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Soccer faces UALR in first-round match

SBC Championships 'wide open'

MT Media Relations

MOBILE, Ala. - Middle Tennessee will begin its quest for a first Sun Belt Conference championship when it begins play in the league's postseason tournament against No. 7 seed UALR Wednesday at 4 p.m., at the University of South Alabama.

The Blue Raiders (10-5-4) are one of the league's hottest teams entering the tournament and are unbeaten in their last eight matches (6-0-2). Middle Tennessee is rated No. 14 in the latest Soccer Buzz Central Regional poll, but coach Aston Rhoden says rankings and previous results don't matter at this point in the season.

"If you look at the eight teams in the Sun Belt Conference Tournament it is easy to see why we believe this could be one of the most competitive tournaments we have had in recent years. It's a wide-open tournament," Rhoden said. "All of the so-called lower seeds have had what would be traditionally considered surprising results this year. Some of the low seeds have beaten higher-seeded teams. I think this tournament is wide open and any of the eight teams here have a good shot at winning."

The Blue Raiders are 11-2 all-time against UALR with 11 straight wins, including a 3-1 win earlier this season in Murfreesboro; however, the Trojans (10-9-1) are one of the Sun Belt's most improved teams and Rhoden says overlooking them would be a big mistake.

"I can assure you our players and our staff won't be overlooking UALR," Rhoden said. "They are a very good team and they have made tremendous progress. Our first match will be extremely challenging but I believe that can be said about all four first-round matches. Little Rock has had a great year and they will be a quality opponent."

The Blue Raiders are led offensively by [Holly Grogan](#), [Kala Morgan](#), [Kelly Downs](#) and [Jen Threlkeld](#), who leads the team in scoring with nine goals and 19 total assists. Middle Tennessee has relied heavily on its defense this season and has allowed just 22 goals in its 19 matches. Defenders [Ingrid Christensen](#), [Bethany Bertovic](#), Fran Howells and keeper [Kela Casiple](#) has played vital roles in the stingy defense, while midfielders [Kathrine Andresen](#), [Vanessa Mueggler](#) and [Kaley Forrest](#) also have been instrumental in another strong Middle Tennessee run.



Kaley Forrest and the Blue Raiders will begin play in the Sun Belt Conference Championships Wednesday. (J. Intintoli)

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