

2026 NCAA Women's Lacrosse Championship

Sunday, May 24, 2026

Chicago, Illinois, USA

Martin Stadium at Northwestern

Northwestern Wildcats

Kelly Amonte Hiller

Gabriella McColleston

Madison Taylor

Jenika Cuocco

Championship Game Media Conference

Northwestern 14, UNC 11

KELLY AMONTE HILLER: This was, you know, something special for our team, for our program, for our university. I am literally so grateful that Mark Jackson brought this to the Midwest for the first time, brought it to Northwestern, and all the people at Northwestern made this thing happen.

Special shout out to TC and everyone else that contributed to this. It was a really well-run event. I think all four teams had great experiences. I feel lucky that we found ourselves on top.

Credit to North Carolina for having a great season. I think that they are a phenomenal team, and I think that's what makes this even more special is we know we just beat a really fantastic group of lacrosse players and team in general.

I think, you know, at the beginning of the season, as I said in previous press conferences, like you know, you kind of doubt for a second, are we going to make the NCAA Tournament, and then after our Ohio State loss, to see what we've done, and to just go wire-to-wire after that moment, to have the big first win against North Carolina, which I think was a big confidence booster for us, and just kind of showed that when we believe in each other and we put our whole heart into it, we really can do anything we want to do.

And this group really stuck together, and were resilient through thick and thin, and I just could not be more proud of them. I just saw the Colorado coach on the field. Gave her a hug. And I said, "You know, this could have gone either way. You could have been here." I just think that



speaks to our resiliency. We've had a lot of tough moments and we never stopped believing.

So I really -- I'm just so proud of this group and so grateful for this day. It is really something special that I will never forget.

Q. On the field after the game, I think it was ESPN, you were doing an interview and you got emotional talking about Lucy. If you could explain a little bit more about that, what she means to the team and how Gabbie steps into a little bit larger of a role and has a day.

MADISON TAYLOR: Hold on, I'm going to get emotional. She's just like my best friend, and to see her go down like that, definitely, not, like, the best. Is worst-case scenario, honestly. She was literally on the ground and she was literally in so much pain and she was like, "Maddie, you got this."

I looked at her like, "We're going to do this for you," and we did. That's what we were saying all game long, every huddle, every time-out, "Do it for the people who can't right now."

And Gabbie just came in and stepped up. I knew she's capable of that. I've seen it every single day of practice and she amazes me every single day, a wicked shot that I've never seen before, and she stepped up today. I knew she was going to have one point go in.

Q. Obviously Mary drew a very difficult matchup coming into this game. How would you describe what you saw out of her and the defense as a whole against Carolina's attack?

JENIKA CUOCCO: I expected nothing less from Mary. She's a beast and a dog. She pushes us during the week in practice and she pushes us and our attackers to be even better. So it does not even surprise me that she did so great.

Defensively, we poured into each other, belief, everything we could, and I'm just so proud of their fight all game.

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Q. This is for all of you but Maddie, specifically. Having played in this national title game all four years, and to have your career wrap up in front of your fans with the national title, can you even articulate what that means to you?

MADISON TAYLOR: I mean, I don't know what else is better than that. That was, like, an ending that you would see in like a movie, I don't know, and it just happened in real life.

So I'm just so grateful for every single person that was able to have this Final Four here. There's so much that went into it that I've been talking about all week that I've never really gotten to see before because I usually just go to the Final Four and everything is set up for you already.

Now that we're here all week, seeing every little thing that goes into it and all these people running around for you to make sure everything is perfect, just makes you feel ten times more grateful to even be here.

Yeah, I just couldn't ask for anything more. This is probably the best day we're going to remember for the rest of our lives.

Q. How does it feel to have the break-out game in the biggest moment that you can imagine and what is it about this team that allowed you to step in and do that?

GABRIELLA MCCOLLESTER: Everyone around me and the team believed in myself and just kept telling me to stay ready and I stayed ready. Everyone was amazing. I just can't believe it. It's amazing.

Q. Was there a specific moment in time that you were able to settle in your respective roles, Gabbie attacking the game and going after those goals, and Maddie, falling back and being that facilitator and setting up your teammates on the with a?

MADISON TAYLOR: Yeah, I think what we talked about going into this game was just attack, attack, attack. And every time we got the ball, we just wanted to just go, go, go, and just like play really fast, and I think we're able to do that throughout the whole entire game.

So I was really proud that we stuck to the game plan.

GABRIELLA MCCOLLESTER: Yeah, I was going to say the same thing (laughing).

Q. You didn't give up a single goal in the fourth quarter. What does that mean to you?

JENIKA CUOCCO: Well, it's not me. It's my defense. They gave me the shots I wanted to see. They put their bodies on the line to get a call overturned, and they are just animals. I work for them and they work for me. It goes vice versa, and that is a reflection of them and the hard work they have done all season.

Q. You finish your Northwestern career tied with Izzy for the most points in history. Seems like might be the first time you're hearing that. How does that feel to be up there with her?

MADISON TAYLOR: I mean, it's the best. I got to learn from her throughout my first two years here, and I feel like I was able to take what I learned from her to the underclassmen now, which has been so awesome. She's just a beast, and I loved playing with her. That's crazy. I can't believe that. I mean, nothing better than that.

Q. You talked all tournament about just fighting to play one more game with this group. How would you rate this final game as a Northwestern Wildcat?

MADISON TAYLOR: Last game, best game. Last game, best game. I mean, that was just -- on our home field, just being able to like come together, and we knew it going to be hard. So like we said before, just loving the hard fight and we really did. Even when we were down, there was ups and downs, and when we were at a low point we just stuck together every single second. And it's so cool to see that belief we built up all year leading to that last game. It's really special.

Q. Was there a moment for each of you during the season to make you guys believe that you can do it again?

MADISON TAYLOR: I think we always knew this group was really, really special. But I think when we did get in those hard moments in the beginning of the season, we were just having trouble resetting and still keeping that energy up. So I think when that did happen, we were able to talk through a lot of things and we had a lot of self-reflection and a lot of team reflect. Once we're able to do that and like build that belief up, then I think we're able to do, like, anything, and nothing was going to stop us.

GABRIELLA MCCOLLESTER: Yeah, like everyone, I think, just took like a moment to look back. And everyone believes -- like after the Colorado game, nothing changed after that.

But I think everyone took a moment and we just kept believing.



JENIKA CUOCCO: I think we just took a second to ask ourselves what do we need to do better for the person next to us and not so much ourselves. That's why we continued to fight, even when we're down or when we're up, we're doing it for each other and not just ourselves.

Q. As a college freshman, you won a national title, and now closing your career with a national title, two different stages at Northwestern. Can you reflect on both of those experiences now that you've experienced both?

MADISON TAYLOR: Yeah, I feel like this is a really full-circle moment because I was in the same exact spot as Gabbie. That was literally me four years ago, and now I'm sitting up here four years later. I've just learned so much about myself and this team, and everything about this program, like, fits me so well.

So I'm just so grateful that I was able to come here and get this opportunity. It's literally been the best of my life. But this is the best way I could have ended it. So can't ask for anything more.

Q. How do you describe what Madison Taylor has meant to this program?

KELLY AMONTE HILLER: I just feel so blessed to have been able to mentor her. She is a really special person. You know, when we first recruited her, you know, both her parents are teachers from Long Island, and we just sold her that, like, this experience could really change your life, not just the lacrosse experience, but getting a degree at Northwestern. And to see, you know -- we knew when she submitted that she had so much potential but to see what she's done, not just in the games, but every single day at practice, she's a great teammate. Everybody loves her. And hardest worker in practice every day, just so coachable, and it's just been a great honor to be a part of her life and to have her family in our lives.

You know, I'm going to cherish our relationship for years and years and years to come.

Q. Talk about the season -- after the Ohio State loss -- reaching the pinnacle of today and how much the team has had to find its identity throughout the year?

KELLY AMONTE HILLER: I think it's incredible. Those adversities at the beginning of season were such a gift to us. That's what we said. We said we can either look at this as a "poor us," or we can look at this as massive gift, a gift and an opportunity to look at ourselves, reflect and find a way to really love each other more, be stronger

individually, be stronger collectively.

And that's not an easy thing to do, to have self-reflection and to really look deep. That's why I say this team is coachable, because I pushed them on that. That's one of my strengths. And they did. They looked deep. They never stopped believing. You know, that's really our motto, don't stop believing. That's my personal motto. That's my ringtone.

Q. When you think about this program has done under your tenure, winning the National Championship in Chicago on the lake what does it say about what the Midwest can mean to the sport of lacrosse?

KELLY AMONTE HILLER: Yeah, you know, I think -- I really hope that today, all those young kids in the stands get inspired to play at a really high level, and just really dream about being on that field. And that's where it starts. It's a little seed of belief in yourself, and that's what pushes you to go out and do wall ball in the backyard and go out and belief that you can be Maddie Taylor or Gabbie McColleston or Jenika.

I think that I'm just proud that we've been able to help grow this sport. I think there's a chance tomorrow that another Midwest team could win a championship on the men's side, and I think that means a lot for the growth and the belief that you can do things no matter where you're from, and you know, Gabbie being from Colorado, coming in here and having that day, this was a lot of Colorado players. UNC had some, too, that played phenomenal today, as well.

This game is universal. You can be any shape, any size, and you can do well. And I think that's the thing that I love about this game the most. You can be from anywhere. Doesn't matter.

Q. You had a great afternoon throwing the challenge flag today. I guess what was your reaction to when you saw the replays initially and what prompted you to throw the flag? Were you confident in those? And then the momentum that came as a result?

KELLY AMONTE HILLER: I just have to give credit to Eric Winchester from our IT department. Our first two rounds, we had a heck of a time with that replay and I didn't have access to it. And we got it figured out in the week off.

That was -- that was massive. I was very confident in both of the challenges because I had the review. I had different angles. And I was very confident that those plays would be called back.



So I just feel lucky that I was able to see those, and our director of operations, who is just a rock star, Keira, she makes that available to me all the time and makes sure it's working.

Yeah, it was definitely a momentum shift, especially that first one and we were able to, instead of going down 10-7, we got the ball, and, you know it, was a one-goal game right after that.

So I know that sometimes can be hard when you're on the other end of it, but it is a good thing that the refs have the opportunity to get it right.

Q. Some of your former players have graduated over the past two years didn't get to end their time here with the National Championship but they got to go out there and celebrate this win today on their home field. What does that mean to you?

KELLY AMONTE HILLER: Yeah, you know, it means a lot, right. I just saw four players from the 2022 team that had the heart-breaking loss against UNC in the -- in the semifinals. And you know, that was a big turning point, that game, for our program. We didn't win it but we got the belief right there that we could do it. And they were a big part of this, and there's so many alums. I mean, we had so many here today and I hope they are still there when I go back outside.

But I'm just, you know, so blessed to have so many, like, just really strong young women that believe in me, my staff, and the people here at Northwestern. This is a really special place. I'm just so excited that that was on display. I mean, the student section, are you kidding me? It was amazing. It was amazing.

Q. Northwestern today became the first team in 40 years to win an NCAA title at home. You won it in front of 8,316 fans, including a massive student section. How did the crowd motivate you and also the players throughout the tournament?

KELLY AMONTE HILLER: Yeah, I know a lot of people behind the scenes at Northwestern worked really hard to get those fans here, and it was -- as I said before in my press conference, I've never been in a situation where we've had the most fans. So to have the most fans, I know that was a huge asset to us. Their energy carried us, and I'm just so grateful for them all coming out and seeing, and I hope we have inspired more people to watch this game.

It was a great game today for the fans. I hope ESPN felt good about the broadcast, the sport, and the potential for this to grow on TV and beyond.

Q. The defensive performance, how would you describe the growth you've seen from Game 1 to the final game of the year?

KELLY AMONTE HILLER: Just amazing. I mean, obviously the performance Jenika had was incredible.

Maddie Smith was throwing up last night. Like the kid is just an absolute warrior. She wasn't feeling great. She just -- I got a cup of Gatorade for her at every time-out to make sure she was okay.

But that kid is the heart of toughness. Jaylen, she is just our leader. She's the speaking leader and, you know, just the job marry did today was truly incredible.

And then you see a freshman go in there, McKenzie Brown, and you see what she was made of, too. And all the midfielders as well, an Annabel Child, Noel, Kate, Hannah Rudolph. They just played together. They never stopped believing.

We were ready for both defenses, and I'm just really proud of them.

Q. Congrats on the win. Your fourth quarter zone was more effective than the rest of the game. Were there some wrinkles you held for the fourth?

KELLY AMONTE HILLER: Only it was the players kind of getting to know what they were doing and real willy looking that down. There was a couple things that they were running to be aware of. I think early on, they scored some just dodging-right-through-us goals, and we talked about that at time-outs, and then those low girls and Jaylen just really good a great job on all the action in the middle, which made everyone's job -- I have to give a lot of credit to Jaylen. Like she's so smart and, and then Mary and Maddie Smith are just like the field generals. So it wasn't anything like specific. I think it was just more getting to know what they were doing and being able to stop that.

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