

Eustachy's Eagles Slip on Big Stage

HATTIESBURG – Larry Eustachy's USM men's basketball team is, in early Mar-2011, on the proverbial March Madness bubble. Although much of the air in that bubble was released in late Feb-2011 on a last second loss to Central Florida in Orlando, the nation was watching again on 2-Mar-2011 as the Eagles welcomed fellow bubbler Alabama – Birmingham to Reed-Green Coliseum in Hattiesburg. With a decade having come and gone since the last time the Eagles were in this position, the USM basketball program [needed this win](#) as much as any over the past 3,650 days. Again, it was not to be, as the Blazers from Alabama [defeated](#) USM on a last second three point basket.

With the loss, Eustachy's Eagles fell to 21-8 on the season, and almost all hope for an at-large invitation to the 2011 NCAA Basketball Tournament faded away into the Hattiesburg night. Now, sources tell USMNEWS.net that the Eagles need to string together a series of wins in the 2011 Conference USA Tournament to secure an automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament if Eustachy's seventh season at the helm will be the first for his Eagles to reach the biggest stage of all. New visitors to USMNEWS.net may wonder why a 21-8 record is not enough for USM in 2011. The easy response to that is that the 21-8 record is actually only an 18-8 record, as Eustachy continues to schedule nearly a handful of games against non-Division 1 schools. These games will not only be left off of USM's resume when it comes to at-large decisions for the NCAAs, sources say that the selection committee will likely look upon USM with some disdain at having even scheduled the likes of Loyola – New Orleans and two other similar schools. Such [scheduling](#) and other suspect [roster management](#) practices have been a staple in Eustachy's repertoire since coming to USM seven seasons ago.

With the loss to UAB, sources say there is reason for the [sportscentric](#) Martha Saunders administration to be upset with Eustachy and his boss, USM athletics director Richard Giannini. Saunders is throwing every dollar she can toward USM athletics, including about \$1 million from academic affairs, and another \$6 million from special fees attached to student tuition. With a big salary and recruiting budget, Eustachy assembled what is arguably USM's best team in 20 years, including what sources believe is one of the greatest players to ever wear a USM jersey in senior Gary Flowers, for its 2010-11 run to the NCAA Tournament. Having been to the big tournament only twice in USM's history, with the most recent visit having come two decades ago, the prospect of now participating in the NIT, or possibly even the CBI, is likely drawing the ire of Saunders. Meanwhile, the ire of some USM faculty will likely be drawn toward Saunders, given that almost 50 USM tenured and tenure-track faculty have been handed terminal notices since fall of 2009, so that \$10 million to \$25 million in budget cuts could be managed by Saunders, while keeping Giannini's unit whole.