Blue Raiders reached high marks during 2008-09 campaign

Future bright for men's hoops

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Middle Tennessee enjoyed highs and lows during an injury-riddled 2008-09 men's basketball season; however, its final body of work resulted in a sixth winning season in seven years and an 18-win worksheet under Head Coach Kermit Davis. Middle Tennessee's 18 wins in 2008-09 represented just the 16th time in its 86-year program history that a squad had won at least 18 games and the Blue Raiders became just the third team among current league members to reach the SBC quarterfinals seven consecutive years. The Blue Raiders ultimately fell to North Texas in the league's postseason tournament, ending their season with an 18-14 overall mark. The Blue Raiders also captured the championship of the Basketball Travelers Tip-Off Tournament in historic fashion during a strong December run in Springfield, Mo. That captivating run stretched into the start of SBC play and was part of one of the longest winning streaks in school history. Davis notched career milestone win No. 250 when the Blue Raiders beat Louisiana-Lafayette. He is the program's third-winningest coach (118) and ranks sixth on the SBC All-Time Coaching Leaders wins list with 61 (excluding tournament wins). "The season certainly did not end the way any of us wanted or anticipated," Davis said. "Our goal was to reach the NCAA Tournament and unfortunately we fell just short of that. We did have some positive moments and accomplished some positive things - 18 wins, a winning season, players graduating. We have positives we can take into the offseason and we will work hard in this off-season to start getting ready for next year." The 2008-09 season that opened with heightened expectations took a decisive blow even before it began when 6-foot-10 center Theryn Hudson - a three-year starter - suffered an ankle injury in preseason practice after undergoing off-season foot surgery. The injury essentially resulted in him taking a redshirt season in 2008-09 and returning in 2009-10. His absence prompted Desmond Yates' move to the center position and forced him to play out of position all season. Weeks later point guard Nigel Johnson suffered a sprained MCL at Vanderbilt and though he missed just a handful of games, the cat-quick and shifty senior never was the same upon his return. Shortly after Johnson's injury guard Antwaun Boyd suffered a season-ending shoulder injury in December and his loss impacted the Blue Raiders'

perimeter depth. Senior guard Kevin Kanaskie suffered two fractured vertebrae in his lower back against Arkansas State in mid-January and finished the season but his game was visibly impacted by the setback. "There's no doubt our season was impacted by some key injuries and we were not able to overcome all of those," Davis said. "Our team was impacted by injuries more than any other team in our league but despite of that our team developed good practice habits, fun to coach, good to travel with and represented our school as good as any group I have ever coached." The season marked the end of the collegiate careers of Demetrius Green, Johnson and Kanaskie, who cemented his legacy as one of the greatest all-around players in program history during a splendid four-year career. He closed his career ranked among all-time leaders in eight different categories, including first for assists (485), first for starts (105), first in minutes (4,078), first in games played (124), second in 3-point field goals (207), fifth for free-throw percentage (.811), seventh in steals (127), and 14th all-time in scoring (1,251). "I had a great time and I still can't believe it's over," Kanaskie said. "I'm appreciative to coach Davis for the opportunity he gave me at Middle Tennessee. When a lot of people didn't believe in me, he did and I have become a better player during the last four years. I'm just grateful to him, the staff and my teammates because my college career was more than I could have ever imagined. I'm disappointed we couldn't get to the NCAA Tournament because that was important to all of us and our fans but I hope that doesn't overshadow some of the good things we have accomplished." Johnson also left his mark on the Blue Raider program. He capped his career with 675 points and finished ninth all-time at Middle Tennessee for assists (292) and steals (90). Green scored double figures in 42 of 62 career games. Green, Kanaskie, Hudson and Eric Allen will earn their degree in May and Johnson and Dino Hair will be August graduates. "This reveals the character of this group," Davis said. "To have seven of them earning their degree in the next few months says a lot about them." Yates enjoyed a banner junior season in which he continued to become one of the most prolific scorers in school history. Yates earned first-team All-SBC honors for the second straight season after leading Middle Tennessee in scoring and field goal percentage. He is one of two Blue Raiders ever to be named All-SBC first-team twice, joining Tommy Gunn (2003, 2004). Yates finished second in the SBC scoring race and third among league leaders for field goal percentage. He closed the season 11th on the all-time scoring list at Middle Tennessee with 1,410 and is on pace to break Robert Taylor's career mark of 1,622 points during the mid-way point of the 2009-10 season. His return to the power forward position, along with the return of Hudson and Montarrio Haddock, anchors what Davis believes can be a dominant inside attack. Middle Tennessee also enjoyed good results in attendance with right at 3,000 season tickets sold and a sellout crowd against Tennessee highlighting the totals. The Blue Raiders were second in the Sun Belt in attendance behind WKU. Middle Tennessee's game against Tennessee, Nov. 21, 2008, drew a crowd of 11,802 - the second-largest in program history. The Blue Raiders' future also appears to be promising as five early signees each enjoyed dynamic moments in 2008-09. Fulton guard James Gallman has led his team the TSSAA State Tournament. Gallman's Fulton team will play Sheffield at Murphy Center Wednesday at 6:45 p.m. Guard David Murray led Leeds High School to the Alabama State Championship and was named MVP of the event. Murray led Leeds to its first state championship. Guard John David Little led Olive Branch to the semifinals of the Mississippi state championships, and forward J.T. Sulton has been named one of the top players in Mississippi by various recruiting sites and newspapers in the state. He has been selected to play in the Mississippi/Alabama All-Star Game. Junior college signee Trevor Ottley finished strong at Garden City Junior College in helping lead his team into the National Junior College Tournament to be played this week. "I feel we have a very good nucleus returning and I am excited about our recruiting class being here and developing them," Davis said. "We feel we have a chance to put one of our best teams on the floor next year."

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