Women's golf readies for Sun Belt Championship this week

Blue Raiders have finished second in each of the last three years

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MURFREESBORO Tenn. -

The Blue Raider women's golf team heads to the Sun Belt Conference Championship this week, beginning Monday and running through Wednesday at Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail at The Shoals in Muscle Shoals, Ala.

The three-day, 54-hole tournament will consist of 11 Sun Belt institutions competing on The Shoals' Fighting Joe course. In addition to Middle Tennessee, the field consists of FIU, UALR, Troy, Arkansas State, North Texas, South Alabama, ULM, WKU, Florida Atlantic and Georgia State,



competing in its first Sun Belt Women's Golf Championship.

The Blue Raiders enter Monday's competition having finished as the runner-up in the past three league championships to Denver, who exited the Sun Belt this year.

"We should be one of the favorites this year," head coach Chris Adams said. "Our girls think they can win it, especially after finishing second for the last three years."

The Fighting Joe course features a 6,264-yard, par-72 layout. Adams feels like the first hole, a 512-yard par 5, will set the tone for the tournament.

"We played the Fighting Joe course for the first time last year, after playing the Schoolmaster course the other years," Adams said. "At first, I didn't like the idea, but now I love it. The extra length tends to separate the teams. Typically, on a harder golf course, the best teams will come out. I like it much better than Schoolmaster, and more importantly, the girls like it better."

No. 54 FIU will enter the tournament with the best stroke average in the league, as the Panthers are

currently averaging 298.71 as a combined team and 74.68 for their individual team average. Freshman Meghan MacLaren leads the Sun Belt in scoring average at 74.21 and has two first place individual finishes. Maclaren leads a group of Panthers that have three of the Sun Belt's top five scoring averages.

The rest of the league leaders are tightly bunched about 50 slots behind FIU in the rankings. MT follows FIU at No. 97, along with UALR (No. 103), Georgia State (No. 104) and Troy (No. 106).

Although FIU has gone in ranked higher than the Blue Raiders in each of the last three tournaments, the Panthers have finished behind them every time. MT has faced most of the Sun Belt teams this year, but did not cross paths with FIU.

Adams faced a difficult choice in selecting her five-person team to make the trip to Muscle Shoals. The top trio of sophomore Allie Knight, senior Olivia Love and freshman Avery George was fairly easy because they have distinguished themselves over the course of the season.

"Allie has been my best player this spring with a 77.5 average," Adams said. "She is hitting the ball well, and her short game is really good. She missed all-conference honors by one stroke last year.

"Olivia has a 78.0 average, which is higher than we had hoped, but she missed two tournaments in the fall with a rib injury. She played well at Fighting Joe last year, and we expect her to step up and have a good conference tournament.

"Avery has played well all year. We have counted all but one of her scores. She is very consistent and has come on strong. She is a very solid player with good course management skills, and doesn't make a lot of mistakes. She is also the longest hitter we have."

Adams rounded out her five with junior Natalie Chrisopulos and senior Ashley Haggard.

"Natalie has only played in two tournaments this spring, but is hitting the ball well now," Adams said. "She has had problems with course management as well. If she can avoid the big hole, and have it snowball on her, she can be a factor. She gave us three really good rounds in this tournament last year."

"Ashley is really struggling right now. Her stroke average has gone from a 75 in the fall to 83 this spring. She is struggling with her driver, which is her bread and butter. Ashley was all-conference last year. She and Olivia have finished second in this tournament three years in a row, and would like to be on the first Middle Tennessee team to earn a trip to the NCAA."

Adams pointed out that the absence of Denver throws the tournament, and the NCAA bid, wide open.

"Both FIU and North Texas will probably get a bid regardless of whether they win the tournament or not. We won't. We have to win the tournament to go the NCAA.

"The key is going to be Ashley Haggard. She needs to get her driver going on a long course like this one. Your drive sets you up for the rest of the hole, and gives you so many more options. If she is on her game off the tee, we can win this thing."

Live scoring is available by clicking here.

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