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MT softball season comes to close Team looks to build on late-season success in 2009

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - The 2008 softball season came to an end for Middle Tennessee last week as the Blue Raiders dropped two games at the Sun Belt Conference Championships in Troy, Ala. However, the frustration of being eliminated from post-season play can not hide the fact that the determination of this year's team to overcome the challenges presented to them was consistently excellent.

"It was a rollercoaster year and there were highs and lows. There were times where we made great strides and times we took a step backwards. Could we have finished with an above .500 record? Most definitely. I look back at the schedule and we could have easily turned 15 or 20 of the losses into wins," said Head Coach Sue Nevar.

The Blue Raiders began the year after facing a multitude of changes following the conclusion of the 2007 season. None were bigger than the hiring of Nevar, a decision that came after then-head coach Leigh Podlesny retired for personal reasons on June 29th. Nevar came to Middle Tennessee with highly-touted credentials after serving as head coach at Kent State from 1986-96 and leading the Golden Flashes to the College World Series in 1990.

"I think a lot of the reason the train didn't get rolling until the middle of April is because our kids were still trying to figure out our expectations and how things were getting done. It was a change of the guard and things were different. There was a lot of change that was expected to happen and it takes time. No one likes to lose a season due to that but I think the team was still transitioning in the middle of the season," said Nevar.


The 2008 squad completed the season with a 22-31 record, including an 11-12 record in Sun Belt Conference play to earn the fifth seed in the conference tournament. The team opened the season with one of the hardest schedules in program history, with five of their first 12 games coming against teams from the 2007 NCAA Tournament, including facing then-second ranked Alabama twice.

The Blue Raiders picked up their most Sun Belt Player of the Week awards since 2005, all coming in the second-half of the season, with **Martha Davis**, **Corrie Abel** and **Justine Cerda** being honored.

"In the middle of April we were finally starting to come together. We did not have to explain to the team the finer details of playing. However, at the same time just as we were realizing the bigger picture then we started to run out of gas," said Nevar.

They were led by Sophomore outfielder Abel, who led the team in runs scored (31), hits (64), total bases (87), slugging percentage (.518), least strikeouts (13), outfield assists(9) and fielding percentage (1.000). The Shorewood, Ill. native was named to the All-Sun Belt Conference second team at the conclusion of the regular season.



First-year Head Coach Sue Nevar led the Blue Raiders to a 22-31 overall record, including an 11-12 mark in Sun Belt play to earn the fifth seed in the conference tournament. (MT) 

"As the year transitioned it was obvious that Corrie was going to be in centerfield. Her aggressive play in general was great. We were counting on her and Martha [Davis] to lead not only in the outfield but at the plate as well. They both have some serious pop in their bats," said Nevar.

Sophomore **Lindsey Vander Lugt** continued her assault not only on the school record books, but nationally as well. The Olympia, Wash. native is currently leading the nation in fewest walks per seven innings (0.69), giving up just 26 walks in 263.2 innings pitched. In just two seasons, the Tumwater HS product is already ranked in the top 10 of 19 other school pitching records for both a season and career.

Her performance this year was highlighted by the recording of the longest streak in school history for consecutive innings without a walk. Her 44.2 inning performance over seven games from March 22-April 6 crushed the former mark of 24.3 innings by former Blue Raider Jennifer Martinez (1999-03).

"We knew coming in to the season that Lindsey was going to be our ace. She started the last 12 games of the year and we should have picked up the run support for her. Someone of her talent should have a winning record. She gave it all she had and she threw two of her best games of the year in the Sun Belt Tournament. Unfortunately, we could not pull out wins for her," said Nevar.

The team's success, however, was not solely limited to on-field achievements. Senior **Whitney Darlington** was voted to the ESPN The Magazine Second Team Academic All-District IV, by the College Sports Information Directors of America after carrying a 4.0 grade-point average during the 2007-08 academic year.

"Whitney is one of those all-around athletes that you do not run into very often in a coaching career. She lives and breathes softball and academics and excels at both. She told me at the beginning of the season and I can honestly say she was true to her word - she could do everything but pitch for us. She was every bit of the word multi-talented and is proof that you can excel in the classroom and on the field," said Nevar.

Four players complete their eligibility from this year's squad, including team co-MVP **Ashley Cline**. Despite playing just two seasons with the Blue Raiders, the Gallatin, Tenn. native has left quite a mark on the MT softball program.

"Ashley did an outstanding job. She exhibited the leadership qualities that were needed in order for the kids to gel. She is so important that I believe if we did not have her that we would have been far worse off this year. I can't say enough about her. She was every bit of the word team and I think she is going to be the biggest hole we have to fill," said Nevar.

The Blue Raiders went into the season with multitudes of questions and unknowns, but over the course of the season they found answers. As the team faces another transition this off-season with the loss of four seniors, they look forward towards their ultimate goal of a Sun Belt Conference Championship and their first-ever berth in NCAA Tournament.

Said Nevar, "If they learned anything this season then I hope it was that only with determination, leadership and dedication can you achieve your goals."

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