

Blue Raiders drop 1-0 heartbreaker in soccer semis

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MOBILE, Ala. - One of the most successful seasons in Middle Tennessee soccer history came to an excruciating halt in a 1-0 loss to host South Alabama in the semifinals of the Aeropostale Sun Belt Championships here Thursday night. South Alabama's Jenn Edgar scored the game's only goal in the eighth minute and the Jaguars (12-4-1) held off several Blue Raiders charges to secure the intense triumph at The Cage. Middle Tennessee (13-5-2) tied the single-season record for wins, but the final result was a difficult one to take for a Blue Raider team that made tremendous strides throughout

the season, despite numerous injuries and utilizing the services of several newcomers playing their first year of Division I soccer. In the end; however, Middle Tennessee was unable to avenge its only conference loss of the season and fell to the host in the semifinals for the second straight season. "South Alabama is a good team and they are playing at home with their fans," Middle Tennessee coach Aston Rhoden said. "We gave up an easy early goal and that, unfortunately, was the difference. We had our opportunities, there's no doubt about that. I think the last 20 minutes or so we played in their half but we couldn't get a goal. That has been one of the things that has hurt us this year and it came back to bite us." Senior keeper Danielle Perreault turned in a dynamic performance in goal, saving four shots and denying South Alabama goals on three breakaways with the game hanging in the balance. Her unyielding play kept Middle Tennessee in the game, and the Blue Raider defense held strong, but the offense couldn't get any of its 16 shots to find the back of net. "Everyone fought hard but it just didn't come for us," said Perreault said. "South Alabama was able to get an early goal and we just didn't get it back. I thought our defense really stepped up. Jordan (LeFan) really did well coming into a position (at defender) she hasn't played until this tournament. I was able to make a couple of saves to keep us in it but we couldn't find a way to get a goal. It's a tough one but when we get over the pain of this loss I think we will realize how much we accomplished this season." The Blue Raiders were on the attack for the majority of the final 20 minutes but South Alabama bunkered and never caved under the relentless pressure. The Middle

Tennessee offensive attack generated eight corner kick opportunities, including six in the final 45 minutes, but none resulted in a goal that would have, in the least, forced overtime. Middle Tennessee again was hampered by injuries. The Blue Raiders were without two of their top defenders in Sun Belt Newcomer of the Year Ingrid Christensen, and freshman standout Katie Daley was unable to perform after pulling a hamstring in the second half of a 1-0 double-overtime win against Troy in the quarterfinals. LeFan earned the start at defender for the first time in her Blue Raider career and performed admirably, as did the usual defensive stalwarts - Katy Rayburn, Sara Wohlhueter, Nenita Burgess, Claire Ward, Kaley Forrest and Nenita Burgess. Kala Morgan, who scored the winner in Middle Tennessee's win against Troy, enjoyed her best all-around game as a Blue Raider and kept the pressure on the South Alabama defense; however, in keeping with the theme of the defensive struggle, Jaguars keeper Kelsie Langford was always true to the task with eight saves in the match. "I am proud of how the girls responded given the injuries that we have had, and I'm proud of the overall team effort," Rhoden said. "It was great to see some of the young players step their game up in a really big match. LeFan adjusted to being a new defender and Morgan really stepped up and played one of her better games. They made a difference in the game. "We had a tough schedule this year and it was set up that way to help us for this tournament. We had a lot of new players and they came in and helped us win a lot of big games. For us to have the start we did in conference play (0-1-2), which is not normal for us, and still finish second in the league and put ourselves in position to contend for a NCAA berth is a great testament to how those kids did and the future we have. We have had good leadership from our four seniors (Perreault, Ward, Rachel Holmes and Melissa Wellman) and they have meant to much to our overall success, not only this season but during their careers."

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