

Blue Raiders open season on Friday

Seven newcomers to add depth to returning core

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. -

Eighteen wins, including seven in a row, and a regular-season tournament championship highlighted the 2008-09 season for the Blue Raiders. And along the way, Coach Kermit Davis moved into third place on Middle Tennessee's all-time win list for coaches.

Despite those successes, Davis was not satisfied with the 2008-09 season. "We were disappointed we fell short of some of our goals," noted Davis. "On the other hand, when you win 18 games, and are still disappointed, that says something about where your program is."

"We make no excuses. At the end of the season, we went back and evaluated the entire program. We found some things that we needed to change, and we found others that we needed to work on. And we have done that," Davis declared.

While Davis would make no excuses for not meeting all expectations last season, the fact remains that the Blue Raiders lost 6-10 senior center Theryn Hudson to a foot injury that limited his action to a total of 61 minutes in only seven games early in the season and which resulted in a redshirt. In addition to the loss of Hudson, All-Sun Belt performers Kevin Kanaskie and Desmond Yates both played in considerable pain the last six weeks of the season.



"Kevin Kanaskie is one tough kid," pointed out Davis. "His back hurt so bad that every time he hit the floor, I would just hold my breath. Probably 98% of the players in college would not have played at all after suffering an injury like that."

Middle Tennessee will miss Kanaskie's toughness. In fact, toughness was one of the points that Davis emphasized in the review at the end of the season.

"Overall, we didn't have the toughness that we have had in years past. We scored 79 points in our Sun Belt Tournament game, and lost. That is just not typical of us in a tournament game," declared Davis. "We have to get some toughness back, and we will."

Gone from last year are Kanaskie, plus guards Nigel Johnson, Demetrius Green, and Eric Allen, and forward Dino Hair who all graduated and received their degrees.

The injury to Hudson had a ripple-down effect on the team, in that Yates, the SBC pre-season Player of the Year, had to play out of position most of the season. It also cost Josh Jones, a junior college transfer, a year of eligibility.

On the upside, junior college transfer Montarrio Haddock got a lot of valuable experience, and wound up the season as perhaps Middle Tennessee's best player down the stretch. He had 26 points, four rebounds and four assists in only 25 minutes in the season-ending loss to North Texas at the Sun Belt Conference tournament.

Besides hoping the team stays healthy all year, Davis thinks the perimeter shooting will be much improved this season with the influx of newcomers, which should help Yates, Haddock and Hudson around the basket.

Yates will miss the beginning of the season due to an injury but should be back before conference play begins.

GUARDS

"Obviously, we needed to recruit some help at the guard position, after we had all those guys graduate," said Davis. "And we did help ourselves a great deal. Our coaching staff did a tremendous job of getting a talented group in here to replace the ones we lost."

Senior Calvin O'Neil and sophomore Demario Williams are the only veteran guards returning from last season, and will be counted on to contribute leadership as well as playing time.

O'Neil started 23 games last year, averaging 5.6 points and 3.7 rebounds per game. He was coming off of a knee injury that ended his season only 21 minutes into the first game of the year. O'Neil can play four positions, but will likely spend most of his time at guard to begin the season until the newcomers earn more playing time.

Williams, a true freshman last season, played in 28 games and started twice. He scored 12 points at Troy, and dished out five assists against Trevecca, both season highs for him.

"Demario can play the point, but he is more comfortable off the ball, and that is where we will utilize him this year," noted Davis.

FORWARDS

After his sophomore season, during which he went from being a player with virtually no mentions in the pre-season, to being named First Team All-Sun Belt Conference, Desmond Yates was a marked man last year as a junior. Things immediately became more difficult when Hudson had to take a medical redshirt year for a foot injury, and both scoring and rebounding responsibilities fell to the 6-7, 225-lb Yates.

He responded by increasing his scoring to 17.2 ppg, pulling down 4.5 rebounds per game and being named to the All-Sun Belt Conference for the second year in a row.

With the return of Hudson, the emergence of Montarrío Haddock during the last part of the season, and the talented newcomers who have joined the team, Yates is looking forward to returning to his normal position for his senior campaign. A two-time All-SBC competitor, Yates will be the recognized leader of the team.

Senior Montarrío Haddock, who closed the 2008-09 campaign on a high note, benefited from the injury to Hudson in that he received a lot more playing time as a result.

Haddock finished the season with a 9.9 scoring average, and led the team with 5.2 rebounds per game. His top performance of the year came in his breakout game in the Sun Belt Tournament against North Texas, giving him some momentum going into this season.

Better conditioning since last season should help the 6-4 Haddock, who can play either forward slot, but Davis stressed that he needed to cut down on his turnovers this season.

Joining Yates and Haddock on the front will be Hudson, a 6-10 redshirt senior. Hudson has fully recovered from the injury that limited him to 61 minutes and only one start in seven games last season.

"It is great to see Theryn back healthy again," smiled Davis. "He has put on weight, is up to 245 with his body fat under six percent, and is working on improving his free throw shooting as well as his balance and quickness."

The other returning front-line player is senior Josh Jones, who played last year after transferring to Middle Tennessee from junior college.

"We really needed to redshirt Josh last year, but had to use him because of Theryn's injury," noted Davis. "On the positive side, he did get some game experience, and has done very well in the off-season, getting his weight down to about 15 pounds. He now has better athleticism and is a skilled player around the basket".

NEWCOMERS

Davis is excited about the seven newcomers who will begin their Middle Tennessee careers this season. With four freshmen and three junior college players, it is the largest incoming class in Davis' tenure here.

"We are extremely pleased with the new guys we have coming in," declared Davis. "In addition to filling the needs that we have on this team, they all have high character, are confident students, and bring a new enthusiasm to the team. They should push the veteran players to a higher level of play.

"Addressing the loss of all but three guards from last year's team to graduation, the Blue Raiders have signed three freshmen and two junior college players at that position.

Heading the list is point guard James Washington, who played that position for Indian Hills Community College last year, and Western Illinois University the year before that.

"James Washington could very well emerge as our top floor leader this year," said Davis. "He has great leadership qualities, shoots the ball well, and has two years of quality experience."

The other junior college guard is Rod Emanuel, an excellent perimeter shooter from Sante Fe Community College. He shot 42% from beyond the arc his sophomore year there.

The best outside shooter of the bunch could well be freshman James Gallman from Knoxville, Tenn. Davis believes Gallman could be the best three-point shooter Middle Tennessee has had. Gallman plays baseline-to-baseline defense, an attribute that has not escaped Davis' watchful eye.

Freshman John David Little from Olive Branch, Miss., is an outstanding shooter, while 6-4, 210-lb David Murray from Leeds, Ala., will split time at guard and forward.

Post players who have joined the Blue Raiders are 6-9 freshman J. T. Sulton, from Yazoo City, Mo., and 6-9 junior college forward Trevor Ottley from Garden City CC. Davis calls Ottley "the toughest guy physically" of the newcomers, while Sulton "is the most athletic."

The Blue Raiders open the 2009-10 season with King College on Friday, Nov. 13 at 7 p.m. in Murphy Center.

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