Middle Tennessee advances to championship after winning penalty kicks

Blue Raiders to battle Saturday for NCAA Tournament berth

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BOWLING GREEN, Ky. - The Middle Tennessee soccer team outscored host Western Kentucky 4-3 on penalty kicks after a 1-1 regulation tie in the semifinals to advance to the Sun Belt Tournament Championship for the first time in school history. The Blue Raiders, seeded second, will face nationally-ranked, top seed and regular-season champion Denver at 1 p.m. Saturday at the WKU Soccer Complex in Bowling Green, Ky. The winner earns the conference's automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament.

Middle Tennessee (13-8-1) jumped out in front first but the host Lady Toppers, seeded sixth, responded with the equalizer later in the second half. Neither team was able to score through the remainder of regulation and the two 10-minute overtime periods, forcing the penalty kick situation from the spot 12 yards away from the end line.

Again, the Blue Raiders gained an early advantage as Fran Howells, Whitney Jorgenson and Allison Stallard provided a 3-1 lead through their first four penalty kick attempts. With two chances left to force sudden victory penalty kicks, Western Kentucky's Lindsay Williams and Ali Stahlke connected, while Jaimee Cooper's last effort was saved and the teams were tied 3-3 after the first five kicks.

It then did not take long for Middle Tennessee to clinch the victory, as sophomore Paige Goeglein

placed her attempt to the left post as WKU keeper Libby Stout did not make much of an effort to stop it. With the game on the line, Shannon Boone high, Blue Raider netminder Rebecca Cushing pushed it over the crossbar and celebration began.

The game ended in a tie through the first 110 minutes. Howells, a defender on the All-Sun Belt First Team, who had not scored all season until Wednesday's quarterfinal win against Florida Atlantic, posted her second in as many days to give MT a 1-0 lead. Freshman Jessika Oseguera sent a corner kick high into the six-yard box area, where Howells placed her head on the pass and redirected it past Stout at 73:06.

However, Western Kentucky (9-8-3) did not quit and knotted the score just four minutes later. Williams intercepted a Blue Raider backline pass and fed the ball to Mallory Outerbridge. Outerbridge, who was standing 30 yards out from the goal, sent a deep shot into the left side past Cushing to tie it at 1-1 at 77:43.

Although the Lady Toppers held a 24-to-14 advantage on shots, the game was evenly played. Middle Tennessee completed a season sweep over Western Kentucky and extended its edge in the all-time series to 5-2-4.

The Blue Raiders, under the direction of ninth-year head coach Aston Rhoden, will be playing Saturday for their first NCAA Tournament berth. Middle Tennessee improves to 5-9-2 all-time in the league tournament and 5-7-2 under Rhoden. Thursday's game was the second time the Blue Raiders went to PKs in its tournament history, but it marked the first time they have advanced.

The win also extended Middle Tennessee's streak to 14 consecutive games without allowing an opponent more than one goal. The last time the Blue Raiders surrendered more than one was against top-ranked North Carolina Sept. 17 at the Duke Nike Classic in Durham, N.C.

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