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## Anticipated men's basketball campaign begins Friday

### Blue Raiders play host to Trevecca in 08-09 season opener

*Athletic Communications*

**MURFREESBORO, Tenn.** - Anticipation of Middle Tennessee's 2008-09 season has been high since last season's appearance in the Sun Belt Conference championship game. Excitement continued to heighten throughout the offseason as numerous national publications, including Blue Ribbon, Rivals.com, Lindy's and Athlon, picked Middle Tennessee as its SBC preseason favorite.

League coaches followed suit by making Middle Tennessee an overwhelming favorite to win the East Division in a poll released at the Sun Belt's Basketball Tip-Off in Hot Springs, Ark., the site of the 2009 SBC Championships.

Eagerness for the start of a promising season will end when Middle Tennessee tips off the 2008-09 campaign against Trevecca at Murphy Center Friday at 7 p.m. The Blue Raiders will play two games in three days to start the season as Houston Baptist comes calling Sunday at 3 p.m.

There is good reasons for the favorable outlook as the Blue Raiders return all five starters and their top eight players from a squad which fell 20 minutes short of reaching the NCAA Tournament last March.

That championship game loss seemed to whet the appetite of a hungry team seeking to take the next step for a rising Blue Raider program, and seventh-year head coach Kermit Davis sees similarities between this Middle Tennessee team and other squads he has coached that have realized a high level of success.

"The really good teams that I have been part of either as a head coach or assistant coach have carried themselves like this team has," said Davis, who is second among active Sun Belt coaches with 51 league wins. "After our loss to Western Kentucky in the Sun Belt championship game the players really went back to work the next week. Our players have had a very good summer in the classroom as well as making progress in our strength and conditioning program. If the talent level is good enough, and ours is, then these things usually equate to a team playing the right way and having a good chance for success."

Experience and leadership are among the biggest qualities for Davis' optimism as the Blue Raiders seek their sixth winning season in seven years under the veteran coach.

"There's not a lot of college teams that can say they have six guys who are starting their fourth year in the program," Davis said. "They are all guys who are on track to graduate and understand how to carry themselves as a successful student-athlete. We have eight guys who have been in the program three years or more and their maturity has carried over to our new players. Our four new guys have a good deal of hard work in front of them but they have been a very responsible and dependable group to date."

Middle Tennessee returns 91 percent of its scoring, 92 percent of its rebounding and 91 percent of the assists from that team which may also go a long way in explaining Davis' vigor for the 08-09 campaign.

"Every program wants expectations," Davis said. "If you have expectations then you know your staff and players are doing things right from a standpoint of recruiting and executing on the floor and that's a positive sign. It's great for our fans, terrific for our program, terrific for recruiting. We don't talk a lot about expectations but we do talk a great deal having a positive work ethic every day, and trying to improve on what we can control. The balance and depth of the Sun Belt is by far the best it has been since I've been it and you are going to see a number of teams that are going to be improved and that may not be picked as high but will have some great non-conference wins. The Sun Belt is developing into a Top 10-to-12 basketball league in the country."

Leading the way for the Blue Raiders in 08-09 will be the senior quartet of [Kevin Kanaskie](#), [Nigel Johnson](#), [Theryn Hudson](#) and [Demetrius Green](#). Behind them are juniors [Desmond Yates](#), Dino Hair and [Darren Avery](#), and the Blue Raiders welcome the return of [Calvin O'Neil](#), who has enjoyed a successful rehabilitation from the knee surgery he underwent last season. The Blue Raiders also welcome five newcomers, including freshman [Antwaun Boyd](#), who took a redshirt season in 2007-08.

Davis, who became the second-fastest coach in Blue Raider history to reach 100 wins when Middle Tennessee beat South Alabama in the SBC semifinals last season, believes this group's versatility will not only provide options on the court but lead to improved play and competition at practice.

"Our player's versatility makes for real competitive practices and if our team stays healthy I think we have a chance to use our depth



Calvin O'Neil makes his return to the court after missing last season due to injury against Trevecca Friday. (MT)

to our advantage," Davis said. "We can go big or we can go small and be a lot more aggressive up the floor with full-court pressure. It's going to be a team that hopefully can adjust from opponent to opponent, maybe adjust during a game depending on match-ups and time and score."

#### **GUARDS**

Preseason All-SBC selection Kanaskie (6-2, 185) provides not only great versatility but leadership and has proven to be one of the better guards in the Sun Belt. He enters his senior season at Middle Tennessee fourth all-time in assists (365), fifth all-time in 3-point field goals made (145), ninth all-time for free-throw percentage (.796) and he is on pace to join the 1,000-point club with 873 points entering his final season. A durable and reliable player, Kanaskie also is on pace to set the all-time Middle Tennessee record for games played and most minutes played during a four-year career.

"Kevin has been the exemplary college guy," Davis said. "He plays through injuries, he's a great student, and he's very accountable. He won't think his college career is complete unless he gets to postseason play and that's something I want very bad for Kevin and the rest of our seniors.

"Kevin is a guy that was under the radar as far as recruiting. He has worked hard every day and improved his body. Last year he would have made all-league teams but during the mid-season he was banged up bad and then the final 10 games of the season he got healthy and played like one of the best guards in the league. I don't know if Kevin's minutes will be as high this year just because of the balance but I know he's going to have a really good senior year."

Johnson (6-2, 185) changed the dynamics of the Blue Raiders when he assumed the point guard position for the stretch run to help free Kanaskie as a shooter. The Memphis, Tenn., native enjoyed some of his best games during the stretch and it was probably no coincidence that Middle Tennessee also enjoyed its best run as a team. He netted his career high of 22 against Arkansas State and five of his 11 double-figure scoring games were in his final 13 contests of the season.

"I thought our team was much faster in transition the last 14 games and Nigel made us much better in the open floor," Davis said. "Nigel's had a tremendous spring and summer and provides us with great leadership. People forget he led our league in 3-point field goal percentage last season."

Green (6-4, 190) enjoyed a breakout season in his first year as a Blue Raider, averaging 12.5 points and shooting 37 percent from 3-point range. Green ranked 18th in the Sun Belt in scoring and reached double figures in 20 of the last 23 games.

"Demetrius really came on and played more consistent the last 15 games of the year," Davis said. "He brings a lot of energy and provides us with a solid scorer and a defensive player on the perimeter. 'Duna' really started to understand how to practice and become a college player on a day-to-day basis."

Avery (6-4, 200) and O'Neil (6-4, 190) also provide versatility and a strong work ethic to what is a deep and talented group of guards.

"[Darren Avery](#) could be one of our best off-ball defenders and he can play the 2, 3 and 4 spots."

#### **FORWARDS**

Yates (6-7, 225) was named SBC Preseason Player of the Year by league coaches, as well as numerous national publications. He emerged as a first-team All-Sun Belt performer as a sophomore after appearing on no preseason teams; however, he averaged 16 points, 4.4 rebounds and shot 58 percent from the field to lead the Blue Raiders and gain attention as one of the best forwards in the conference. Yates has scored double figures in 70 percent of his 64 career games and with 860 points appears braced to break into the 1,000-point club as a junior. He has 45 career double-figure scoring games, including 14 with 20-plus points, and he has led the team in scoring 27 times in his first two years.

"All coaches say it but when your best players are your most coachable guys then your team is fun to coach," Davis said. "(Yates) is one of the most coachable guys I ever have been around. 'Boogie' tries to go every day, and then he's also very versatile. You have a guy who is 6-7, 225 pounds who is a low post scorer, a good mid-post scorer within 10-to-13 feet of the basket, and he shot better than 50 percent from 3-point.

"Now Boogie has to prove he can do it against the very best teams night in, night out and can he become one of the better rebounders in our league?"

Teaming with Yates inside is senior center [Theryn Hudson](#), a 6-foot-10 player who has seen his numbers improve each season, including a career-best 9.1 points and 5.4 rebounds in 2007-08. Hudson's career field goal percentage of 60.5 is second all-time at Middle Tennessee and his 64.7 shooting clip was best in the Sun Belt last season. Hudson shot a blistering 74 percent (45-of-61) from the field over the last 12 games.

"Theryn has spent an unbelievable amount of time in the gym and I think his body is outstanding," Davis said. "I believe Theryn will have a fantastic senior year. Theryn has to improve in his low-post defense and become a more consistent free-throw shooter."

O'Neil will be a very versatile player and he can play as many as four positions. His return to the court will improve Middle Tennessee's basketball IQ, toughness, rebounding and defense.

"There is no one that works harder at anything than Calvin no matter what it is," Davis said. "He's been our toughest competitor on the practice floor when he was healthy and he's attacked his rehab the same way. He is getting in better condition, he's healthy. He needs to lose six-to-eight pounds to get to his best weight."

Hair (6-9, 200) enters his junior year with high expectations. He's a player who has helped key Middle Tennessee surges in each of the last two seasons but Davis would like to see more consistency throughout the year. Avery also will be counted on to play either of the forward positions.

"Dino Hair comes back with a lot of experience and he has always played well at the end but we have to get him to play better early in the year with conditioning and toughness," Davis said. "(Avery) and O'Neil can play the 4 so we can go small and play guards. I like our depth and versatility with this group."

#### **NEWCOMERS**

The Blue Raiders welcome four newcomers - [DeMario Williams](#), [Eric Allen](#), [Montarrio Haddock](#) and [Josh Jones](#), and redshirt freshman [Antwaun Boyd](#) also is in his first season as far as playing.

Davis believes all four newcomers can impact the team whether it is this season or the immediate future.

"[DeMario Williams](#) is a mature guy. He walks around and you think he's been around your program two or three years so I think he has a chance," Davis said. "DeMario's biggest thing is patience because we have some senior guards but he is going to be a very successful player here. [Eric Allen](#) is a celebrated junior college player. He can shoot the ball, is a very good rebounding guard and he passes the ball extremely well. Eric's biggest challenge, like other new college players, will be how he handles the day-to-day toughness part, playing with nicks and injuries and if he does that he has a chance to be a very good player.

"[Antwaun Boyd](#) would have been an unbelievable addition to our team last year with our depth. He's may be our most athletic player going to the rim, very versatile, and I think he has a chance to be a great defender. [Josh Jones](#) has lost 25 pounds this summer and is down to 224. He possesses a high skill level for his size in the front court.

"[Montarrio Haddock](#) was an excellent scorer at the junior college level. Montarrio's biggest challenge will be getting his body fat and weight down to a level where we could all see his talent really blossom at a high level."