Raiders Hang on For 7-5 Victory

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MIAMI, Fla. - Middle Tennessee scored six runs in the first four innings and held on for a 7-5 victory over 23rd-ranked Louisiana-Lafayette late Friday night in the Sun Belt Championships, advancing to Saturday's championship game at noon ET against South Alabama. The Blue Raiders (32-22) advance to the SBC Tournament championship game for the fourth time in five years in the league and will meet South Alabama for the second time in the title game (2001). Eric McNamee led the Blue Raiders offense with three hits and two runs scored, while Todd Martin had a two-run homer. Middle Tennessee did not get a hit after McNamee's leadoff single in the sixth, but hung on by using four relievers to defeat the Ragin' Cajuns (47-17) for the fifth straight time in SBC Tournament action. Middle Tennessee starter Tyler Copeland worked just 3.1 innings despite holding a six-run lead, giving up two runs on six hits with two strikeouts and two walks. Kyler Wetherington, Aaron Wallus, Josh Anderson and Allan Woodward went the rest of the way, though all of the Blue Raider hurlers suffered from wildness, issuing nine walks in the contest. Anderson (2-3) worked 1.1 hitless innings to get the victory, walking one. Woodward got the final eight outs, but not without trouble. He allowed two runs in the eighth and got Justin Merendino to fly out with the tying runs on base, ending Merendino's 19-game hitting streak. UL starter Kevin Ardoin (10-4) threw 117 pitches in five-plus innings to take the loss, giving up eight hits and six earned runs, walking five and striking out seven. Brandt Sanders came on to throw four hitless innings, walking three and striking out three. The Raiders struck first with a four-run second inning, collecting four hits and a pair of walks. Nathan Hines drew a leadoff walk, moved to second on a wild pitch, and scored on Adam Warrren's single to right. Jeff Beachum followed with another single to right, and both runners moved up on a wild pitch. Josh Archer reached out and singled to left, plating both runners. McNamee then sliced a double down the rigthfield line, and Archer chugged around to score from first and give Middle Tennessee a 4-0 advantage. The Blue Raiders expanded the lead in the fourth when McNamee fisted a single into leftfield before Martin's high fly ball to rightcenter just cleared the wall for a 6-0 edge. But the Cajuns would not go away, scoring twice in the bottom of the inning to chase Copeland from the contest. Dallas Morris doubled with one out ahead of an RBI single to

center from Jonathan Lucroy. Alex Preciado followed with another single and Jefferies Tatford was hit to load the bases. Jameson Parker walked, forcing in a run and forcing a pitching change for Middle Tennessee. Wetherington got a ground ball on his first pitch to Adam Massiatte, and the Blue Raiders turned an inning-ending 5-2-3 doubleplay, their third of the contest, holding on to a 6-2 advantage. UL added a run in the fifth without the benefit of a hit, as John Coker and Josh Landry both walked to leadoff. A double steal put runners on second and third, and Merendino's groundout scored Coker. Wallus worked out of the jam despite walking Dallas Morris, with Middle Tennessee holding a 6-3 lead. McNamee singled to leadoff the sixth and chase Ardoin. Martin followed with his third walk of the game, but the next two batters were retired before a grounder to second from Hines drew a bad throw from Merendino. The ball got away, allowing McNamee to scamper home and expand the lead to four runs again. UL cut the deficit to 7-5 in the eighth after Phillip Hawke drew a one-out walk before a double to right from Parker. Massiatte's groundout scored Hawke, and after a walk to Coker, Landry blooped a single into short center, plating Parker. Woodward worked a scoreless ninth, getting three straight outs for Middle Tennessee's sixth straight victory. Saturday's one-game-take-all championship game begins at noon ET at University Park. **GAME NOTES** Middle Tennessee failed to score in the first inning for the first time in nine games ... Jeff Beachum extended his hitting streak to 11 games with a single in the second ... Eric McNamee extended his hitting streak to a career-best 14 games with a double in the second ... Beachum left the game in the third inning with recurring back problems. Wayne Kendrick took his place and made an outstanding play up the middle to leadoff the fourth against UL's Justin Merendino ... The game had a 22-minute rain delay in the top of the fifth after a power surge on the Florida International campus, the second power surge of the day ... Todd Martin walked a career-high four times in the game.

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