

2021 NCAA Men's Lacrosse Championship

Saturday, May 29, 2021

East Hartford, Connecticut, USA

Virginia Cavaliers

Lars Tiffany

Media Conference



Virginia - 12, North Carolina - 11

THE MODERATOR: Coach, congratulations on the victory today. If you could make an opening statement about the game, and then we'll take some questions.

LARS TIFFANY: What a fantastic lacrosse game, and I hope I'm not coming across as a gloating head coach of the winning team. Joe Breschi's team never gave up, and the way they rode us in the fourth quarter was so impressive. Alex Rode and our defense was making stops, but we just couldn't get the ball to our offense and take some time off the clock. Carolina just kept giving them more chances.

It's a credit to what this game of lacrosse is all about. The game of lacrosse is a preparation for life. We've learned that from the Native Americans. The Native Americans gave us this game, and the game for them is preparing their young men and now women for life. Historically preparing men and boys to become better hunters, to become better warriors, to be brave, and how symbolic it is, with this being Memorial Day Weekend, when we get to honor those Americans, those men and women who have served, who have done everything they could and given their lives for us.

So I see that connection, those parallels, and you see that in this game today. Nothing was taken for granted. Two teams going toe to toe, so much offensive firepower out there, and then us building the lead and Carolina not giving up and not quitting. So lessons for life, certainly for them, and they should hold their heads really high. We're the fortunate ones to come out ahead.

Interesting the face-offs, how Tucci gets us early, and then Petey got on a roll there in the second quarter and got us the ball, and we just kept getting those goals. We got seven goals in that second quarter. Then Tucci got on a roll late in the game. But Petey's help from Grayson Sallade, amazing the number of ground balls that Grayson

picked up for us today, and I was so impressed with him.

This game of the face-off ax, how it can swing so quickly, when you get on a roll like that. We got on a roll, and then Carolina and Tucci got on a roll, but fortunately, Alex Rode and our team defense, and especially our man down, stepped up to ensure that Carolina didn't get goals in bunches, like we got the goals in bunches in that second quarter. I'll stop there.

Q. You just mentioned Alex. 15 saves today, including some really, I thought, challenging ones. How big was he, and what is it about this tournament that seems to bring out the best in his game?

LARS TIFFANY: I see Alex every day, and we think he's a fantastic goalie all the time, but you're right, when everyone's watching, steps up even bigger, doesn't he? On the biggest stage, this is Alex Rode's platform.

Yeah, we saw a highly powered offense that has really 12 different options. Preparing for North Carolina is very difficult because of all the weapons, and with Dave Metzbowler, a fantastic offensive coordinator, he's got so many different things he can do to you. Our defense held as much as they could, and then Alex bailed us out time and time again. Especially with our man down, some huge saves there.

Yeah, this is Alex Rode. That's who he is, and I'm very grateful he plays for Virginia.

Q. I did want to ask a little bit about the man down as well as the last sequence. How significant was that man down play overall? I'm sure, if somebody had told you 0 for 5 for Carolina, you would have been thrilled with that. And then the finishing sequence, was it basically making sure that they just didn't -- they had somebody in their face, somebody in their hands pretty much for any sort of shots they were going to get?

LARS TIFFANY: Sure. If you had told me we were going to be man down five times, I would have gulped. There's a hope that, when you get this late in the season, there tends



to be fewer fouls, but unfortunately, the referees got it right. We slashed some people late in that game that had to be called, and they were obvious fouls. Charlie slashed somebody right in the back, for example, and we were just giving up -- we made it easy on the referees with some of those slashes.

Boy, our man down stepped up. We put in different men for that. Scott Bower, Jake Giulieri, John Fox guides us there. I was nervous coming into the game because of the conditions with somebody who's been standing on the sidelines for 20, 25 minutes, not having played, how will they be, especially against a high powered man-up offense like North Carolina?

Alex Rode bailed us out on our second man down, where we left somebody wide open, but somebody took a shot, and Alex Rode made a huge save. From there, we got really better with our rotation, and we didn't give up any open looks. We got fortunate. They threw the ball away on the very last one, but, of course, we didn't clear the ball, did we?

And with the time-out with 20 seconds left, there had been a play beforehand where I could have called time-out, I didn't, and Carolina took advantage of sort of a four v. four, five v. four, and Will Perry scored another goal against us. Boy, he's had some field days against us. His shot is different. It's just that much faster, and it's really tough. Alex Rode can see a lot of shots, just couldn't see that one.

When I called time-out with 20 seconds left, it was to say, all right, fellas. Let's press out on their short sticks. Let's make it difficult for them to run by our short sticks. When we saw they gave 0 the ball, we said, okay, Cole Kastner, here we go, and let you defend this one v. one. Eventually the ball got to Chris Gray, and I thought Chris Merle made a huge play. What a big time play Chris Merle made there because typically with a pick, with Chris Gray involved, you want to keep Cade Saustad, one of the best defensemen in the country, on the ball, but Chris Merle recognized that this was an opportunity to surprise Gray, jam him, and it stymied the rest of their offensive flow the last ten seconds of the game. So huge, huge jump switch by Chris Merle.

Q. When you guys go into the half with a pretty good lead off of that run you guys were going on, how does this knowing North Carolina so well kind of help you stay grounded as you guys move into the second half?

LARS TIFFANY: It's true. We knew them well. We said, hey, we know they're going to get their full pressure ride now, and we dealt with it well in the third quarter. Obviously, as you saw, we didn't deal with it in the fourth quarter at all. We knew they would bring that type of

intensity.

You're right. Having played them twice, it takes away some of the question marks of the schemes, and it allowed us to be better prepared, saying, okay, I think they're going to try to set more picks for Chris Gray and get him loose and get him going because he's such an incredible lacrosse player. And then defensively, trying to figure out what they were going to do.

They threw things that were a little different, but not too different. Sean Kirwan calls them masterful game. We didn't get Sean the ball enough. We only got three goals in the second half. That possession, when you're losing face-offs and failing clears, that's a lot of extra possessions for the opponent. That's why North Carolina was able to get seven goals in that second half. We're probably fortunate they only got seven. That's because of good defense, very good man down play, and again Alex Rode.

Knowing them, there wasn't going to be too big of a question mark coming out of half. We just said, fellas, there's a surge coming. There's a storm coming. They're going to get a couple goals. Focus on the next one. Don't get involved with the ups and downs, the emotions, and just steady and make the next play.

Q. What was it like for you to see the fan turnout, the atmosphere today? It was pretty energetic in here.

LARS TIFFANY: Yeah, it was loud. This is what lacrosse fans are very passionate people, aren't they? Forget this is probably the coldest day on record for Memorial Day Weekend. They came out, and it got loud. It's a great venue. It's a great small venue for our championships.

But I will admit, most of that that got the loudest was at the end of the game when Carolina was making some big time plays and getting the ball back. We come in the huddles aa defense, and we talk about this all the time. We live for this. We love this. Up a goal, coming out of time-out, fans yelling and screaming, this is what we live for. We crave these moments, so we try to embrace that.

Again, pressure is a gift. You want to thrive under pressure. You commit to coming to University of Virginia because you want to play in big time moments like this. You want that pressure. You want that crowd. Thanks to our lacrosse fans and Hartford for creating that energy despite the conditions.

Q. Just talk about playing Monday, either Duke or Maryland. You didn't play Maryland this year because of COVID, but you played them over the years. What do they look similar getting ready for Monday?

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LARS TIFFANY: Big, strong, and athletic, both teams. Elite attackmen. Probably our Heisman Trophy, the Tewaaraton award, you're probably looking at the top two guys between Jared Bernhardt and Michael Sowers, surrounded by a ton of talent. One team's undefeated.

I'm happy that we get to sit way up high in the top tier for the next two hours and watch this game because that means we won, but I know I'm going to be watching and scratching my head how to defend these guys. Yeah, so two very well coached, talented teams, so I'll enjoy it for a little while, but not too long.

Q. Coach, you briefly talked about John Fox helping you out of your man down, and he also was kind of deployed a little bit in the middle as a bit of a backer, slider, and he had a huge clear with about two minutes left. What has he meant to your team as like the glue guy so far for the Cavs?

LARS TIFFANY: John Fox, what he does on the field is impressive. What he does off the field is even better. People don't witness -- I don't know I've had as great a leader as him. Alex Buckley at Brown University, Dave Smith here at University of Virginia, John Fox is in the same breath. He stepped on campus four years ago here in Charlottesville, Virginia, as a leader. He made comments his freshman year at Charlottesville, I was shocked. You would expect a fourth or fifth year to say.

He understands what it means to commit to a team. He takes responsibility for so many of our men. He takes responsibility for our decision-making off the field. It's uncanny what he's done for us, what he's meant for us as a captain. He's essentially a three-time captain. He could have been four-time if we let first years do that. 2019, he wasn't technically a captain, but he was a leader. 2020 he was a captain. 2021 he was a captain. If he wanted to come back next year, he could be a captain, so three-time captain.

I feel like I have another coach off the field, guiding our young men, making good decisions, and leading this program in everything we do because of John Fox.

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