

Zapapas provides winner in SBC opener

Blue Raiders turn back FAU, 2-1

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BOCA RATON, Fla. - Middle Tennessee put its best foot forward against league newcomer Florida Atlantic in a riveting 2-1 win here Friday to stretch its regular-season Sun Belt Conference winning streak to seven, dating to last season.

Freshman standout Mary Zapapas scored the winner in the 88th minute to send the Blue Raiders (7-2, 1-0) to a win in their SBC opener for the first time since the 2003 season. Zapapas has been a staple in Middle Tennessee's success through the first half of the season but her sixth goal of the season may have been the biggest of her collegiate career.

The freshman midfielder helped the Blue Raiders avoid what would have been their third overtime game in four matches when she knocked in the winner with 2:41 remaining in regulation.



The Centennial, Colo., native took the ball on the edge of the area and thundered a left-footed shot past the outstretched arms of the keeper into the bottom far corner to send the Blue Raiders into seventh heaven.

"It was a well-deserved win against a very good Florida Atlantic team," Middle Tennessee coach Aston Rhoden said. "Florida Atlantic is very well coaches, they are organized, and they caused problems for us. They had us on the ropes in the first half but we made some changes at the half that helped us win the game. Our players did a great job of winning this game against a tough team on the road."

Middle Tennessee had to battle from behind to win the highly-competitive match on the road and it was able to successfully complete the task with timely scoring and outstanding defense.

The Blue Raiders trailed 1-0 at halftime as Florida Atlantic (3-4-2) scored in the 12th minute. Forward Susanna Lehtinen received the ball behind the defense and knocked it past freshman keeper Erynn Murray. It would be the only time the Owls would be able to solve Murray, who collected three saves and picked up her second career win in goal.

Middle Tennessee evened the slate in the 64th minute when Rebecca Rodriguez played an early ball to Holly Grogan who scored on a breakaway when she slotted the ball into the bottom right-hand corner. It was Grogan's 23rd career goal, moving her into a tie for fourth with Emily Carter on the career list.

The Blue Raiders' patented defense would not allow the Owls to regain the lead as the match remained a stalemate until Zapapas broke through late in the contest to send the team to a win in the important opener.

"It was a big win because it's the league opener, it's on the road, and it was against a very good team," Rhoden said. "I believe our non-conference schedule helped us today because we had to win a tough game on the road and our players have been in tough games, home and away. The proved they know how to come from behind and win a big game. I'm really proud of their effort."

The Blue Raiders, who continue the best start in school history, conclude a three-game road swing against Florida International Sunday.

NOTES: Middle Tennessee will wrap up a long road stretch when it faces FIU Sunday. The game will conclude a three-game road swing and a stretch of five of six away from home ... Middle Tennessee won its conference opener for the first time since 2003 ... Holly Grogan moved into a tie for fourth on the career goals list with 23 ... Rebecca Rodriguez's assist gives her 78 points for her career, which is nine shy of the school record held by former great and current assistant Laura Miguez-Howarth ... Katy Rayburn started in her 68th career game, which is tied for sixth on the all-time list and one shy the fifth spot.

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