

2026 NCAA Women's Lacrosse Championship

Thursday, May 21, 2026

Chicago, Illinois, USA

Martin Stadium at Northwestern

Northwestern Wildcats

Kelly Amonte Hiller

Madison Taylor

Jenika Cuocco

Semifinals Media Conference



people's opinion.

MADISON TAYLOR: No, we are just grateful. We are just grateful to be here. Usually we have to go to the East Coast or travel very far, and we're always the underdog in the stands.

We've been to all different places where we -- we have a great following of Northwestern Purple, but we are hopeful that tomorrow the purple will be dominant. That's just, honestly, a dream come true. I don't necessarily think it puts additional pressure on us. It just gives us more excitement for what's ahead.

KELLY AMONTE HILLER: I'm just overwhelmed with gratitude and excitement to be here, for all the work that's gone in to make this happen, and just really, really excited for tomorrow and hoping the fans will come out.

Q. What can you recall of your first memory of watching championship weekend, and what does it mean to be able to host such an event on your home field?

MADISON TAYLOR: Yeah, I remember watching. I was in Stony Brook. So that's Long Island. So we were both from Long Island. I just saw them play at the last weekend of May, and I just remember wanting to be in those shoes so bad, and now I've been here for four years in a row, and the same feeling applies every single year. It never gets old. I'm just super grateful to be here.

JENIKA CUOCO: I'm similar to Maddie. I was at Stony Brook watching the Final Four. It was just such a surreal environment to be a part of as a fan.

But obviously as a little girl, you have those dreams of wanting to play on that platform. I think it's just so awesome to be here and have the support of everyone and just be so grateful for the opportunity to, you know, play for the little girls that we were once watching.

Q. Home-field advantage you hear in any sport is supposed to be an advantage. Is there extra pressure here, knowing the fans coming in know you; that you should win; you are here?

MADISON TAYLOR: That's your opinion, we should win --

Q. I'm not saying it's my opinion. I'm saying it's some

Q. You, of course, have a ton of experience playing alongside Reagan on the USA team. What are the challenges of playing against a takeaway defender of that caliber present and how do you scheme, or at least prepare to play against someone who excels so much at forcing takeaways?

MADISON TAYLOR: Yeah, I think she's an amazing player. She's really, really talented, and she's had such an amazing career here.

I think at the same time, I get to play against the best defenders in practice every single day, and I think she's really similar to Jane Hansen. We were just talking about that before about how they are kind of the same. I was like, yeah, I got to play against Jane every single day the past three years, and she just is like the best back-checker I've ever seen.

So it really makes you remember to really focus just protect your stick. So, yeah, I'm excited.

Q. You've been in this situation before, but how is it different -- I know the emotions can sometimes be the same, but the team is different, right. Like you as a unit are different. So how does that feel heading into this weekend?

JENIKA CUOCO: I think we are just so excited to have extended our season for this long. We have really bought into each other and done so much self-reflection that we

ASAP sports . . . when all is said, we're done.®

want to play for each other and we want to play for even more time.

I think we have really just focused on ourselves this entire season and that's the best part because we really are just 39 -- 39? 40? -- of each other's best friend and this is the best part of our day. Just being able to show up, and this really has been one of the best seasons I've been part of a team.

MADISON TAYLOR: Yeah, I was going to say the same thing. I also think that we are not the same team when we first started in the month of February. It's May now, and we have grown so much as a team and individually, and we've just gotten better each game. We've learned so much as a group that will help prepare us for this weekend.

Q. Having faced this team already in the regular season, does that add a sense of familiarity that serves almost a cover for Friday's game?

JENIKA CUOCO: Yeah, I think obviously we saw them earlier this season so we kind of know what to expect. But they could throw something completely different at us.

But I think just focusing on ourselves the entire week has been the best prep of all. And I have so much confidence in my defense that they give me a sense of calm, so not so much as the opponent. But my defense in front of me gives me the confidence that's needed in games like this.

Q. Obviously you guys have been in the Final Four a lot. How much does that experience, the familiarity with the big stage, help you as you get ready for these big games this weekend?

MADISON TAYLOR: I think it's just an amazing experience that I feel so lucky to be a part of, playing in that last weekend of May, like you said, for the fourth time in a row. It's just unreal, and I'm just incredibly grateful that I get this opportunity.

I think when you think about it as there's only four teams in Division I that are playing right now, like we should be so lucky, instead of putting so much pressure on yourself. When you think of it like that, that there's only four teams playing, it makes you feel really excited and just grateful, and I think that just takes the pressure off a lot. So I feel like that's something we talk about a lot, and it just helps everyone a bunch.

Q. For both of you guys, this is probably your final game of your college career. What is the message that you hope you leave for those watching the game hoping to play in the future?

KELLY AMONTE HILLER: Hopefully not the final game.

Q. Final weekend.

KELLY AMONTE HILLER: That's correct.

MADISON TAYLOR: I think I just show everyone, like, how much I love this game, and how much just loving the game and just like working really hard, where it could get you. I think that's just the biggest thing.

And just like having fun with my friends. I mean, lacrosse has brought me so many places that I could never have imagined, and I've gained so many friendships and memories. When you think of it like that, and the sport of lacrosse, like where it's taken me it just like really is so fun.

Q. We've seen you guys at some of your friends' games on other teams, what's the support been like from your friends?

JENIKA CUOCO: I think the support on-campus from other athletes is what makes Northwestern such a special place. There's such a huge sense of pride for the logo that we wear on our chest every day.

And I think that's what drives us to keep being so successful, and also keep working so hard is that you want to fight for, obviously, your institution but also the other teams here. And especially just be part of a culture that makes you want to work really hard, and also appreciates you, is something super special.

Q. You talked about how this feels like a different team than earlier in the season. When you guys went through a few losses earlier, what allowed you to stick together and then go on this run that you have?

MADISON TAYLOR: Yeah, I think we talked about it a lot, but when we did lose those games, we just had a lot of, like, personal growth, personally, and then also as a team. And I think we really knew how special this group was but we just weren't getting the results that we wanted.

So I think once we had all those conversations and had that time to reflect, we were able to just go out there and just like let it rip, and we saw what our potential could be. So then once we saw that, we were just like, why would we just stop there? Might as well just keep going, and we've had so much fun ever since.

And I think that's helped prepare us for this week. We've been in, like, every situation possible. So we are just like super excited to just go out there this week and just have



as much fun with each other, and just keep fighting for more time together.

Q. Obviously when you come to Northwestern to play lacrosse, you know the standard that is around here, and this weekend you guys get to make history by hosting the first one. What does that mean to you to be part of that and have an opportunity to win it all on your home field?

MADISON TAYLOR: Yeah, I just feel so lucky to be a part of this. We were talking about this last night about how amazing this opportunity is. We are going to have so many alumni back in town that probably haven't been here in a while.

So just getting to see those people that played before us come in, it's just like, you have so much gratitude for that. And it's such an amazing thing to see all these facilities people that are putting this together. There's so much that goes on behind the scenes. All of s, we can't stop smiling. We're walking around, and you can't take the smile off our face.

It's just incredible and incredible for the sport. Like I said, for everyone that went into that, we are just going to keep fighting for more time together.

Q. Given the landscape of women's lacrosse this year, all the upsets, a lot of chaos, is there any level of being surprised that the Top-4 seeds survived to make it to this stage and that chaos didn't interrupt any of those plans?

KELLY AMONTE HILLER: Chaos almost did. You know, I mean, we went to the brink. Johns Hopkins went to the brink. I think Stanford gave UNC a great game, and Maryland had a great game with Navy. I think the competitiveness of every game this year was so cool for our sport.

Obviously we love when teams do really well continually, but it's also nice to have parity, too. You know, it just -- it just made things fun. I think when we, you know, had a couple of upsets, that just gives everyone belief that, you know, they can compete.

And so I think it's anyone's ballgame this weekend, and there's four amazing teams here. And that's what you want to see. That's what you want to see, four teams putting it all on the line for their institution and just for the greater betterment for the sport.

Q. A hallmark of the team this year has been players stepping up in big moments. Cumberland's and

Child's game-winners being the most recent examples. What does it say about the team's mentality and composure under pressure and how important do you think that will be heading into the Final Four?

KELLY AMONTE HILLER: Yeah, I think the girls spoke about it before, but early on in the season, we had to really, like, look deep inside and solve some things.

And you know, I don't think we shied away from that. I think, you know, to be here and be the No. 1 seed is just crazy, from where we started. You know, my thought at one point is are we going to make the NCAA Tournament? That's where the season started.

I think this team is very coachable, and as a result, they have become very resilient. I think there's been moments where one aspect of our game hasn't been at the greatest and something else steps up, some other aspect of our game.

I think that's a sign of a good team is when one thing is not working, something else carries the day, and for the unlikely heroes of Annabel and Noel to have those moments when we needed them, it was just incredible. I think it gives everyone hope, life, confidence everything.

Q. The familiarity between these two coaching staffs goes without saying. How do you describe the growth that you saw out of Tim as a coach during his time at Evanston, and what has it been like to track his progress and see him take confidence into their first Final Four ever as a D1 program?

KELLY AMONTE HILLER: I'm just really happy for Tim. Tim is my family, right. My kids were in his wedding. Like, we're very, very close. And I seem to be going up against all my close friends. Last round it was Ann. Now it's Tim.

But, you know, I'm just so happy for him and how -- I'm not surprised in the character of the person that he is and how he's just gotten his young women to just really love the game, love each other and compete really hard for Johns Hopkins. He's done an amazing job, and really happy for him.

But obviously tomorrow we're going to compete like crazy and so are they, and we know that. There will be the deepest level of respect between us.

Q. Three of the four teams in this Final Four are from the Big Ten. What do you think that says about the quality of the conference this year?

KELLY AMONTE HILLER: It's amazing. We really have



battled, and you know, I don't think it was always like that. So to see the progress and the confidence, to see how well we did outside of conference this year, it just really speaks volumes, and I think that's why you're seeing those results of three out of the four being Big Ten.

So, yeah, I know, Big Ten is excited. We're excited, and I hope all the teams compete hard.

Q. I'm not going to ask you do you have a 25-year plan, but as you look back at literally bringing a team back from the dead, and now where you are, do you ever think, how did this really happen?

KELLY AMONTE HILLER: You know, honestly, when I got the job, I was only 25. So I think I was just, you know in, that stage of my life of, you know, we're going to make this happen and no one going to stop us. And almost like naïve and confident at the same time.

It really worked. I think that once we kind of gained the momentum here at Northwestern, you know, it's just been so cool to see the progress. You know, I got hired by Rick Taylor, and then along came Mark Murphy who was an incredible mentor to me, and then Jim Phillips and Derrick Gragg, and now Mark Jackson.

It's just been really cool to see all of the great things that have happened in our department throughout that time and I just feel really blessed to be at this institution and to wear the N and carry the torch a little bit.

Q. Given that history of building the program, what does it mean to you to be having the tournament here this weekend?

KELLY AMONTE HILLER: I mean, I'm speechless to be honest. I never would have ever imagined this. Just knowing, you know, what you go through. As a lacrosse person, you always have to travel to the East Coast for recruiting tournaments. Everything is on the East Coast. And just this one time to have it out here, and to see how well the sport is supported out here and how seriously it is taken and how our athletic director really got behind us, Mark has been just amazing.

And then the amount of staff and people and volunteers that have really made this a special thing already, I really hope that it goes off tomorrow and young people in this area, and fans in this area, really get to see how awesome this sport is.

I have been -- my life has been changed by this sport. I feel like the luckiest person, and I feel honored to have, you know, brought myself to the Midwest and have had a

little bit of an impact on spreading it this -- this way.

Q. You talked before the quarterfinal about how you guys and Colorado have improved since the home opener. What can you take away from the first Johns Hopkins game earlier this season?

KELLY AMONTE HILLER: I think, you know, it's kind of interesting, like we were both in very challenging situations. I believe that the airport strike happened like the day that Johns Hopkins was coming out here, and they couldn't get through security, so they drove here. And we had been from Oregon to UNC, and then back here.

So it will be cool to see a fresh Hopkins and a fresh Northwestern on a week's rest and see us battle it out. I know they have improved a ton and found themselves. They have incredible personnel from top to bottom, and I think we've been finding ourselves, too. I think we're really, really battle-tested, and I hope that that proves to help us tomorrow night.

Q. Last year, I asked about how the community was taking to the event after being granted it. Here we are, a year later, and after traveling all the time in the past, what surprised you as the year wore on about how different it was to host instead of travel?

KELLY AMONTE HILLER: Yeah, it's crazy. You know, when you -- when you make the Final Four, it's like literally like a sprint of, you know, getting ready, travel plans, flights, meals, scouting, just everything, interviews, media, all of that stuff.

And I think, you know, just being at home there's a familiarity. You know where things are, what things are, what you need to access. So it's definitely been like something that's completely different for us. We've never been able to drive to a Final Four or anything.

So it's been, I would say, maybe a touch more restful. But we are just trying to enjoy it.

And I was lucky enough to college to play a Final Four at my institution, and so I think that I've drawn from some of those experiences that I had and done some things to just make this a special thing and really for the girls feel different even though we are at home.

Q. Northwestern has done a lot to help grow lacrosse outside of the East Coast, including at this Final Four. How important is geographic growth on college level in this sport in today's House/revenue-sharing era?

KELLY AMONTE HILLER: Yeah, it's really important. And



just the fact that we can, you know, have a successful championship weekend, and we can draw fans, it's really, really important to our sport.

And you know, we've been fortunate enough to go West beyond Northwestern in the Midwest, and we've got the mountain states. We've got the West Coast. We really want to see that stay but also grow.

That's -- that's challenging right now. I know this for a fact because I have a daughter who is a part of an emerging sport. She's a wrestler at the University of Iowa, and you know, just to see they are having like a slow trickle of growth, but I want to see that continue for our sport, too. I want it to be an attractive sport for fans, for players, and just really a sport that can relate to the masses.

And so I hope that, you know, we can put that on display this weekend. I think there's an incredible amount of talent across the four teams. Big personalities, like well-known names in the sport. I hope those players will shine through and carry the day, and you'll see new faces, too, shine through and carry the day, as well.

Q. Losing Olivia Adamson late in the season took away some of the options behind the net in particular. Was Taylor Lapointe the one who stepped up the most in her absence?

KELLY AMONTE HILLER: Yeah, losing Liv, I mean, we didn't lose her. She is still so ever-present as a leader. It was tough for her. But just her maturity level and how she handled the whole situation was truly incredible.

And yes, I think Taylor definitely did step up but I think it was also by committee. You don't replace someone like Olivia unless a lot of people step up.

I think it's just another rallying point for our team that, you know, Liv doesn't get to play, so we're playing for her.

Thanks for everyone to come out. Appreciate it. Looking forward to tomorrow night.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports