

# Season Preview: Infielders

## Ford and Thomas anchor infield for MT

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*This is the second of a three-part series highlighting the 2013 Blue Raiders. Part two discusses the infielders.*

*Middle Tennessee opens the season on Friday at 3 p.m. vs. Ball State at Reese Smith Jr. Field.*

Senior Ryan Ford will return to his starting role at shortstop and the same goes for senior Johnny Thomas at second base. Ford is a four-year starter for MT. Thomas started as a freshman in New Orleans before transferring. Both players will be four year Division I middle infield starters and head coach Jim

McGuire feels indicates a lot about their makeup and defensive skills.

"They are just both outstanding defensive players and they communicate well together," McGuire said. "They give us a solid core going up the middle. Now it is time for both of them to do more offensively than they have been and be major contributors."

Primary starter at third base Hank LaRue is coming off labrum surgery and isn't quite ready to see action at third. LaRue, a two-time All-Sun Belt honoree, will likely start out as the designated hitter for the opening series. McGuire feels that he's probably 65-70% of where he was at before the surgery.

"He has played a lot at first and third in the scrimmages, but the arm's just too far away. He swung the bat well, and he will be able to hit two or three in the lineup as the DH. We are counting on him big time offensively, but we are going to really miss him defensively without him being on the field," said McGuire.

In his absence, fifth-year senior Robert Lawrence will get the start at third. Lawrence batted .333 last year with 39 hits in 117 at-bats.

"Robert has done a good job. He has been solid over there, and I've got confidence that he will make the routine play and be a good defender. I think offensively, he will hit like he did last year," stated



McGuire.

With Lawrence at third, junior outfielder and preseason all-conference selection Trent Miller will likely move to first base. Miller led the team with 13 home runs a year ago and batted .345 with 78 hits and 49 RBI. He was selected to the ABCA All-Region team for his efforts. Miller has the ability defensively to lock down first base until LaRue returns to full strength and Miller can move back to the outfield.

"That (offense) is a big part of his game and it is what we need because we don't have as much power as we have had before. He will be in that three or four hole depending on the situation or the pitcher we are facing. He's in there to drive the ball and drive runs in and hit some balls out of the ball park," said McGuire of Miller.

Sophomore Austin Bryant, who according to McGuire, is a true utility guy, could also see some time in the infield. Bryant can fill in at a moment's notice for any of the infield positions and gives the coaching staff confidence with his abilities.

"He can play all the infield spots. He will be the fill-in guy. If somebody goes down, he will go in right away. He will be a big part of what we are doing," said McGuire.

Part three of the series will highlight MT's outfield.

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