

2023 NCAA Men's Lacrosse Championship

Saturday, May 27, 2023

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA

Lincoln Financial Field

Virginia Cavaliers

Coach Lars Tiffany

Matthew Nunes

Xander Dickson

Media Conference



He's the one -- he's the reason we had that one- or two-goal lead later in the game, because he just wouldn't let the ball in as the game went on.

A fantastic performance there.

Special credit to Cole Kastner. With Scott Bower going down with injury and not playing in the second half, we needed more from Cole, and Cole was playing not only an elite attack man but also bumping up to play long stick midfield and taking face-off wings, which we haven't asked him to do this year.

Also Grayson Sallade. Grayson Sallade, a heroic effort. We asked him to play more as Jeff Conner cramped up and didn't play as much in the second half.

A couple men who despite the loss, I couldn't be more grateful, and certainly honored to coach those type of men as well as all the men at Virginia.

Yeah, heck of a game. I'll stop there.

Q. They outscored you guys 4-1 over the final three minutes in the overtime, and their shots coming out of the time-outs were pretty quick. What did you see defensively in front of you as they were getting those early shots out of those time-outs?

MATTHEW NUNES: Notre Dame is a super talented team. Both the Kavanagh brothers are great players. Eric Dobson, and that list can go on, Jack Simmons. Just super talented offensive players, and we have super talented defensive players, too.

They just ended up getting a little bit of a step, and I think I probably could have helped out our team more in the last couple minutes, but all credit goes to Notre Dame for drawing up those plays and getting good looks off.

LARS TIFFANY: They came out of the time-out, we were up two, and Dobson swept across the middle and he hit Kavanagh sneaking from behind the goal. It's a great look he made, and it's something that is exposed against our

Notre Dame 13, Virginia 12

LARS TIFFANY: First of all, it's wonderful to see everybody here. The last time I was here at the Final Four, I had a microphone in front of me and nobody in the room, and I could blabber on and make mistakes thinking this is being prerecorded. No, this is live. Now I know it's live because I can see all your faces.

What an incredible setting. Philadelphia does an amazing job hosting this event, and what a venue here at Lincoln Financial. We were obviously hoping for the storybook ending to the careers, especially the fifth-year men. We have six of them who were here in 2019 in Philadelphia and won the National Championship, a team that found ways to always win in overtime, by obviously the closest of margins when you win five games in 2019 in overtime, and this year we lost both of our overtime games with a minuscule difference there.

But as we all know, the huge range of emotions, the very different range of emotions being on the losing end.

What a great lacrosse game, and fantastic opponent, athletes all over the field, a great goalie. But I want to tell the media and the lacrosse world, I think this is three times Matt Nunes in his games against Notre Dame showed to make more saves and to win the matchup, if there is such a thing, goalie versus goalie.

Our team defense certainly exposed at the end, but I don't know if we played great team defense all game. How many times did all of us see a Notre Dame shooter really close, and it looked like it was about to go in? Too close. And whoa, it didn't go in. There's Matt Nunes with another save.



defense because we were ready to slide to Dobson, and then second slide from our lowest defender into Jake Taylor because he's such a threat.

If Notre Dame wants to make that really heroic feed, it's there, and they made it. That got them within one, and I'll admit, as a defense, now we're like, ooh, all right, if we keep sliding, we might get exposed with those pipes, and they were able to take advantage from there.

Q. Xander, you're part of the fifth-year group that Coach mentioned. What were your emotions when you realized the game was over and your college career was over?

XANDER DICKSON: Yeah, definitely I think every guy, specifically the fifth years, but every guy on this roster, was sort of flooded and almost shocked when we realized it was over and our journey was finally done because we thought it might be done last year but we kept it going, and everyone wanted to come back. There was no question everyone wanted to come back to Virginia because the place is special and the program is special.

My first reaction was to go to Connor Shellenberger. Just having a chance to play alongside him at attack this year was something I couldn't have dreamed of. Probably the most special player I'll ever play with.

I think all the fifth years are just grateful for the opportunity to return and give it our best shot one more time, but I think we're going to miss it a lot for sure.

Q. The three goals that they had coming out of those time-outs late in the game and in overtime, I think it took them 14 seconds, 10 seconds, nine seconds. How quickly did that unfold in your eyes, just how quickly they were attacking, and what sort of challenges does that present when a team comes right at you coming out of a time-out like that when they're that prepared?

MATTHEW NUNES: Yeah, when two of the best teams in the country are competing at a high level, you can't ever take your foot off the gas, and they kept their foot on the gas, and if that was either 10 years or they were 60 seconds into a possession, you always felt their pressure.

As I said, just super talented team that we were playing on the other side, so all credit goes to them, and if they got those looks in the first 10 seconds or the last 10 seconds of the possession, they just kept applying the pressure, but my defense, again, did just a great job. Grayson Sallade, Noah Chizmar, the short stick D-middies really did a great job, and enough -- Cade -- not enough can be said about

Cade Saustad.

LARS TIFFANY: I'm not happy with the way I guided the defense at the end of the game, but I don't want to take credit away from Notre Dame. I think about the two goals, one by Dobson and the other by Jake Taylor, they got us sliding and we slid to them, and we made contact, and yet Taylor does that little twister action and Dobson gets pounded by a couple guys and still gets that ball to the far pipe. Those are two great plays, too.

Yeah, I didn't do my job at the end as a defensive coach because when you're giving up goals that quickly, it's on me.

Q. Matthew, obviously the result wasn't what you wanted, but with two years left, 17 saves in the Final Four, do you feel like this game and this season can be a building block for you moving forward?

MATTHEW NUNES: Yeah, we're going to take this -- we're taking it on the chin right now, but we're losing one hell of a fifth-year class. We're losing a lot of fourth years, losing a lot of guys who their names don't get mentioned in the paper: Andrew Brennfleck, Dave Roselle, just that list can go on and on, and my grade, the first years, have really talked about just how special those guys who are leaving us, and we've got to continue their legacy and build upon their legacy that they've left.

They've left this place way better than they found it. They left it with two National Championships. I forget, I don't know how many ACC titles, but they turned everything about this program around, and they're the reason why I'm at this place.

Q. Xander, going off of that, when you guys got here to UVA, it obviously wasn't the program it is right now with the two National Championships. What does it mean just kind of when you do get a chance to reflect back on what these past five years have been?

XANDER DICKSON: It's been everything. For every guy on this team knows, we eat, sleep and breathe Virginia lacrosse. It starts with the coaches and then our leadership and all the way down. Everyone is so bought in, day in and day out, so committed, it is such a special thing to be a part of. We view ourselves as just cogs in the machine of the program. Like Matt mentioned and you saw today, a lot of young guys stepped up. Patrick McIntosh, a lot of points, great player, hell of a day today.

I'm just happy that we're able to sort of be mentioned as the class that helped shape this program and helped to sort of lead it where it's going in the future, and we know

there's great things coming, and we're definitely pretty distraught that we didn't get to finish off with a national title this year, but just to be able to say I helped out a little bit and I guided this program to where it's headed in the future is something really special. It's something we hold very valuable to us.

LARS TIFFANY: It's an overused line, but we love it, leave the program better than you found it, and essentially that's what Xander is saying.

It hurts. It really hurts. But because it -- it hurts because one, the absolute level of commitment this group has had. The agenda items I haven't had to worry about off the field, nothing. And how much they poured their hearts into it.

Also it hurts because we have reached the pinnacle. Though we leave with a loss, this group has really truly left the program better than what they found four or five years ago.

Q. Xander, I know it's tough to talk about right after the loss, but as you think about this season, how would you characterize it? Has it been a successful season to obviously get to this point?

XANDER DICKSON: I think that's a twofold question. I think no, because we didn't win a National Championship, and that's just a standard we created. We're not trying to be arrogant about that, but that's what we want, a national title. This is Virginia lacrosse; this is the best of the best, the bluebloods. We want a national title, so in that essence, yes, we didn't reach our goal, but definitely not a failure, no, in the idea that we had so much fun along the way and it was such a crazy ride.

Day in and day out, guys were smiling every day, and it was interesting when we got in the playoffs, it almost seemed like you'd imagine then we got way more serious, way more in depth in what we were doing in our schemes, but it was actually the opposite, and we think that's because we work so hard throughout the year and everyone individually as a team, schematically, coaches, every part of this program is working so hard day in and day out that when we get to spots like this, it's like, let's breathe, let's fall back on what we've done all year.

Guys were just smiling in the weight room right before we came here. It was just full of smiles and laughter. Guys were putting in the work, but guys were just excited to be a part of this and excited to get to spend more time together, and that's why we want to win these games is just honestly to get more time with each other, and it's a really, really fun group.

Q. You've become so accustomed to having an edge in possession I think most games. How much did Notre Dame's success on face-offs kind of skew the game in their favor?

LARS TIFFANY: You're right, we have grown accustomed to having an unfair advantage at the face-off having Petey Lasalla for five years now, so you've got to give credit certainly to Lynch, No. 22, especially what he was able to do. He was able to counter Petey and disrupt it and make it a 3-v-3 ground ball, and certainly we can all see the stats, Notre Dame earned a lot of extra possessions off the ground.

Yeah, it looked like it was pretty balanced throughout, but then in that fourth quarter, that's where those extra couple, like man, if we can just get one more of these, and we finally did when we were -- when the game was tied, and I think they finally called a face-off violation against Lynch for holding Petey and we got him to score the goal.

I know Petey is someone who's unique, scoring that big goal in the fourth quarter, and as a coaching staff, right before he dodged, I'm like, Lynch is a pretty good defender; I'm not sure -- this isn't a typical face-off guy who's not a great athlete, and I'm not sure Petey should go, and he goes and he scores.

We would not have won the National Championships in '19 and '21 without Petey Lasalla, and I bring that up because I know right now Petey -- I just talked to him. He's disappointed in himself that he couldn't get those one or two more possessions late in the game to get us the ball, to get us the overtime face-off and to get us a shot to win that game.

But it's like, Petey, we're not going to define your -- based on a couple face-offs. You've already broken the NCAA face-off for attempts record, and you've been incredible for us.

But yeah, when you get accustomed to the unfair advantage, it gets -- you do feel it when it's not going your way.

Q. It kind of struck you that Connor had the nerve to say it's kind of National Championship or bust. I was curious in that answer and in this moment now, do you worry about a program and guys who feel like it's got to be that when you come up just one win away from that game?

LARS TIFFANY: Sure, no, you're right, because if we define life based on National Championship or bust, that's a bit daunting, isn't it, when in the NBA only one out of 32

teams or in the NFL wins the Super Bowl or the NBA Finals. I hope the rest of the athletes and teams don't look at the season as a failure.

It certainly does right now because we have these expectations and we've build this program to where it is, and the men who are next to me and in that locker room had a lot to do with that.

But your question is a really poignant one because we want to make sure our men know that this season wasn't a failure. It feels like a failure right now, temporarily, but man, we had a lot of fun this year. We scored a bunch of goals, broke the UVA record for assists, so we're sharing it, we're being unselfish, and we got to come back here.

The Final Four is such a magical place, and we missed it last year, and man, that was a season that felt unfruitful. That felt -- that was disappointing.

But yeah, and I'm glad you brought it up because it's something I'll go reinforce with the men. As much as it hurts right now, this was a successful year.

Q. You've gotten to this point with guys like Molloy and guys like Connor a couple years ago where watching them it felt like they were just going to carry a team all the way, and obviously with Molloy the injury kind of played a role there. When you're in the middle of this game and Connor is doing what he's doing like he has the last two weeks, the last month or so, does it feel like he's just going to carry us to another one here, one way or the other?

LARS TIFFANY: It does. I know, so nice to have him fully back to just about 100 percent health-wise, and he fought from things right from the first scrimmage. The second scrimmage when we scrimmaged Georgetown, he tweaked something there and just wasn't right. Boy, yeah, at Georgetown to see him doing what he's doing and now today, yeah, that's a special player, and you certainly feel like you've got that edge. You really do.

Connor Shellenberger, yeah, I mean, what he does -- and today he really found that perfect balance, I thought, because you can't have him just be a feeder. We all know he's not selfish. We want him to be more selfish, and he said, I'm going to the goal, and a great cover guy on him, and against a great goalie, but Connor found a way to get those three goals.

Yeah, I know, I'm saying goodbye to a lot of incredible players. I'm thankful that he's not one of them.

Truly he didn't actually get the COVID year. We had red

shirted him that year. So he's only -- he'll truly have four years of playing time for Virginia lacrosse statistically and everything he's done. Yeah, with a guy like that, it's just get the ball, get him that ball, and we're going to win this game. We just didn't get him the ball enough.

Q. I'm sure that you're not surprised that it was a one-goal game, but when you look at it from the standpoint of a handful of stats specifically, Notre Dame took 49 shots, both teams went 0 for 3 on extra man, Notre Dame failed only one clear, combined to cause just 15 turnovers. I'm sure that when you envisioned the game, it unfolded in a number of different ways. How surprised are you by how this game unfolded?

LARS TIFFANY: Yeah, our offense has been fantastic with extra possessions. Something we did really well for most of the year, so we started riding it. Let's take pride in this. Look at all the extra possessions we get. Yeah, we're super talented, but sometimes it was a second or third time when the ball went on the ground.

Notre Dame wouldn't let us do that today. That defensive end, they were absorbing and vacuuming up all those, it felt like the entire game. How many times did we get -- I felt like to get an extra possession we had to run a shot out on points there, just to get that ball.

Overall our team defensive slide scheme did not have a great day. Matt Nunes bailed us out multiple times in that first half and it felt like in the third quarter, as well. Like it was, oh, boy, somebody is wide open. Oh, he made the save again.

So yeah, when you look at the numbers and the extra shots they had, all the extra ground balls, and we were only able to get them to fail one clear, our 10-man ride, they dealt with it fairly well.

Yeah, so it doesn't go -- it probably didn't go the way I would have expected. I would have thought we'd have gotten more ground balls because we've been very good with the ground balls. We've led the nation in ground balls many years.

Yeah, we played more defense. And again, I don't know if it was -- I wouldn't call it a great team defensive effort. It was pretty good, but Matt Nunes made us -- he's the one who kept that score down, in an era where the scoring is up. Holy cow. Watching that first game today, a lot of goals being scored.

But yeah, we're not -- the nation, myself, all of us, we need to talk about Matt Nunes more, and we're really fortunate

we get him for two more years.

Q. What is your message to your fan base about the season you just had? And secondly, what makes the city of Philadelphia a good site to host a Final Four?

LARS TIFFANY: Sure. Yeah, the message to the UVA lacrosse family, I'm sorry. As the coach of this program, I didn't get us to that land, get us to that lonely place at the very top of the mountain, and yes, we've built that expectations but so did Dom Starsia, and so did the men of yesteryear. They built that expectation, so I apologize for that. But know how proud and how grateful I am for these men.

My sports administrator Kim Record is over here. We focus on budgets, we focus on recruiting, we're focusing on facility enhancements. We're not focusing on bad behavior. We're not focusing on things that waste time. This group has sacrificed so much and transformed what it means to be a Virginia lacrosse player both on and off the field. It's been dramatic, the change there.

So I want them to know how grateful they should be of these men, their GPA, internship and job acquisition. Man, it's a wonderful group of men. That's why I'm going to miss them so much.

Philadelphia, first of all, low-hanging fruit, it's just central. It's really nice. But I don't want to say it's a great venue just because it's central. This stadium is awesome. When we ran on the field yesterday for our practice, I've been here before, I've been fortunate to be here with Brown in '16 and Virginia in '19. It still took my breath away for the first 10 seconds. This coliseum -- us as the gladiators inside of it, I don't know if there's a better venue. It's amazing.

The city of Philadelphia, it's got everything you'd want in terms of great food and entertainment. They give us the police escorts to get to the stadium. There's a huge amount of parking for all the fans to celebrate and have their tailgates, easy to get to. But yeah, the people here, that's what it really comes down to.

We were saying, and I probably shouldn't say this, but baseball has an Omaha. It would be fun if lacrosse had an Omaha, and Philadelphia might be right at the top of the list. They do a fantastic job with it.

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