MT soccer season comes to an end

Academic, athletic awards highlight 2008 campaign

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - The 2008 soccer season came to a close for Middle Tennessee with last week's disappointing 2-1 overtime defeat to Florida Atlantic in the quarterfinals of the Sun Belt Tournament. However, the growth of the young squad athletically and the success that they achieved academically were certainly apparent when the season concluded. The Blue Raiders began the season with high expectations despite welcoming 12 new players to a squad that finished second in the Sun Belt Conference regular season in 2007. After a tough 1-1 draw in poor conditions on the road against Jacksonville State to begin the year, Middle Tennessee dropped three of the next four matches before picking up its first win of the campaign at the Tulsa Soccer Invitational, a 1-0 win against the host Golden Hurricane. "We got off to a shaky start. Obviously, trying to incorporate 12 new players into our team and system was challenging, "Head Coach Aston Rhoden said." It took some time, but credit goes to the players for adjusting to what we wanted them to do. They started getting the results they were capable of getting." As chemistry and understanding improved amongst the squad, so did the results. The Blue Raiders went on to win six of their next seven matches, including a season-high five game winning streak. The run also saw them pick up an impressive four shutouts during the same span. The stellar defense exhibited during that stretch proved to be key as Middle Tennessee finished with an 8-3-1 record over the final 12 regular-season matches. The backline allowed just 21 goals the entire campaign, the least in program history. The team also shut out the opposition eight times, good for second-place in a single season all-time. Middle Tennessee finished the year ranked 82nd in the nation in shutout percentage and 87th in goals-against average. Not to go unnoticed, Kela Casiple had a solid year in goal for the Blue Raiders. The sophomore was on hand for every Blue Raider shutout, placing her in the top spot in program history for shutouts in a single season and second in a career behind former Blue Raider Jennifer Robb (1997-00). She also ranked 48th nationally in save percentage and 91st in saves per game. "We wanted our defense to be a total team defense where not just the defenders, but the forwards, midfielders and goalkeepers were involved," Rhoden said. "The starters and substitutes did a great job of denying teams the ability to get behind us. The times that the opposition was able to do that our goalkeeping was solid enough to minimize goal-scoring opportunities." Middle Tennessee finished the regular season with a dramatic 2-2 draw with Western Kentucky to clinch the

fourth-seed in the conference tournament. Junior forward Jen Threlkeld scored with just nine seconds in regulation in a match that played a part in spoiling their rivals' opportunity to win the regular-season conference title. Threlkeld finished her third year as a Blue Raider with four goals in her last five matches and now sits sixth in points and seventh in goals during a career. Middle Tennessee finished the season with a 2-1 overtime loss to the Owls in their first match at the conference tournament. The Blue Raiders opened the scoring with a sixth-minute Hope Suominen strike but allowed the equalizing goal in the 14th minute of the first half before falling in the second period of overtime to the fifth-seeded team. "It is always disappointing when you lose in the conference tournament regardless of when you go out," Rhoden said. "We didn't achieve one of our goals. At Middle Tennessee your objective has to be not just to make the tournament but to win it. The team showed good character in the match, played with a lot of effort and created more chances, but in the end the final bounce just didn't go our way. Middle Tennessee graduates four seniors from the team in forward Kim Farrant and defenders Nenita Burgess, Elise Hutter and Caitlin Reeves. They have all enjoyed successful careers as Blue Raiders. Big improvements are expected for a team that returns nine of eleven starters and the bulk of the squad next season. "Stability is good and having a lot of returning players is excellent for the team," Rhoden said. "We have so many young players that the spring is going to be a crucial time to develop them into the players and the team we want them to be. We have to make sure we keep focused and tailor everything we do in the off-season with the objective to accomplish our goals for the 2009 season." The 2008 edition of the Blue Raiders made their mark on not just the program but the Sun Belt Conference. Three players picked up conference honors following the conclusion of the regular season. Shan Jones added to the program's tradition of bringing in talented newcomers by becoming just the third player in school history to win the Sun Belt's Freshman of the Year award. The Y Felinheli, Wales native also picked up first-team all-conference honors. Sophomore's Fran Howells and Vanessa Mueggler were named to the second team after highly successful seasons. "Shan is a good player with a lot of pace," Rhoden said. "She still has a lot to learn from the standpoint of her adjustment to the collegiate game, but for a freshman to come in and have that type of impact is great. It is good to have those types of players because you just have to tweak their game to make them better all-around players." Despite achieving great things in regards to school athletic records, the most important award received this year came in the academic area. Middle Tennessee picked up the Sun Belt's Team Academic Award for achieving the highest cumulative grade-point average of any squad during the 2007-08 season. "At the end of the day our players are student-athletes and not professional athletes," Rhoden said. "They certainly have academic in addition to athletic responsibilities and it is not an easy thing to balance. All the credit goes to our current sophomores and above because they are the ones who won the award. This honor is about the character of the players we recruit and the importance they, the program and the university puts on academics and a quality education."

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