Blue Raiders Make History With 4-3 Win

First team to take a series from Ragin Cajuns

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LAFAYETTE, La. - Middle Tennessee softball (11-13, 2-1 SBC) held off a seventh inning rally by No. 15 Louisiana-Lafayette (21-6, 1-2 SBC) to defeat the Ragin Cajuns, 4-3, and take the first Sun Belt series of the season Thursday at Ragin Cajun Park. It marks the first time in Sun Belt Conference play that the Ragin Cajuns have dropped a series to a league member.

"Anyone who has seen the team play this year knows we were capable of taking this series," said Head Coach Leigh Podlesny. "I think this win validates this team on many different levels. It is a culmination of three years of hard work."

The Blue Raiders had a 4-1 lead heading into the bottom of the seventh inning but the Ragin Cajuns weren't going to go down without a fight, and it all started with a lead-off single by Vallie Gaspard. Karli Hubbard reached first on fielder's choice and Gaspard was out on the play for the first out of the inning. Blue Raider pitcher Lindsey Vander Lugt hit Codi Runyon to put runners on first and second and a ground out by Holly Tankersly moved runners to second and third. With two outs Lacey Bertucci drew a walk to load the bases. Desi Chatman hit a two RBI double to cut the Blue Raider lead to 4-3 but the Ragin Cajun threat was neutralized with a ground out by Melissa Verde.

"Surprisingly, I was very calm in the seventh inning," Podlesny said. "We had been in this situation so many times already this season and I felt confident the girls had what it took to close the door on the game."

Vander Lugt tossed her 10th complete game of the year and improves to 7-9 on the season. With her save on Wednesday and win today, she was involved in both victories over Louisiana-Lafayette. In the game to clinch the series, Vander Lugt went seven innings allowing three runs on eight hits and struck out four. She now has 67 strikeouts for the season and needs just six more to have the

most strikeouts by a Blue Raider pitcher in two years.

For the second straight game, Middle Tennessee took an early lead over the Ragin Cajuns which proved to be the catalyst for the win. After four scoreless innings, the Blue Raiders posted three runs on the board in the top of the fourth inning.

A Ragin Cajun error to start the fourth inning allowed Justine Cerda to reach first. Pinch runner Corrie Abel replaced Cerda at first and a sacrifice bunt by Katie Mielke moved Abel to second. With one out, sophomore Martha Davis singled to right field to plate Abel for the first run of the game.

The long ball proved to be Middle Tennessee's closest friend in the series with Louisiana-Lafayette and it was crucial in the game on Thursday. It was Ashley Cline's turn to send one out as her homer over the left field wall gave her a round trip and also plated Davis for the second and third runs of the fourth inning.

"Ashley Cline is a very versatile player," Podlesny said. "Most people notice her just for her speed, but she is a great all-around player who rises to the occasion when she faces high-quality teams."

Louisianan-Lafayette would pick up one run in its half of the fourth inning. Verde hit a one out double and scored off an RBI double by Lana Bowers.

The Ragin Cajuns are notorious for their offensive prowess and late-inning heroics so it was fortuitous Middle Tennessee plated the insurance run in the top of the seventh inning.

Senior Shelby Stiner had been hitless throughout the series, but chose the most opportune time to hit a rope to right field with one out. Fellow senior Melissa Weiland pinch hit for designated player Whitney Darlington and delivered a solid single to center field which moved Stiner to second. Freshman Caitlin McLure's bunt single allowed Stiner to score and all but ice the game for the Blue Raiders.

The Blue Raiders return home on Saturday to host Sun Belt foe Troy. First pitch is set for 1 p.m. at Blue Raider Field.

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