

## Davis makes his mark at MT

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It was 2002 and MTSU was looking for a basketball coach to replace Randy Wiel.

Then Athletics Director Boots Donnelly had moved from the football field to run the department.

It would be the first basketball coach Boots had hired. If you know Boots, it wasn't his favorite sport. Boots had always been street smart. He realized he needed to do his research.

He called me during the Final Four and wanted my opinion on Kermit Davis Jr. He had interviewed Davis and liked everything about him. But. For Boots, it was a big but. He was worried about Davis having run afoul of the NCAA when he was head coach at Idaho. The rules violations put Davis one step away from a coaching grave.

I remember telling Boots he shouldn't worry about it. Davis would be the safest hire in the country. Why was that, he asked.

Because, I told him, Kermit knows if he even thinks about breaking a rule, he could be banned from coaching for life.

And coaching basketball is all over Kermit's DNA. His father, Kermit Sr., had been Mississippi State's head coach and was highly respected. Kermit grew up around the game. The threat of losing that would allow Boots to sleep at night.

Boots brought Davis to Murfreesboro. Now in his 11th season, Davis not only has more wins (203) in MTSU history, but more than any coach in the Sun Belt Conference. His 113 victories are the most in that league's history, one ahead of South Alabama's Ronnie Arrow.

Davis has proven to be the perfect fit.

He has really been in a groove the past two seasons. Davis is riding a hand so hot a Las Vegas pit boss would ask him to leave the casino.

MTSU has won 16 of its last 17 games. The Blue Raiders have won a dozen games in a row, have an overall record of 23-4 and are leading the Sun Belt with a 15-1 record.

"This is the closest team I've had since I've been here," Davis said Monday. "They play with an edge and toughness. We have depth and it is an unselfish team.

"I think a lot of that unselfishness started with LaRon Dendy last year," Davis said of last year's Sun Belt Conference Player of the Year, now playing professionally in Greece. "He could score six points and be happy if we won and that's the way this team is.

"I think they have taken on my personality. This season has been great. I grew up in this stuff."

As his team continues to rack up wins, Davis is putting up other numbers.

The 12-game winning streak is the fourth longest winning in school history. Their current RPI is 25, better than every SEC team except Florida's.

ESPN bracketologist Joe Lunardi has them projected as a 12-seed in the NCAA Tournament. They need to win the Sun Belt tournament to get an automatic bid. If they keep winning, it will be hard to keep them out.

"I think we have a great chance based on our RPI. We have the second most wins in the country and the committee likes teams playing well at the end," Davis said.

An NCAA bid would be the first since the late Bruce Stewart years and a perfect farewell to the Sun Belt on their way to Conference USA next season.

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