

# Sun Belt Champs! Soccer wins another PK thriller to earn NCAA berth

## Blue Raiders clinch program's first NCAA Tournament appearance

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**BOWLING GREEN, Ky.** - For the first time in school history, the Middle Tennessee soccer team will make its inaugural appearance in the NCAA Tournament as it advanced past No. 15 Denver 3-2 on penalty kicks after the teams tied 0-0 through two overtime periods at the Sun Belt Tournament at the WKU Soccer Complex in Bowling Green, Ky. The Blue Raiders used a penalty kick win to advance for the second-straight match, following the semifinals against host Western Kentucky Thursday night.

Middle Tennessee (13-8-2) withstood a strong effort from the nationally-ranked Pioneers, who held a 26-11 shot advantage, to make the 64-team NCAA field for the first time in school history. Denver, who won the previous four conference tournament titles, could not find the back of the net behind junior goalkeeper Rebecca Cushing during the first 110 minutes.



The tie extends MT's streak to 15 consecutive matches with allowing a goal or fewer, dating back to mid-September at the Duke Nike Classic. It also marked the program's first Sun Belt Championship game appearance.

The Pioneers won the coin flip for the shootout round and elected to kick first. Bria Beardsley gave Denver (19-2-1) the early edge, but senior Fran Howells matched her score. Sun Belt Player of the Year Kaitlin Bast then put DU back up one; however, sophomore Whitney Jorgenson answered and kept the Blue Raiders even.

On the Pioneers' third attempt, Nicholette DiGiacomo pushed the ball wide right giving MT a chance to take an advantage. Junior Laura Lamberth, however, had her shot bounce off the outstretched arms of keeper Lara Campbell and hit the right post, keeping the teams tied at 2-2. Lauren Cavarra tried to fool Cushing by shooting right at her, but the Middle Tennessee netminder did not budge.

Sophomore Paige Goeglein then toed the spot, 12 yards from the goal, and for the second-straight game, buried her PK attempt giving the Blue Raiders a 3-2 edge. Denver had one last chance to knot the shootout, on its fifth attempt by Alexis Hanks, but Cushing again stood firm and the Middle Tennessee bench cleared in a jubilate celebration as the players rushed the field.

The Pioneers held a 12-to-3 shot advantage in the opening half although senior Vanessa Mueggler challenged Campbell early with the game's first attempt. Cushing kept the Blue Raiders in the game, making a pair of diving stops in her own cage. The evenly played battle for both teams was mostly contested in the midfield, despite the difference in shots.

Middle Tennessee made its halftime adjustments and came out with more chances at the net in the second 45 minutes. Junior Shan Jones fed redshirt sophomore Regina Thomas for a breakaway attempt in the 56th minute, but Campbell stopped her first shot. Thomas then gathered the rebound, and as she got off another attempt, a Denver defender stepped in front and redirected it wide to force a corner kick.

The first overtime was mostly controlled by the Pioneers, but the Blue Raiders regrouped and played stronger in the final 10 minute frame before the shootout. Neither team was able to score behind the outstanding work of the goalkeepers, forcing the penalty kick situation.

Cushing finished with seven saves for the shutout, while Campbell collected five stops for her blank sheet.

DiGiacomo led all players with seven shots, while Bast, Kalie Vaughn and Cassidy Larson each tallied four shots for Denver.

Thomas paced Middle Tennessee with three attempts. Mueggler, Goeglein and Luisa Moscoso registered a pair of shots apiece.

The Blue Raiders will learn of their NCAA Tournament fate at 3:30 p.m. Monday when the NCAA Selection Show is broadcast live on ESPNU.

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