

Blue Raiders Lose Penalty Kick Shootout, 3-2, In SBC Semis

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MIAMI - A season of firsts for Middle Tennessee ended with an excruciating first as the top-seeded Blue Raiders suffered a 3-2 setback to No. 4 seed and host Florida International in a penalty kick shootout in the semifinals of the Sun Belt Championships at University Park Thursday night. It was the first shootout for the Blue Raiders in their nine-year history.

The two teams battled to a 2-2 draw through two sudden death overtimes to set up the shootout, where each team has five players alternate penalty kicks. Middle Tennessee (13-4-2) won the toss and opted to put the Golden Panthers in the box first.

Florida International went up 2-0 after each team had two players attempt kicks, but Middle Tennessee freshman keeper Jenny Manis gave the Blue Raiders life with an

outstanding diving save on the Golden Panthers' third try.

Senior forward Laura Miguez then pulled Middle Tennessee to within 2-1 with a successful try and Florida International misfired on its fourth try. Rachel Holmes responded with a successful goal to even the slate, 2-2, before Jenessa Taddei slipped a shot past Manis to put her team on top 3-2 and put the pressure on the Blue Raiders.

Claire Ward's attempt to force a second shootout went off the crossbar and sent Florida International into a wild celebration at midfield.



"I'm extremely proud of how our team played tonight and all season," Sun Belt Conference Coach of the Year Aston Rhoden said. "We were playing FIU at home, which is always a tough thing to do. I hate it to end because this season was so much fun. When the game gets to a penalty kick shootout anything can happen and that's just the way it goes."

Middle Tennessee won the program's first regular-season conference championship in 2004 and set a single-season record for wins with 13. The Blue Raiders also ended the season with a 10 match unbeaten streak as Thursday's game is considered a 2-2 draw. Middle Tennessee also ended the successful campaign with a school record 11-game home winning streak.

"It's a tough way to go out, but I'm proud of our team and all of our accomplishments," said Miguez, who concludes her illustrious career as the most prolific performer in program history. She leaves as Middle Tennessee's all-time leader in goals, assists and points. "We have a close team and we made tremendous strides. I feel like we have left the program in good standing, and I know the team will only continue to improve. My four years at Middle Tennessee have been very rewarding and I'll never forget it. I feel like I've been fortunate enough to be part of something special. We may not have reached our goal of winning the (Sun Belt) Tournament, but we did win the regular-season championship and that's something no one can take from us."

Florida International struck first in the hotly-contested match and scored in the game's third minute. The 1-0 lead held until halftime as the Blue Raiders received exemplary defensive play from Halley Dawe, Jessica Northcutt, Katy Rayburn and Sara Wohlhueter.

Middle Tennessee came out with a vengeance in the second half and controlled the game for the better part of the 45 minutes. Sophomore Rebecca Rodriguez evened the score in the 58th minute with her fourth goal of the season, and SBC Player of the Year Debs Brereton's 19th goal of the season put the Blue Raiders in front 2-1 in the 73rd minute.

"That's what good teams do," Rhoden said. "They deal with adversity and we were down one at the half in a hostile environment but we came out in the second half and executed perfectly to take the lead and give ourselves a chance. We were so close to reaching the championship game."

Rhoden switched his lineup at the half, moving Miguez to midfield, along with Ward, and Lisa-Marie Woods, and going with Brereton, Rodriguez and Holmes at the forward positions. The move worked as the Blue Raiders maintained the lead until the 82nd minute when Whitney Rezendes tied the score with her third goal of the season.

The game remained deadlocked through regulation and two sudden-death overtimes to set up the penalty kick shootout.

Woods, the SBC Newcomer of the Year, had a remarkable game and helped the Blue Raiders control the match throughout the second half as they were within 8:37 of winning in regulation. Manis, who enjoyed a remarkable breakthrough campaign in her rookie season, finished with eight saves, including four in the two overtime periods.

Although Middle Tennessee fell short of winning the league's automatic berth into the NCAA Tournament, Rhoden is hopeful the Blue Raiders could still get a nod for an at-large bid.

"Maybe we can get lucky and an at-large berth will come our way because I do think our team is worthy," Rhoden said. "There's no doubt in my mind, despite the loss, that we have the best team in the conference. We have accomplished so much this season and we have attracted fans, even here at the tournament, because of the quality of soccer our team plays. I hope this is the start of something special for our program."

NOTES: Middle Tennessee senior forward Danielle LaDuke suffered an ankle injury in the 85th minute and was taken to a local hospital for X-rays, which were negative. LaDuke rejoined the team hours after the match on crutches ... Debs Brereton completed her sensational senior season with 19 goals, averaging a goal a match, and setting the Middle Tennessee single-season record for goals and points (47) ... Laura Miguez completed her career as Middle Tennessee's all-time leader in goals, assists and points ... The Blue Raiders put together back-to-back winning seasons for the first time in program history in 2004 ... Middle Tennessee, which had the nation's No. 2-rated scoring offense, shattered the single-season mark for goals with 69, breaking the previous mark of 47 in 2001 ... Five seniors - Debs Brereton, Ashley Elliot, Danielle LaDuke, Laura Miguez, and Jessica Northcutt played their final match if the team doesn't receive an at-large bid into the NCAA Tournament ... Middle Tennessee has never won in five matches at Florida International's University Park.

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