Volleyball takes home Sun Belt Tournament Championship with win over Western Kentucky

Blue Raiders earn Sun Belt's automatic bid to NCAA Tournament

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - For the fourth time in five seasons, the Middle Tennessee volleyball team took home the Sun Belt Tournament Championship, defeating rival Western Kentucky 3-1 (25-21, 25-21, 23-25, 25-21) at Alumni Memorial Gym on Saturday night. "Winning both the regular season and tournament title is a great accomplishment," head coach Matt Peck said. "We had some questions this year with what we lost last year: a four-year starting setter in Leslie Clark, the MVP of the tournament last year Ashley Mead, Ashley Waugh and Janay Yancey. But we had kids waiting in the wings, and when their turn came, they really shined." Middle Tennessee, who knocked off the Hilltoppers last Friday to earn the Sun Belt regular season title, will be going to their fifth consecutive NCAA Tournament. They also became the first Sun Belt team to win the tournament title on their home floor since UALR accomplished the feat in 1998 in Little Rock. "The crowd here was immense," Peck said. "It was a huge part of the game. The energy level was great, and when the band came in after the first set, I was the happiest guy on earth. Even with the Western fans here, they got into it, we got into it. It was just a great atmosphere. I think it was a great thing for the Sun Belt, and I don't think we could ask for more." The Blue Raiders have now won 11 consecutive matches and 25 of their last 26. "I knew that Western would play us tough, and I'm glad they did because we needed that going into the NCAA Tournament," Peck said. "They pushed us, they challenged us, they fought back, and we had some great things happen in that match, and we just had people come up for us when we needed them." As has been the case all season, Izabela Kozon was the focal point of a potent Blue Raider offense that posted 63 kills to WKU's 47. The senior hit .350 and recorded a match-high 18 kills. She was also a threat defensively, notching 12 digs and three block assists. Following the match, Kozon, who was named the Sun Belt Player of the Year on Wednesday, earned the SBC Tournament Most Outstanding Player Award. Lindsay Cheatham and Stacy Oladinni also put together outstanding outings on both sides of the ball. The duo tallied 12 and

10 kills, respectively. At the net, Oladinni put up a match-high seven block assists and Cheatham posted four. "Our middles were great tonight, combining for 22 kills," Peck said. "Lindsay Cheatham was outstanding. She really won that match for us and she was unstoppable in crunch time." Ashley Adams also reached double figures in kills with 10, and notched a trio of block assists. Maria Szivos recorded seven kills and tied a career high with five block assists. Both Oladinni and Szivos, 2010 All-Sun Belt selections, earned a spot on the SBC All-Tournament Team after the match ended. Morgan Peterson and Angela Peyton split time directing a Middle Tennessee offense that outhit Western Kentucky .283 to .217. For the third straight day, Peterson tallied the team high assists, dishing out 32. Peyton was second with 20. Brynne Henderson anchored the defense with a match-high 13 digs, and Kendall Howard was also a key cog with eight. Middle Tennessee took home the first set in comeback fashion, 25-21. Western Kentucky held on to a slim lead for much of the early goings, stretching the margin out to four points on three occasions, including at 8-12. The Blue Raiders would slowly battle back, taking their first lead of the set at 15-14 with an Adams kill. The Hilltoppers would tie it two more times, but Cheatham, who tallied five kills in the set, provided an answer on each occasion, and the Blue Raiders would never trail again in the set. Adams and Oladinni each posted four kills in the opening stanza, and MT outhit WKU .325 to .263. The Blue Raiders survived a late Western Kentucky comeback bid in the second set, winning 25-21. Middle Tennessee scored the first three points of the set, and the margin would hold for much of the frame. However, three consecutive WKU points late handed the Hilltoppers their first lead at 20-19. A Cheatham kill evened things up at 20-20, but Western regained the lead at 21-20. Stacy Oladinni had a hand in in the next three points, notching a kill and a pair of block assists to give MT the advantage at 23-21. Kozon, who had six kills in the set, hammered home the final two points to send the Blue Raiders into the break with a 2-0 lead for the third straight day. Western Kentucky held off a pair of late Blue Raiders charges to win the third set 25-23. Middle Tennessee actually posted more kills in the set, but WKU held the edge in both attack percentage and blocks, giving the Hilltoppers their first set victory over MT in 11 attempts. Middle Tennessee secured their second consecutive Sun Belt Tournament Championship with a 25-21 fourth set victory. The Blue Raiders fought off a number of WKU rallies in the frame and led wire-to-wire. The Blue Raiders blocked strong in the early goings, jumping out to a 7-2 lead, and Middle Tennessee slowly inched the advantage out to seven at 17-10. However, the Hilltoppers notched four consecutive points to cut the deficit to three at 17-14. WKU brought it within two on four occasions, including at 23-21, but Adams and Cheatham put together back-to-back kills to seal the deal. Middle Tennessee (28-5) will now look to prepare to take on Saint Louis in a final test before heading to the NCAA Tournament on December 2. "I'm looking forward to seeing what happens in the tournament this year," Peck said. "We have a veteran team. Izabela went to the Sweet 16 as a freshman, Sasha McGlothin and Stacy were a part of that team as well. We're not inexperience, and I hope we'll make a nice little run in the tournament this year." A replay of the Sun Belt Championship match will be shown on Comcast Sports Southeast on Sunday morning at 11:00 a.m. and on Monday night at 8:00 p.m.

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