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Men take cross country title, women place second

First conference cross country title in 26 years for the Blue Raiders

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The men's cross country team won the first team title Middle Tennessee in 26 years. ()

MONROE, La. - The slippery and wet conditions of Selman field in Monroe, La. were not enough to keep the Middle Tennessee men's cross country team from taking their first ever Sun Belt Conference title in the program's history.

Led by the efforts of individual runner-up Festus Chemaoui and fifth place William Songock, all Blue Raider scorers placed in the top 11. Chemaoui completed the 8,000 meter course in 26:42.14 with Songock coming in 27:32.13. The Blue Raiders finished with 36 team points to defeat second place South Alabama with 43 points.

"I'm really proud of what they did. It was a good solid team performance. All five knew they were going to have to go out and do their jobs and they did. Festus and William had to neutralize South Alabama's top guys and then the three, four and five guys needed to beat the rest of South's guys," said head coach Dean Hayes.

Hayes received his first ever men's cross country Sun Belt Conference Coach of the Year award.

Newcomer Chris Mason ran an inspired race at his first conference meet. The SUNY Delhi transfer finished eighth overall to earn his first All-Sun Belt award at Middle Tennessee. What was perhaps more impressive was Mason ran most of the race shoeless upon losing both in the first mile.

Mason commented, "It almost felt like an advantage going without shoes. It was tough to get traction with all the water on the course. I was able to dig in more with my toes and run stronger without the shoes."

Senior Isaac Biwott earned the second all-conference cross country award of his career upon taking ninth at the meet in a time of 27:42.24. Biwott first garnered the award in 2007 at the championships in Bowling Green, Ky. David Emery rounded out the Middle Tennessee scorers placing 11th in a time of 28:00.88. Philip Benavides and Josh Wheeler also participated.

2009 marked the first time in school history the men's cross country team had four runners earn all-conference honors.

Chemaoui commented on the performance of his team, "I am so proud of my team. We worked hard all season and it is great to see it pay off. Chris is the toughest runner on our team and came through even though losing his shoes early in the race.

The Blue Raider women took second place for the second year in a row. The team raced a tough race against a formidable opponent in Western Kentucky. The Hilltoppers beat the Raiders 53 to 65.

Zamzam Sangau was the top MT finisher placing third in 19:49.09 in the women's 5K. Marla Bailey earned her first All-Sun Belt cross country award as the junior placed fourth in 19:58.33. Bailey finished 11th at the Sun Belt Championships last season in Bowling Green, Ky.

Bailey said, "I loved the course today. Cross country is my favorite season, so earning this honor is important to me. I have progressed each year which not everyone does."

Jackie Serem earned her first all-conference award placing seventh in 20:30.52. Samantha Hunt led the pack of Blue Raider freshman finishing 24th in 22:30.52 with Stephanie Smith coming in 27th in 22:14.98 as the last team scorer. Alissa Ruggle, Kayla Bryan and Amber Kassuba rounded out the women's roster with respective finishes of 42nd, 45th, and 47th.

Hayes said, "The top three really ran well. Marla ran a great race, and Jackie has done a super job of improving in less than a year. Both teams ran a great race in really tough conditions."

The Blue Raiders will be off for the next two weeks before returning to action at the NCAA South Regional in Tuscaloosa, Ala. Stay tuned to goblueraiders.com.

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