

2021 NCAA Men's Lacrosse Championship

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Virginia Cavaliers

Lars Tiffany

Media Conference

Virginia 17, Maryland 16

LARS TIFFANY: First of all, I want to thank Dom Starsia. Dom Starsia gave me a chance as a high school recruit to attend a Division I university and play lacrosse at Brown and I've been following Dom ever since. Even though I'm finishing my fifth year with Sean Kirwan and Kip Turner here as coaches at the University of Virginia, we're still enjoying Dom's recruiting efforts along with Marc Van Arsdale. I was really grateful for all the talent that he left five years ago and the recruits.

But more importantly how to treat people, how to be a man, how to be respectful of the game. Dom has a very close relationship with Native Americans, Dave White in particular, who's also a Brown lacrosse alum, and so just how to hold yourself as a man and how to treat people right and how to be good to the game, and so thank you, Dom, for everything you've done.

Second I'd like to thank President Ryan, our rector, the athletic director Carla Williams, Jane Miller. What a wonderful surprise. Bronco Mendenhall, our university rector for being here. What a wonderful surprise to look over on the sidelines and go over and give everyone a hug pregame on Memorial Day, to have such a contingent from our administration and our University to be here. What a special surprise.

I hope you were able to notice that a lot of us were wearing the lime green laces. The Colleluori family, what they've done to support those families who went through what their family went through when their son died of cancer and they organized the HEADstrong, and what they've done for so many families and what they do now for a young man who's touched us, David Alexander. He's a Commonwealth of Virginia resident, lacrosse player who is battling his fight, and David Alexander was able to come to some games this year at Klockner, and we've built a relationship with him, and that's been really special for us. To wear the lime green laces to not only honor David



Alexander but also the entire organization HEADstrong, we feel really lucky to be a part of that.

The rector is Jim Murray. How did I forget that?

What an incredible experience to be a part of such an exciting game.

I fell in love with the game of lacrosse in 1983. I'd been playing the game before that with my native friends Brad Powliss, Joe Solomon, Jacob Lazore, T-bone Homer and many more, but the 1983 National Championship game, Syracuse versus Hopkins, Joe Solomon's brother, Travis Solomon was the starting goalie. Joe Solomon is my best friend, still is, and I got to join on the parent bus. What a thrill for me going into as a 14-year-old boy to be on that bus and to ride right into the stadium and see this incredible game at Rutgers.

The reason I bring it up, the score that day was 17-16. I just remember the passion of the game and the fans and the excitement, and I fell in love with the game of lacrosse that day, whereas I know some people the first time they touch the stick they fell in love. I loved it, but the emotions of that.

Here we are today with that same score with two fantastic teams. John Tillman, what he does year in and year out with his program is simply phenomenal. That guy has been to seven National Championship games. It's incredible what he does.

He seems to hit all three tenets of how we rate lacrosse programs, the talent acquisition, the development of that talent and the schemes that you put them within, the strategy. Maryland does all three incredibly well, and that's why you can see they're an undefeated lacrosse team this season.

Of course they didn't give up. We were up by five, enjoying it, making a couple saves, making some stops, and failed a couple clears unfortunately, and finally they got a couple and they got that one off the scramble when they were man up, and they just wouldn't go away.



Of course they didn't because it's the definition of a Maryland lacrosse player. They've got an incredible history, and it also defines their present because of John Tillman.

I am very grateful to have had Kip Turner for 11 years and now Sean Kirwan for seven, through our years at Brown and now here at the University of Virginia. The continuity of the staff cannot be underestimated. Sean Kirwan flat out is the best offensive coach in the game. I often say young offensive coach, but what he did today, putting up the number of goals and a scout defense and a strong goalie, he continues to prove that.

I'm fortunate Cooper Fersen and I are doing the defense and how fortunate are we we can give up 16 goals and win and that's because of our offensive prowess, and it starts with those two men we lean so heavily on, Matt Moore and Connor Shellenberger. We went into the game thinking how can we get away from the matchups that Maryland will put on us because we have incredible respect for 43 Makar and 54 Grill.

But it was Connor Shellenberger stepping up and showing that he can win that matchup, he can win his matchup. The balance that he plays with, understanding when to attack because the opposing defense isn't sliding versus when they are sliding and he can become the facilitator, the quarterback, he's got a great balance for that.

He's not putting himself too far out in front and making himself like hunting points. He can let the game come to him and take what he sees.

And then Matt Moore, stepping up on the biggest stage. I remember two years ago against Yale what a fantastic effort he had that day and here he is again with two goals. Our offense starts with those guys but we're so lucky to have such a plethora of offensive personnel with Laviano and Payton and Connor, et cetera.

Petey LaSalla, wow. He's been fighting through an injury the last few weeks. He's not been his normal stuff as we've grown accustomed to with Petey. He was fighting through an injury, he fought through it the past few weeks, and to get our offense going when things were stagnant early in the game, to get us a goal and get us an assist, amazing.

And then maybe for me as a defensive coach, two guys, Chris Merle. He has emerged as an elite short stick D-middie. We gave incredibly difficult assignment, Bubba Fairman. Early on we were putting on a short on No. 23 Kyle Long, and that guy is too fast. He blew by us and scored a goal in that first quarter and so we made the

adjustment and said, we've got to try to see if we can survive against Bubba. Bubba had some good looks and he's a heck of a lacrosse player, and Chris Merle really stepped up to the task there.

And then Cade Saustad. Jared Bernhardt is the best player in the game for the last 10 to 20 years since people named Powell were playing this game. What Jared Bernhardt does to opposing defenses puts you in such a bind because he's also such a balance of being able to make his feeds and see the field but yet when he's going to the goal there's nobody tougher to stop. Cade Saustad stepped up today. We had several different thoughts and ideas and strategies. It's just we ended up just sticking with the one of, all right, Cade, this is your matchup; win it.

I'm not sure we completely -- you don't neutralize Jared Bernhardt, but Cade stepped up and was able to deny and take away some of those opportunities, so the rest of the defense didn't have to be solely focused on one and we could focus on so many other talents and Maryland lacrosse players.

I'll stop there.

Q. The story of 2019 and the tournament was those late-game comebacks you had. Other than the Bryant game and this tournament, you never really had to put together a big rally. What were the last two games like for you in the final minute knowing your defense had to get a stop or the game was going to overtime?

LARS TIFFANY: Right, yeah. Very similar path there, right. We were up by three, four goals and watched that lead disappear. Not completely fortunately, so we were able to make some stands there late in the game.

You're right, when you look at how there was just one comeback after another and winning all five games in 2019 that went to overtime, we were 5-0 in those games. And a different path this way, with we were just able to -- in the playoffs here, just continue to improve and just meshing.

Having Dox Aitken return for his fifth year, what a boon for us. Having Charlie Bertrand transfer, what an incredible talent. There's Charlie Bertrand with three National Championships now.

It's difficult to blend all that talent because we've got really good recruits, as well, coming into the program and we've got talented players returning, and all of a sudden you add these two fifth-year players, so trying to find the right balance of making sure everyone is getting the playing time that they deserve wasn't easy. But I give credit to the men, they may not have all been completely happy with

their playing time, but Coach Kirwan as able to not only tactically but emotionally find the right balance on attack and how many guys ran through the midfield.

When we finally got that gelled in there somewhere in April and certainly in May, then we became really dangerous, and we were really able to put some points on the board. And then certainly Connor Shellenberger, he's emerged. He was a really good player down in Charlottesville, Virginia, and now the rest of the world is being able to see here in the month of May, he's one of the best in the game, period.

Q. You said last week that the best part of reaching championship weekend was going to be just the time, the extra time that you got to spend with your team. Now that that time has been rewarded with what is to your left, what has this been like and meant to you?

LARS TIFFANY: Yeah, I mean, you're starting to make me think about how it is over, though. This extra time, we squeeze these moments, and I think about specifically Jared Connors and Dox Aitken. Those are men who they were first years, our first year here, Sean, Kip and I, and I get emotional thinking about it. I'll admit to you, we all started together in late August of 2016, and I just -- I haven't coached a game without those two and I haven't coached a practice or anything without Jared because obviously Dox was at Villanova playing football or pursuing football this past fall.

In 2020 when COVID hit and we all shut down and everyone just disappeared, that was hard, but I always felt like, a lot of us will come back. But a lot of our men didn't. I sort of wondered, I wonder why that is. When I talked to some of these men, some of their bodies were beat up, but it was Coach, we won a National Championship, it checks that box and I'm ready to move on with my career. Our career services, our placing of our man in fantastic jobs in New York City in finance and marketing and other areas is incredible, so our guys had really good jobs, too, so they took off. They took the next step of their life.

All of a sudden they were gone, and it didn't have that really goodbye. And so now when I think about this, with Dox and Jared, there's no better way to say goodbye, right?

But it's hard to think that three months from now when we're practicing and starting up again, those two aren't going to be there, and it's a whole new realm. I'm excited about the recruits coming in and I'm excited about getting a chance to get at it again, but man, I'll end this -- and I'm answering this way too long, I know, I can't wait for this 10-hour bus ride home. I won't want it to end. It'll be 2:00

in the morning before we get in, but I'm going to squeeze my time because I know once we get to Charlottesville and we get off that bus, it'll never be the same. It'll be over.

I just don't want to let it go, win or lose. The time with Jared, Dox and this group of men, it defines who we are, the bonds, the tightness, the community, the culture that we've tried so hard to create. It's real, and saying goodbye is going to be hard.

Q. You mentioned Connor Shellenberger's emergence and I know you've pushed him to be more aggressive over the course of the season. When do you feel like that clicked for him and has this heralded a different level for him especially over the last three games?

LARS TIFFANY: It really has. The month of May, this is where it's really happened. He's been a great player. You can see the stats. He put up big numbers all year. But it was really when you saw him here in the month of May because he was seeing elite cover defense men. Throughout the season he might get the short stick defender sometimes. He might get someone's third best pole.

But now in the month of May he's going to get some elite defensemen. He didn't back down. He was going after people, and his ability to beat his man top side or if they're taking away top side for him to lower his shoulder and inside roll like he did on Grill at one time today for a goal, it's uncanny. I'm amazed.

Of course he isn't truly a first year because I'm the not-so-smart coach who wanted to red shirt him last year, and as a good friend of mine reminded me with that, and of course everyone got last year back but he could have played six games before the COVID shutdown. But it's his ability to be able to beat good defenders off the dribble as we say, but then also to recognize when the slide is coming and move and move that ball and put it right on Payton Cormier's stick or Peter Garno's stick and let those guys step up and hammer. It really is amazing. How lucky am I and how lucky is Sean and Kip. We got that guy for three more years.

Q. You talked a lot about your joy for the game and that obviously always spreads to the players and they play with that sort of enthusiasm. But the second half especially they came out at halftime like just seemingly enjoying every moment of this. Was there emphasis at halftime around, hey, we've got 30 minutes left in the season, let's make the most of it?

LARS TIFFANY: That comes from the men themselves, the hooting and hollering we were doing pregame, couldn't

get to get out of the tunnel to start the hour countdown. The fun, the positivity, there's a belief in our system. Everything we do is preparing for us for championship weekend. How we lift, when we lift, how we lift on Sundays, it creates this attitude that we can play on a Saturday, lift heavy on Sundays and then once in a while sometimes practice on Monday and then give Tuesday off because the mindset that we're getting ready for championship weekend.

The men know that, and so I felt it in 2019. I remember Matt Dziama was up there doing some lip sync deeJay thing pregame before Yale. The guys were so loose and happy and excited. I'm so glad you saw that and witnessed that.

That's from them because they really are having a fun time.

But they're believing in the system that we're not beat up, we're not sore. We're used to lifting heavy on Sundays.

And then you combine that with what our training staff does, what Bebecca Vozzo and her student trainers were doing yesterday with her men. We were in the pool yesterday morning, the massages, the back rubs, the rolling out, every that Steve does. UVA is built to win, we have the support staff, and it transfers to the men, and then we just keep, hey, just play the game, play your best and enjoy it.

Man, I'm really glad you saw that because I've seen two Mondays in a row where there's a confidence, there's a fun, a joy of playing, as opposed to wow, this is a huge moment, oh, boy, this is pressure filled. I'm really lucky that we've created that culture on championship weekend.

Q. You told your team going into 2020 that repeating was difficult. You told them how few teams have been able to do it. How difficult did it prove? How much does it mean to you to get that done? And you had a moment there it looked like with I guess your daughter cutting the net at the cage; what does that moment mean to you?

LARS TIFFANY: Yeah, I mean, I've got a great photo of my daughter and I cutting the net in 2019 and I kept yelling, where's my daughter, I need Charlotte with me, and cutting that net with her again, it's -- yeah, it's amazing. I waited too long to become a dad. I try to tell my men, don't wait until you're 45 or 46 to become a dad. There's too much joy, it's too much fun. To be able to share that with my daughter, it's amazing. I'm so glad we finally got her on the field. It's a little different with the COVID protocols. I just grabbed her and ran and said thanks, security, I've got to do this.

What was the beginning part of the question? I got a little emotional talking about my daughter.

Q. You mentioned going into 2020 how difficult repeating was. Now that you've done it, how difficult was it to accomplish?

LARS TIFFANY: It is, there's no question it's really hard. We got two one-goal wins over a great North Carolina team and a great Maryland team, and Alex Rode making all these great saves for us. Just a couple balls go the wrong way -- it's really, really difficult to do this.

I had this opportunity, it was a really great experience, Dom Starsia connected the Georgetown men's soccer staff with me for a call during the COVID shutdown. We jumped on a Zoom and they were coming off of their National Championship, which unfortunately was against our own Virginia Cavaliers, and we just talked about how do you approach the concept of defending or repeating, and we couldn't have come at it any more different.

I actually did exercises where I showed them, look over the last 20 years of college football, men's basketball, men's lacrosse. Let's see how many teams have repeated, and there's just not many. College football it was Alabama may have done it once they repeated, and USC did it one and a half times because one time they split, and men's basketball it was Florida and men's lacrosse Duke had done it once.

I was just trying to prove a point that this is really hard, so we've got to work. If you could put a number on it, 42 ergs of work energy out of all the men in our program. We've got to get to 50 or 52. And then I talked to the Georgetown staff and he had done just the opposite; he was saying, let's look over the history of men's soccer and look at all these examples of when teams have gone on a roll, have won three in a row.

After that conference call, I'm like, I really like his message much better than my negative one.

That was really kind of this incredible opportunity to be able to defend a title and get a second chance because with the COVID year shut it down and I created such a negativity over -- I wouldn't even let the guys say defend or repeat.

We had a good start to the year, but it felt a little too professional almost, and care line seeing that passion that she mentioned in her question to me, kind of lost a little bit of that luster because I was so uptight about it, and having that conference call over the Zoom with the Georgetown soccer staff and Dom was exactly what I needed to just

liberate this thing, like hey, let's embrace our history, let's have some fun with it. Look, this is possible. Let's look at the examples in history.

Sorry for the long-winded answer there, but it was a -- so just created a positive mindset, but no question, this is really, really difficult because there's so many great coaches and great teams out there. You know, this is an arduous task.

Q. I asked Jared and Alex earlier just about the journey this program has gone through since you've gotten there and Jared joined you. Thinking back to that win at UNC, the first ACC win, what has this journey been like to now look at yourselves as two-time NCAA champions?

LARS TIFFANY: Right, it's -- the opportunity to come here was one that I was certainly very excited about. I wanted to make sure Sean and Kip were ready to come, too, and fortunately they were. It was funny in 2016 I had bought a house in essentially January of 2016 and Kip had bought a house in May of 2016. It took me about six months later and Kip about a month later we're selling houses we just bought. It's not the greatest at finance apparently with the two of us. And to follow Dom -- forget about trying to get in those shoes. It's just impossible with his four National Championships and how he's been just an incredible coach and mentor.

Looking back at the struggles of year one, the challenges of year one, but boy, did we learn so much as a coaching staff. We learned that we needed to spend more time as a team. We needed just to dive into some books, cultural Thursdays, and we just finished our sixth book, "How Champions Think," by Dr. Bob Rotella, a fantastic sports psychologist. We recognized that we needed to get faster. We were big, we just weren't fast enough.

I can remember playing North Carolina and Duke late in that first year of 2017 and recognizing, okay, so we knew we had to get faster and quicker, but playing those two teams like okay, we need to be faster and quicker and we still need to be big, so we have to up our games when it comes to the recruiting.

That's the beautiful thing about ACC lacrosse is because it's so deep, and because of how the success that the other teams in our league have had, it raises the bar. We've had to get better because of Syracuse, Notre Dame, Duke and North Carolina. We didn't have a choice.

Our success is because of their success and because of how strong they are, and we've been fortunate year two, year three, year four obviously cut short, year five that

we've been able to take these really, really good steps forward. But again, it's because we didn't have a choice.

So yeah, it's been -- it's a challenge, but it's a wonderful challenge being in the ACC. It only hardens us.

Q. Yesterday's Zoom call Matt Moore was asked about his injury and he kind of downplayed it and said it was no big deal. Was that indeed the case or was he playing through some pain today? And just what about his performance in general?

LARS TIFFANY: Matt Moore's performance was heroic, the pain he was playing through. Matt Moore -- to Matt Moore's standards, has not had a typical Matt Moore season.

And for him with an injury to step up on the biggest stage as he did against Yale two years ago and today to score four goals, including that essentially the one that put us ahead two goals and every goal mattered as Maryland was making that comeback, it's absolutely heroic. There was no question he was playing, and it didn't change the way he played. He didn't favor one side versus the other. He was going to let it all hang out there.

For him to be able to play, just to play itself was heroic, and for him to obviously put up four goals, get a couple of assists, fly around in the ride, that's who he is. Through thick and thin, we're going to lean heavily and ride Matt Moore, and really lucky he wants to come back for a fifth year. He's in the Batten School, so we'll have Matt and Connor together for one more season, the dynamic duo.

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