Blue Raiders Lose Classic 2-1 to South Alabama

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If you had told head coach Steve Peterson that his team would be locked in a classic pitcher's duel in the opening round of the Sun Belt Tournament after his starter had left the game after recording only four outs he would have said you were nuts. But that's what happened on Wednesday night as his Blue Raiders dropped a heartbreaking 2-1 decision to South Alabama. The first drama of the game came in the bottom of the second inning with one out. Blue Raider starter Adam Larson was forced from the game with an injury after attempting to snare a high chopper with his bare hand and suffering a bruised hand. Peterson called for freshman Chris Mobley out of the dugout to relieve Larson and the Kingsport native turned in the performance of his young career. Mobley came in to hurl seven innings of outstanding baseball, allowing only one run on five hits during his tenure. He walked one while striking out a career-high nine batters. As well as Mobley pitched, he was continually matched by USA starter Caleb Crosby. Crosby pitched a career high seven innings before being relieved by lefty Adam Wood. Crosby gave up only three hits while striking out three and walking four. The Blue Raiders kept having offensive chances in the game. The Blue Raiders stranded 11 runners in the game, eight of which were in scoring position. The Blue Raiders looked as if they would finally break through in the top of the eighth inning. Nate Jaggers reached after being hit by a pitch and Justin Sims slashed a single into left field to put runners at first and second with no outs. A strikeout, popup, and fly out later, the scoring chance went by the wayside. The Jags would break the deadlock in the bottom of the eighth. Kevin Sytko led off with a solid double and a sacrifice bunt from Brett Parker moved Sytko to third with one out. T.J. Touchstone singled down the left field line to bring the run across, but was thrown out at second trying to stretch the play into a double. Erik Smallwood then grounded out to end the inning. The Blue Raiders would not go quietly. Chris Leguenec led off the top of the ninth with a walk and was lifted for pinch runner Chris Smith. A Jason Howarth bunt moved Smith to second with one out. Pinch hitter Doug Kunicki struck out for the second out. Smith moved to third on a wild pitch and

came in to tie the score on a huge base hit from Chuck Akers. With the score tied at 1-1, Mobley gave up a single to Ben Nelson to lead off the inning and was lifted for pinch runner Cole Craig. After a fly our from Ryan Mulhern, Mobley was relieved by Steven Kines. Josh Touchstone singled to left to greet Kines and put runners at the corners with one out. Jason Gross came to the plate and delivered a fly to right for the second out, but the throw from Marshall Nisbett was just offline, allowing the winning run to score from third. Mobley took the hard-luck loss to fall to 5-5 on the year. Bert Heath got the win in relief to push his record to 8-3. Justin Sims led the Blue Raiders with a 2-for-4 performance at the plate. The loss puts Middle Tennessee in an elimination game against New Orleans on Thursday afternoon with the first pitch slated for 12:30 PM.

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