Blue Raiders drop opener in shootout

Penalty kicks don't go Blue Raiders' way against UALR

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MOBILE, Ala. - Middle Tennessee's opening match at the Sun Belt Conference Championships went according to form based on the results of the regular season. Unfortunately, for the Blue Raiders, the strong defense wasn't enough to overcome more missed opportunities as No. 2 seed Middle Tennessee was upset by No. 7 UALR (11-9-1) in a penalty kick shootout after the teams played two a scoreless draw through two overtime periods. It marked the first time Middle Tennessee (10-5-5) failed to reach the semifinals of the league's postseason tournament since 2003. Technically the match goes down as a draw so the Blue Raiders ended the season with a nine-match unbeaten streak; however, the postseason adds the dimension of penalty kicks and after playing to four draws during the regular season the tournament match followed the same pattern. Middle Tennessee dominated possession and play and piled up 20 shots to UALR's four but the Blue Raiders couldn't find the back of the net and had at least three balls hit off either the post or crossbar, including Holly Grogan's miss off the cross bar on a free kick in the 89th minute. That attempt proved to be one of Middle Tennessee's best scoring chances. "This was a tough match and a well-played match between both teams, as we knew it would be," Middle Tennessee coach Aston Rhoden said. "UALR is a much improved team and we knew it was going to be a draw when the pairings came out. The defense was sound and we just didn't capitalize on some of the scoring opportunities we had. It really is the story of our season." UALR won the match on the strength of a 3-2 advantage in the shootout that concluded after standout Kaley Forrest's attempt was just right of the far post. UALR went up 2-1 in the shootout but freshman keeper Kela Casiple prevented goals on two of the next three attempts to give the Blue Raiders a final chance. Freshmen Fran Howells and Bethany Bertovic converted their penalty kicks for the Blue Raiders. The unlucky result concluded a strong campaign for the Blue Raiders

considering they started six freshmen and two sophomores and showed improvement as the season progressed. Casiple enjoyed a breakthrough season in goal. Her 0.52 goals-against-average is a new school record, besting the previous mark of 1.02, and her seven shutouts tied for the single-season lead.

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