

# Men's basketball hours away from first official practice

## Blue Raiders will hit the court at 5 p.m. Friday

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### MURFREESBORO, Tenn. -

The Blue Raider men's basketball team has been eagerly awaiting this day, as the team will hit the court on Friday at 5 p.m. CT in Murphy Center for the first official practice of the 2011-12 season.



As the Blue Raiders gear up for the 2011-12 season, head coach Kermit Davis has his team poised for a breakout

year thanks to a squad rich with experience and depth. The bulk of the squad, including three starters and 57.4 percent of the offense, returns from last year's team that finished second in the Sun Belt Conference East Division.

"We feel good about the nucleus coming back," Davis said. "We have six returning guys who combined for 91 starts, so there is some experience in that area. Your returning players have to be the strength of your team."

Add to the mix two transfers who sat out last year (LaRon Dendy, Torin Walker), three junior college transfers (Raymond Cintron, Marcos Knight, Bruce Massey) and two true freshmen (Julian Edmonson, Jacques Rozier) and the Blue Raiders' blend of veterans and newcomers will give Davis a plethora of options to match up against opponents.

"With the two transfers that sat out but were part of practice every day last year, you almost include them as returners because they understand what we're trying to do," Davis said. "We also feel good about our nationally ranked recruiting class. They got great experience in Canada, got to start some games and played a lot of minutes."

The trip to Canada, to which Davis refers, was a four-game tournament in Calgary, Alberta, during mid-August. The Blue Raiders went 4-0, but more importantly, the team got a jumpstart on practice and building chemistry, including a chance to become familiar with the two new assistant coaches, Greg Gensing and Monte Towe.

"Canada was great on so many fronts," Davis said. "It gave our players a chance to be around each other, understand how games go and understand how we coach. It also was great for our two

new assistant coaches to be around the team and for us all to get to know each other. When you take a trip like that, it makes you realize how beneficial it can be to help your team get ahead.”

It also gave Davis an early opportunity to evaluate MT’s strengths and weaknesses.

“This should be the best defensive team we’ve had,” Davis said. “We limited teams in Canada offensively and forced a lot of turnovers. Sometimes our best offense is pressuring the ball and leading to transition baskets. Last year, we led the Sun Belt in steals and turnovers created, and I think those numbers have a chance to go up. We should be a bigger, stronger team. But we didn’t have a physical presence around the rim in Canada, so that’s something we’re really going to work on this preseason.”

MT’s defense was among the best in the Sun Belt in league games last year, topping the conference in steals per game (8.8), recording the second-best scoring defense (allowing 63.2 ppg) and holding opponents to 32.5 percent shooting from beyond the arc. The Blue Raiders also ranked second in turnover margin at plus 1.75 and forced 17.6 turnovers per game.

While Davis is confident in the strength of the defense, he already recognizes the need for offensive improvement.

“We’re so much more athletic, physical and longer in the perimeter,” Davis said. “We can put more pressure on the ball to create things defensively that will lead to easy buckets. Now we have to have a bigger presence in the back line – contesting shots, being athletic around the rim, being more physical and guarding posts. We’ve got to get better moving the ball and being a more efficient offensive team.”

## **BACKCOURT**

With the graduation of James Washington, the team’s leading scorer last season at 14.0 points per game, the Blue Raiders will look to Jason Jones to step up on the offensive end. Jones was the team’s second-leading scorer last year with 13.1 points per game and ranked eighth in the league with 14.6 points per game in Sun Belt contests.

“Jason got a lot better as the year went on, so that’s a good start for this season,” Davis said.

“With his versatility, he can play multiple positions.”

Davis also is relying on Jones to step up into a leadership role with Washington’s departure.

“Leadership is all about actions because that’s the only way guys will listen to you,” Davis said. “I see Jason now in a leadership role, trying to get other guys to play.”

The team will count on returners James Gallman, Kerry Hammonds and Jimmy Oden in the backcourt as well. Gallman averaged 7.5 points per game last season, while Hammonds contributed 4.2 points per game. Hammond also set the freshman scoring record with 28 points against South Alabama. Oden was one of the key reasons the Blue Raiders led the Sun Belt in steals per game as he finished second on the team with 42 steals and second in Sun Belt action with 2.1 steals per game.

“James had some good moments last year, and he had a really good spring,” Davis said. “Kerry

had some solid moments as well, especially against South Alabama. His body has really changed, and we have a lot of confidence that Kerry's going to shoot the ball well this year. Jimmy played well for us and ran our team last season. He's a very effective team defensive player, and that's what he has got to do to be good for our team."

Davis also has already seen the impact the incoming guards could have this season. Cintron, a junior transfer from Mississippi Gulf Coast Junior College, knocked down seven 3-pointers in MT's second contest against Alberta, while Knight, a junior transfer from Chipola Junior College, led the Blue Raiders with 22 points in the first contest against Alberta. Dodge City Community College transfer Bruce Massey also impressed Davis with his defensive intensity, and Edmonson's athleticism stood out.

"Raymond is just tough and understands how to play," Davis said. "Marcos is very talented, but his main obstacle is his weight and conditioning. He could be a really, really good player at about 215 pounds and when he gets there, he'll become an even more effective offensive player. Bruce has a chance to lead our team in steals this season. Julian had some really bright moments in Canada. He is our most athletic player."

## **FRONTCOURT**

The Blue Raiders also will have to account for the graduation of last year's leading rebounder, Trevor Ottley (5.2 rpg). To fill the void Davis will rely on a pair of veterans (JT Sulton, Shawn Jones), two transfers (Dendy, Walker) and one true freshman (Rozier). Sulton averaged 9.3 points per game and was second on the team with 5.0 rebounds per game last year, while Shawn Jones also saw considerable time off the bench with 4.1 points per game and 2.3 rebounds per game.

"JT and Shawn both put on weight during the offseason, which will make us much more physical," Davis said.

Iowa State transfer Dendy and Oklahoma State transfer Walker will debut for the Blue and White after sitting out last season. Dendy was impressive during the Blue Raiders' stint in Canada, nearly averaging a double-double with 14.5 points and 9.8 rebounds per game.

"LaRon could be the best player in the league this year," Davis said.

Although Walker did not travel with the team to Canada, Davis already is anticipating his potential impact.

"Torin has the potential to be the starting center on our team and has a chance to really make an impact around the basket," Davis said.

Rozier rounds out the options in the frontcourt.

"Jacquez is a tough guy, skilled and will eventually be a really good player here," Davis said.

Davis also is hopeful that he will see other leaders step up in addition to Jason Jones, and believes Sulton and Dendy could provide that extra spark.

"The best teams are the teams that have the most leaders," Davis said. "LaRon has a chance to do that, and JT as well. You also hope, as some of these new guys settle in, that they'll feel more

comfortable to lead.”

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