuire said.

Baker made 17 appearances and one start in 2012. He was able to strike out 24 batters in 24 innings and looks to add depth in the bullpen heading into this season.

Two freshmen pitchers to watch for this season are Garrett Ring and Heath Slatton. Both players were highly recruited out of the state of Tennessee. Ring, from Mt. Pleasant, and Slatton, from Columbia, pitched well through the fall and entered the spring competing for time. Ring will be the guy that will get the most time on the mound. His consistency and steadiness have led McGuire to give him the nod the quickest.

"Slatton might be our hardest thrower on the mound," stated McGuire. "You may see him offensively before you see him on the mound because he's a left-handed hitter and has some power too that I think will help."

The Blue Raiders return two as battery mates for the pitching staff. Sophomore Michael Adkins and senior Dain McNabb will anchor the catcher position and are neck and neck as to who gets the start.

"The biggest thing for them is the guy that handles the pitching staff the best, that can communicate with them and get them through innings will earn the start," McGuire said.

At this point, McGuire wants to worry about the hitting secondary with both of them. Look for each guy to catch two games apiece for the first four games and be evaluated from there.

Michael Adkins and Frebis formed a successful battery a year ago and the two will get the start together on Saturday. McGuire plans to have McNabb catch Hunter Adkins on Opening Day for the same reason. He noted that either one can handle Curtis successfully and has yet to make a decision on who will catch Sunday. He wants his pitchers to feel as comfortable as possible, especially the first time out.

Part two of the series will highlight MT's infield.

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