

Blue Raiders set to open conference tournament Wednesday

Middle Tennessee is No. 2 seed in eight-team field

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. -

The Middle Tennessee soccer team will open Sun Belt Tournament action at 4 p.m. Wednesday as the No. 2 seed when it faces No. 7 seed Florida Atlantic at the WKU Soccer Complex in Bowling Green, Ky.

"We had a good end to the regular season, but now that we are in tournament play, everything is unpredictable," head coach Aston Rhoden said. "We face a strong opponent in FAU, who was one of our losses this season. We do expect a strong game from them.

"We have to be able to put together a strong game plan if we want to be successful as well as having our players execute it. We will have to be more efficient with our game plan, especially in front of the goal.



The Blue Raiders finished second in the Sun Belt regular-season standings after posting a 9-2 league record, just behind champion Denver's 11-0 ledger. It marks the highest ranking in the conference race for Middle Tennessee since it also earned a second-place result in 2007.

Seven Blue Raiders netted at least one goal during the campaign, led by a career-high 12 from senior midfielder Vanessa Mueggler. The Oct. 12 Sun Belt Player of the Week added a team-high tying seven assists to register a career-best 31 points on a team-high 68 shots. One-third of her goals were game winners, including a pair in overtime.

Sophomore Whitney Jorgenson also had a career season, tallying seven goals and contributing seven assists for 21 points. She tied Mueggler for the team lead with four game-winning goals.

Redshirt sophomore Regina Thomas, junior Shan Jones and sophomore Paige Goeglein were next on the scoring list with four goals apiece, while Thomas also distributed a team-best tying seven assists.

Although it may not have the offensive numbers of the rest of the team, the Middle Tennessee defense has been a key factor in the Blue Raiders winning nine of their last 10 matches entering the tournament.

Middle Tennessee has recorded five consecutive shutouts, including four solo efforts from junior goalkeeper Rebecca Cushing, and the Blue Raiders have not allowed more than a goal in 12 straight matches, dating back to mid-September. The streak includes all 11 Sun Belt contests, as Middle Tennessee posted a 0.45 goals-against average in league play.

Cushing stopped 85 shots throughout the season for a 79.4 save percentage and was the team's goalie of record in all 20 regular-season games, posting a 12-8 mark.

Florida Atlantic enters the eight-team field with a 6-12 overall record but a 5-6 league mark, including a 1-0 triumph over the Blue Raiders October 8 in Boca Raton, Fla. The loss was the last for Middle Tennessee during the regular season.

Head coach Brian Dooley's squad is led by Jesse Shugg's seven goals and 15 points. She is one of three Owls with double-figure points. Courtney Zwetsch played the majority of the team's minutes in goal, posting a 1.42 goals-against average and all four of the team's shutouts.

The two teams have met once previously in Sun Belt Tournament action with Florida Atlantic advancing on a 2-1 overtime victory in the 2008 quarterfinals in Denton, Texas. Overall, the Blue Raiders own a 4-9-1 record in the league tournament, having made the event each season since joining the conference in 2000.

Middle Tennessee's last conference tournament triumph came in the 2006 quarterfinals, defeating No. 7 seed South Alabama 2-0. The Blue Raiders were the No. 1 seed in 2004 after sharing the regular-season crown with North Texas, and then were the No. 2 seed from 2005 through 2007.

Middle Tennessee will serve as first-time hosts of the event when it comes to Murfreesboro in 2011.

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