SPORTS

FIELD HOCKEY: HUSKIES ADVANCE TO FINAL FOUR



The UConn Field Hockey team celebrates their advancement to the NCAA Final Four. They clinched their spot in the Semifinals after a nail-biting shootout against Princeton College on Friday. PHOTO COURTESY OF @UCONNFHOCKEY ON INSTAGRAM

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In the span of seven days, the University of Connecticut women's field hockey team went from the lowest point of its season to the brink of a national title.

After an upset loss to Old Dominion University in the Big East Championship snapped their 12-game win streak, the Huskies punched their ticket to the program's 16th national semifinal and first since 2017.

It marks the first Final Four appearance for head coach Paul Caddy, who took over in 2020 and fell in the Elite Eight in two of his three prior tournament runs.

At last, the Huskies got over the hump and did so in dramatic fashion, walking off both Lafayette and No. 5 Princeton in overtime and a penalty shootout, respectively.

The 2-1 overtime win over Lafayette College came on Friday afternoon, featuring a slow start but a down-to-the-wire finish.

UConn established itself as the clear aggressor out of the gate. Just six minutes in, Big East Co-Offensive Player of the Year Lucy Zich dribbled through a sea of Lafayette defenders. The freshman forward slapped a shot on target, forcing Leopards junior goalkeeper Addison Kahn into the splits for the save.

From there, four other Huskies fired off shots in the first quarter, including another attempt on goal by junior forward Paige Keller, who got off a backhanded push shot that Kahn knocked away with her right foot.

Halfway through the second quarter, Zich broke free once more, looking to snap the scoreless stalemate. Closing in on the cage, she flicked the ball right at a diving Kahn's chest.

UConn controlled the first half by holding Lafayette completely shotless. However, the Huskies couldn't capitalize on their seven total shots, three of which were on goal, leaving the score knotted at 0-0 at the break.

Approaching one minute remaining in the third quarter, Connecticut failed to convert on three additional shot attempts, while Lafayette remained shotless in the match. Yet, with 1:17 left to play in the period, the game completely shifted gears.

Another unsuccessful Zich shot attempt ultimately led to a penalty corner opportunity for the Huskies. It was just UConn's second corner of the match, down from its season average of 6.83 per game.

After ten missed shots across three quarters, a penalty corner goal in the 43rd minute broke the seal to put the Huskies on top. Junior defender Milo Hueker inserted to the stopper, sophomore midfielder Emma Larit, allowing sophomore defender Marlijn Swaan to score on a drive from the top of the circle that deflected off Kahn's left foot and found the back of the cage.

UConn held its 1-0 lead for just 35 seconds of game time, as Lafayette immediately responded off a penalty corner of its own near the end of the third quarter to convert on its first shot of the match.

Senior goalkeeper Natalie McKenna made the initial save for the Huskies, yet the ball deflected off her leg guard all the way to the top of the circle and fell into the lap of junior forward/midfielder Laila Pasic, who drove in the equalizer with just 33 seconds remaining in the period.

Both squads searched for the go-ahead goal for the entire fourth quarter but were unable to find the back of the cage.

Lafayette seriously threatened with two penalty-corner chances, resulting in three missed shots with seven minutes remaining in regulation, but did not score. UConn did not get a single shot off in the period, surviving to reach a sudden-victory overtime.

In overtime, the script flipped once again, and the Huskies regained their dominance from the first half, holding the Leopards shotless.

On its third penalty corner chance and sixth shot of the overtime period, UConn at last scored the goal that would send them to the second round of the NCAA Tournament.

Caddy adjusted to have senior midfielder Olivia McKenna insert the penalty corner. Both Zich and freshman midfielder Lena Reiche fired off back-to-back shots that got blocked, as the ball found sophomore forward Abby Davdison's stick waiting on the weak side, where, on the third attempt, she raised her stick for the game-winning tap-in.

The victory propelled the Huskies to their matchup against Princeton on Sunday, in a match that ended nearly identically to the program's first meeting this season back in September.

The halftime box score was sparse, as the squads exchanged one unsuccessful penalty corner each in the first half, marking the only two shots in the match.

The second half saw an uptick in shots, but the scoreless stalemate stood for the entirety of regulation. Princeton held UConn to just one penalty corner all game, which came in the first quarter, completely shutting down the Huskies' offensive approach. It has been the penalty corner that has made up for a third of UConn's goals this season, but the Tigers were not letting the Huskies get those looks.

Much different from the overtime period against Lafayette, UConn was the team to go shotless and had to fend off three Princeton shots to survive and advance to the penalty shootout.

Princeton posed a serious threat in the 64th minute, when the Tigers got a pair of shots off in the matter of seconds. Natalie McKenna saved the first, and the Huskies' defense blocked the second to preserve the tie.

Just like the first time the programs met this season, the match headed to a shootout; however, this one with higher stakes, a true win-or-go-home scenario.

Davidson led off the shootout for the Huskies and missed wide. Sophomore midfielder Caitlin Thompson followed for Princeton, slapping a backhanded shot over a diving N. McKenna giving the Tigers a 1-0 lead.

Reiche went next for UConn and flicked the ball over a diving freshman goalkeeper, Josie Bianco.

Natalie McKenna saved the next two Princeton attempts, while Zich wrapped a shot around Bianco to put the Huskies on top 2-1.

Olivia McKenna helped out her twin sister in goal by pushing the ball through the legs of Bianco with her back to the net, extending the advantage to 3-1 in favor of the Huskies.

Princeton's senior defender, Hope Delaney, put one past Natalie McKenna to make the shootout 3-2.

Needing a make to advance to the Final Four, freshman midfielder Charlotte Ritter stepped up and nutmegged Bianco for the second consecutive time to push the shootout score to 4-2, clinching the victory for UConn to keep it dancing.

The Huskies will travel to Louisville, Kentucky, to take on top-seeded Northwestern, which also just advanced via penalty shootout, on Friday at 1 p.m.