

Blue Raiders' soccer season ends in NCAA Tournament

Middle Tennessee finishes 13-9-2

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. - Middle Tennessee's historic soccer season came to a close Friday afternoon, dropping a 3-0 decision to No. 15 Florida State in the NCAA Tournament First Round at the Seminole Soccer Complex in Tallahassee, Fla. The Blue Raiders end the campaign 13-9-2, having lost just twice in their final 14 matches, on the way to claiming the first Sun Belt Tournament title and NCAA Tournament berth in school history.

"I thought we played well in the first half, just a little unlucky to give up a goal late," ninth-year head coach Aston Rhoden said. "It was a big momentum shifter in the game. That goal was the difference in the game for us.

"That goal certainly changed tactically what we had to do. Now we were chasing the game and against a team like

Florida State, who is a very possession-oriented team, the more you chase the game, the more they are going to find gaps.

"This is a game about momentum and I think we had it with a very balanced game. We gave a great account of ourselves during the first half and bits of the second half, but when you are chasing the game against a perennial power like Florida State, it is a hill to climb."

Middle Tennessee started the game strong offensively, posting the game's first three shots by senior



Vanessa Mueggler as well as redshirt sophomores Regina Thomas and Charity Blair. However, the Seminoles quickly recovered and outshot the Blue Raiders the remainder of the half, 7-0, and forcing goalkeeper Rebecca Cushing into three saves.

Florida State broke through with just two seconds left in the first half, at 44:58, for the game's opening goal. Tori Huster located Breezy Hupp and she buried the ball from 33 yards out into the left corner to give the Seminoles a 1-0 lead at the break.

The first half goal is the first surrendered by the Blue Raider defense in the game's opening 45 minutes since FIU Oct. 10 in Miami.

A No. 2 national seed, the Florida State (14-5-1) squad added to its scoring with a pair of second half goals by Casey Short, putting the game out of reach in the first meeting between the two schools.

Short's first tally was an unassisted score from 16 yards away, lifting FSU to a 2-0 advantage at 50:28. Florida State then capped its scoring at 59:32 when Amanda DaCosta sent a through ball to Short, who finished the pass from eight yards out.

The Seminoles became the first team since defending national champion and then-No. 1 North Carolina to score more than a goal on the Blue Raider defense, snapping a streak of 15 consecutive matches it had allowed a goal or less. The Tar Heels accomplished the feat Sept. 17 at the Duke Nike Classic in Durham, N.C.

Middle Tennessee was one of 12 schools making its NCAA Tournament debut this weekend.

Mueggler finished with three of the Blue Raiders' five shots, placing all of her attempts on goal against netminder Kelsey Wys. Huster paced FSU with five shots, three of which were on goal, while Short contributed three attempts.

Cushing finished with four saves, equaling Wys' total during the shutout.

"I was really proud of the way our team responded and did not quit in the second half. We did not stop fighting or stop playing. That says a lot about our group and its character, especially given its youth. We are really excited about what the future holds for us.

"We lose some very strong leadership in our seniors, but they have helped to set the bar high for us. We want nothing more than to be back here, hopefully playing Florida State, again in the NCAA Tournament."

The game marked the final game in the careers of seniors Jaimee Cooper, Emily Harris, Fran Howells, Mueggler and Emily Snowdon.

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