Raiders ready for explosive Pirates on Homecoming

First-ever C-USA home game to kickoff at 2:35 PM Saturday

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MURFREESBORO - The posturing is over. The preseason favorite to win Conference USA's Eastern Division will be in town to take on Middle Tennessee in a huge early season league battle.

Kickoff for the first-ever C-USA home game is set for 2:35 PM, and will be televised live on Fox Sports Net, with Mark Followill handling play by play, and Brian Baldinger providing color analysis. J.C. Pearson



will report from the sidelines. The game will be shown on DirecTV (649), Comcast in Middle Tennessee (1676), Dish Network (437), and AT&T U-Verse (1729).

Click here for a complete listing of television outlets that will be carrying the game.

The game is also available on the Blue Raider Network, with Chip Walters doing the play-by-play and former Blue Raider and NFL quarterback Kelly Holcomb providing color analysis.

There are also four ways that Blue Raider fans can keep track of the game through social media (Game Hashtag: #MTvsECU, Twitter:@MTAthletics/@MT_FB, Facebook.com/Blue Raider Athletics and Instagram: MTAthletics.

Middle Tennessee and East Carolina have never met on the football field, but despite that fact, the two teams garnered the first and third most votes in the league's pre-season poll to make this game a "must-watch" contest in the Eastern Division. It could also affect the pecking order for C-USA's six bowl tie-in's later in the year.

The two teams enter the contest from opposite directions. Middle Tennessee is coming off of a 37-10 loss at BYU last Friday night, while less than 24 hours later, ECU blitzed North Carolina, 55-31, in Chapel Hill.

Blue Raider Head Coach Rick Stockstill (who was the offensive coordinator at ECU in 2003 before

going to Clemson) had high praise for the visiting Pirate team that comes in with only one loss on the young season.

"They are a really good football team, led by their quarterback (Shane Carden). He is having a great year, and they have been running the ball more effectively the past couple of weeks. Defensively, they are strong, especially against the run. They are a really solid football team, coming off of a big win, so this is a great challenge and a great opportunity for us on Saturday afternoon."

Carden was 32 of 47 for 376 yards and three touchdowns against UNC, while running back Vintavious Cooper rushed for 186 yards, and also caught 8 passes for 70 yards.

For the Blue Raiders, it will be a welcome return to Floyd Stadium after two games on the road, 2,500 miles apart in a six-day span. MT won the first game at FAU, 42-35 in overtime in 95 degree heat, then lost at BYU in the cool, thin mountain air of Provo, Utah.

"Our defense, thinned by injuries to start with, was just gassed in the second half at BYU, but that is no excuse," Stockstill pointed out. "We'll have to play a lot better against ECU than we did in Provo."

With an extra day to prepare and heal, and a normal routine for a change, Stockstill expects his team to play up to their full capabilities, which includes some of the nation's best defensive play.

MT has forced 16 turnovers in its first five games, which ranks first in the nation (tied with Tulane). The Raiders have eight interceptions this season by seven different players. The team's +6 turnover margin ranks 9th nationally. Sophomore linebacker T.T. Barber is ranked 4th nationally in solo tackles per game, and 5th nationally in total tackles per game.

Senior Josh Davis is ranked 31st in punting with a 43.3 average, and has placed 45 career punts inside the opponents 20-yard line.

Perhaps overlooked with all of the accolades garnered by ECU's Carden, Blue Raider senior quarterback Logan Kilgore has some impressive stats of his own.

Saturday, Kilgore will make his team-best 31st career start. He has 16 games in which he has recorded over 200 yards passing. Kilgore has thrown 42 touchdown passes, nine shy of breaking Wes Counts' school record of 50.

Leading receivers for the Blue Raiders are Tavarres Jefferson (22 for 279 yards) and Kyle Griswould (16 for 134 yards and two TDs).

Sophomore Jordan Parker is the team's leading rusher with 480 yards and four touchdowns in five games. He is joined by junior speedster Reggie Whatley, who has 283 yards rushing and 288 yards in kickoff returns.

Stockstill feels like the key to the game will be getting the defense off the field on third down.

"Our defense has done a great job of attacking the ball, but we need to be more consistent, and we have to be better on third down, which is something we can't afford to keep giving up. We have to get off the field more consistently defensively."

Saturday's game is the focal point of the annual Homecoming activities at Middle Tennessee, and

nothing would please the old grads more than a win over East Carolina.

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