

Blue Raiders Win Sun Belt Championship

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LAFAYETTE, La. - Josh Archer's bases-clearing triple in the first set the tone, as Middle Tennessee scored eight runs in the first three innings and held off a furious Western Kentucky comeback, taking an 8-5 decision over the Hilltoppers in the Sun Belt Tournament championship game at M.L. 'Tigue' Moore Field. The win gives the Blue Raiders an automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament, with the 64-team field set to be announced Monday on ESPN2.

The Blue Raiders will make their 11th trip to the NCAA Tournament and seventh under head coach Steve Peterson after winning four straight games to take the SBC Tournament title, their first since joining the league three years ago. Junior Chuck

Akers was voted the tournament Most Outstanding Player after going 7-for-16 in the four contests with two doubles, two triples and a homer, as well as a game-saving catch on Thursday against Arkansas-Little Rock.

Middle Tennessee scored eight times in the first three innings with the aid of seven Western Kentucky errors to take control of the contest early.

Jeff Beachum and Chuck Akers both singled to leadoff the game before Chad Cooper was hit, loading the bases. Archer followed with a bases-clearing triple off the base of the rightfield wall for a quick 3-0 lead. Archer later scored on an infield single by Chris LeGuenec for a four-run lead after a half-inning.

The Hilltoppers helped Middle Tennessee get one run in the second. Shane Kemp drew a leadoff walk before Beachum reached on an error by WKU first baseman Matt Gunning, with Kemp moving to third on the play. Cooper's single through the leftside plated the run for a 5-0 lead.



The WKU defense, ranked 10th in the nation heading into the tournament, made four errors in the third, helping the Blue Raiders score three unearned runs on just one hit.

Brett Carroll got a one-out single to get it started. LeGuenec reached on an error by 'Topper second baseman Matt Johnston on a ball scorched up the middle. With two outs shortstop Travis Brown misplayed a Kemp grounder, allowing Carroll to score.

Third baseman Tim Grogan's throw to first was low on a Beachum grounder. LeGuenec scored from second on the play and Kemp came all the way from first when rightfielder Antone Towns misplayed the ball, giving the Blue Raiders an 8-0 advantage.

Western Kentucky had chances to score in the third, fourth and sixth, but Blue Raider starter Chris Mobley wriggled out of each jam..

WKU's David Lower doubled to leadoff the third and Rafael Vallejo followed with a walk, but Mobley struck out the side to end the threat. In the fourth Towns drew a one-out walk, followed by a single from Brown and another walk, this one to Gunning, to load the bases. But Lower struck out and Vallejo grounded out first baseman to the pitcher, preserving Mobley's shutout.

Brown doubled in the sixth and Lower drew a two-out walk, but Vallejo grounded out to third to again end the threat.

A double down the rightfield line by Grogan, his second of the game, gave Western Kentucky another runner in scoring position in the seventh, and this time the 'Toppers took advantage. Kevin Bearden laced a single to right, scoring Brown and chasing Mobley from the contest after more than 120 pitches.

Danny Borne came on to get the final two outs of the inning and get out of the jam with the Blue Raiders holding an 8-1 advantage.

Western Kentucky made it interesting with four runs in the eighth, including a bases-clearing triple from Kevin Bearden.

Lower started the rally with two outs when he was hit by a 1-2 Borne curveball. Vallejo then singled up the middle before Johnston singled through the rightside, scoring Lower. Grogan then drew a walk to load the bases before Bearden laced a full count pitch to centerfield.

Akers started in on the ball before trying to recover, as the ball sailed high and hit off the top of his glove as he jumped to catch it. All three runners scored and all of a sudden it was an 8-5 game. The Blue Raiders summoned closer Chase Swing, who got the final out of the inning.

A leadoff single by Towns and a two-out single from Lower put runners at the corners for the Hilltoppers in the ninth, but Swing got Vallejo to fly out to Cooper in left, sealing the victory and Middle Tennessee's eighth tournament title under 16th-year head coach Steve Peterson.

Mobley (3-5) picked up the win with 6.1 innings of work, allowing one run on eight hits. The sophomore struck out seven and walked four, not bad for a guy who woke up with a slight case of food poisoning on Saturday. Mobley likes postseason play, now having made two appearances and

tossing 13.1 innings, giving up three runs, two earned, with 16 strikeouts.

Borne got four outs before Swing got the final four, picking up his 11th save of the season, moving him into first place on the Blue Raider single-season saves list. Middle Tennessee has won 19 of its last 26 games this season after starting the year 14-18.

Carroll went 3-for-4 and scored a run, while Akers collected two hits in the contest, his third multi-hit game of the tournament. Archer drove in three runs in the victory.

WKU's Grady Hinchman (6-4) suffered the loss, allowing five runs on four hits in one-plus inning. Andy Baldwin gave up three unearned runs in four innings, with Matt Wilhite tossing the last four innings.

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