

Volleyball wins 3-1 over North Texas, advances to Sun Belt Final

Blue Raiders will take on rival Western Kentucky at 7:30 p.m. Saturday

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. -

The Middle Tennessee volleyball team will be in familiar territory on Saturday evening, taking on Western Kentucky for the Sun Belt Championship thanks to a 3-1 victory (25-17, 25-15, 23-25, 25-21) over West Division champion North Texas on Friday night in the Sun Belt Tournament semifinals at Alumni Memorial Gym. "This was a good match for us. We needed to be challenged, and I'm glad we were," head coach Matt Peck said. "As for Western, fortunately, I don't have to do much to get our kids up for them. We are looking for another outstanding match. Our teams are very similar. We played them very well the first two times, and I think that we will play them well again Saturday night." Saturday will mark the fourth championship match appearance in five years for the Blue Raiders, who are seeking to become the first



host school to win the Sun Belt Tournament since UALR accomplished the feat in 1998. Middle Tennessee is also entering Saturday's match-up on a tear, having won 24 of their last 25 matches and 10 in a row. Maria Szivos put together an impressive display to lead the Blue Raiders over North Texas. The junior tallied a team-best 12 kills at a .500 rate and two service aces to go along with nine digs and three block assists. Izabela Kozon also showed off both sides of her game, recording

10 kills on offense with eight digs and a pair of block assists on defense. Both Ashley Adams and Stacy Oladinni were also forces for a Blue Raider offense that recorded 51 kills on the night. The duo posted nine and eight, respectively. North Texas also put up 51 kills on the night, but were outhit by Middle Tennessee .301 to .138. Morgan Peterson and Angela Peyton split setting duties, combining for 47 assists. On defense, Kendall Howard anchored the reception game with a team-high 10 digs. Brynne Henderson was second with eight. At the net, Peterson and Oladinni each had three block assists, and both Brandi Waller and Lindsay Cheatham chipped in two. A pair of late runs secured a wire-to-wire 25-17 first set victory for Middle Tennessee. The Blue Raiders raced out to an early 10-4 edge, but the Mean Green slowly battled back, cutting the deficit to three at 15-12. However, MT would respond thanks to a four-point run engineered by the serving of Szivos to push the lead out to seven at 19-12 and putting the set out of reach. Szivos tallied four kills and a service ace in the opening frame, and the Blue Raiders outhit the Mean Green .387 to .111. Propelled by four kills and two blocks by Oladinni, the Blue Raiders cruised to a 25-15 second set win. Middle Tennessee, who outhit North Texas .300 to .029 in the frame, jumped out to an 11-4 advantage and would never look back as the Mean Green never cut the deficit closer than five, sending MT into the break with a 2-0 lead for the second straight day. North Texas took home the third set in dramatic fashion. The frame featured 17 ties and nine lead changes, and cut the match lead to one at 2-1. The fourth set would also prove to be dramatic, but the Blue Raiders would prevail in 25-21 fashion. After some back-and-forth battling early on in the set, but the Blue Raiders grabbed four straight points to take a slim 11-8 lead and wouldn't lose it. North Texas challenged Middle Tennessee a few minutes later, cutting the deficit to two at 14-12, but Szivos and Adams would respond by combining for four of the next five points to take an 18-13 edge, which went mostly unchallenged down the stretch. The Blue Raiders (27-5) will now go into Saturday's match vs. Western Kentucky under similar circumstances as a week ago. Last Friday, the two schools battled in a virtual playoff for the Sun Belt regular season title, which Middle Tennessee took home in 3-0 fashion in Bowling Green. Match time on Saturday is set for 7:30 p.m. at Alumni Memorial Gym, with the winner receiving the Sun Belt's automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament.

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