

The Daily Tar Heel

NEW ERA SAME ERIN



PHOTOS BY GRACE RICHARDS DTH DESIGN BY HAILEY PATTERSON, CARSON ELM-PICARD

UNC field hockey wins fifth title in six years

COLUMN

A letter to Matson

By Caroline Wills
Senior Writer
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She never wanted this year to be “the Erin show.”

In recent press conferences, Erin Matson has been asked about the significance of this season, her emotions — all the buzz from the national media. Each time, she’s smiled politely and redirected the attention to her team.

“I never want it to be about me,” Matson said on Tuesday. “And at the same time, I’m lucky enough to have been given the opportunity to build a platform where I can spread field hockey.”

Now, following UNC’s 11th national title — coming in the 23-year-old’s first year at the helm — this season doesn’t just cement Matson as a coaching legend.

The former four-time national champion became the youngest collegiate head coach to win an NCAA title. But most importantly, she’s laid the groundwork for women across college athletics to go directly into coaching — to have the confidence to ask their athletic director for the job they truly want.

UNC’s national championship wasn’t just a win for the program. It was a win for all athletes

SEE MATSON PAGE 2

TIEBREAKER

Heck delivers clutch penalty shootout performance

The team’s leading point scorer sealed UNC’s victory

By Caroline Wills
Senior Writer
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With a national championship on the line, Ryleigh Heck spun her hockey stick in her hands, placed the tip on the turf and waited for the whistle.

Then, the sophomore forward was off. Dribbling inside the circle and putting her back to Northwestern goalkeeper Annabel Skubisz — regarded as one of the top goalies in the nation — Heck spun around and swept the shot around Skubisz and toward the cage. The ball pounded against the goal’s backboard.

What the Heck. “My mind went blank,” she said. “I literally don’t even remember spinning or scoring. I just remember being with my teammates, cheering.”

In a nail-biting penalty shootout, No. 1 UNC took down No. 2 Northwestern in the NCAA Championship, 2-1. With Heck’s goal sealing the victory, North Carolina defended its championship crown and earned its 11th title in program history. Given that Heck led the Tar Heels this season in points, it was only fitting the game was ultimately in her hands.

“Ryleigh likes to make it exciting,” head coach Erin Matson

said. “She’s so creative. She’s hard to defend because you can watch everything she does, then go out there and maybe win one v. one, but she’ll learn throughout the process. She’s going to do something you don’t expect. She gets the same outcome doing it 50, 100 different ways.”

The final stroke was a poetic ending for Heck. It was also a moment of redemption.

Matson said her team’s shots were slightly off target and Skubisz kept coming up with big saves. The first-year head coach called Skubisz “one of the best goalkeepers in the country.”



Throughout regulation and both overtime periods, the Tar Heels outshot the Wildcats 14-8, but struggled to find the back of the cage after first-year forward Charly Bruder rocketed in a shot off a penalty

SEE IT WAS PAGE 3

BY THE NUMBERS

17 Matson’s age when she joined the U.S. national team

5 National championships as both a player and a coach

22 Matson’s age when she became the youngest DI head coach

557 Matson’s winning percentage in her first season as head coach

117-11 Matson’s record in her time at UNC

“About time for another Sunday Funday.”

ERIN MATSON

The Daily Tar Heel

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Matson, this win is about you

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who don't want to wait years or decades before coaching at the Division I level.

Because if Matson can do it, someone else can too.

While Matson's success this season may have come as a surprise to outsiders, everyone close to the program knew she was the right person for the job — especially her predecessor.

"She's got it all," Karen Shelton told The Daily Tar Heel after the championship win. "She's really smart, articulate, mature and charismatic. She's smart. She knows the game inside and out. She's relatable. I knew it as the coach — you can tell when you have somebody that's special."

When she was growing up, Matson said field hockey taught her a myriad of lessons.

Traveling with the U.S. team as a high schooler, she frequently had to miss class and communicate with her teachers about absences and make-up work.

She had to learn how to take care of her body.

She had to always play faster and be stronger than her opponents.

She said this job wasn't any different than that.

"I've had to grow up — I guess you could say even faster," she said. "But it's not the first time. It's not the first time that I've had to prove to myself that I can do that and take it on."

She's had to learn how to maintain a brave face on the field, too.

As a player, she could hole up in her bedroom and simmer in her emotions.

Now, she has to keep the team



DTH/LARA CROCHIK

Current UNC field hockey head coach Erin Matson and former head coach Karen Shelton talk after the NCAA Championship game against Northwestern at Karen Shelton Stadium on Sunday.

grounded after wins and build up their confidence after losses.

"Obviously, as you guys know, I'm very much learning this whole coaching thing," Matson said after Sunday's win with a laugh as she donned a fresh "2023 NCAA NATIONAL CHAMPIONS" hat.

Just a few hours before, during the title game, she paced along the sidelines.

With her hands in her pockets, she was mostly stoic — only releasing the occasional yell of

encouragement or exasperation.

She portrayed a calm face for the sake of her players, but after the game, she admitted she was feeling the exact opposite.

In fact, her hands were shaking. She said she was freaking out.

"I think that she is showing people all over the world that she's doing something impossible," sophomore forward Ryleigh Heck said. "And it's proven because we just won a national championship, and I give her full

credit. I'm so, so grateful that she is our coach and could not pick anyone else."

Eventually, there will be other people like Matson — other young players-turned-coaches who garner even more accolades.

It's no longer quite as impossible. She's made sure of it.

Sorry, Coach, but this story had to be about you.

X: @carolinewills03

Congratulations to the UNC women's field hockey team on winning the 2023 NCAA championship!



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DEFENSIVE STAND

'Not done yet': Tar Heels take down Virginia in Final Four

The 2-0 victory is North Carolina's fifth shutout this season

By Caroline Wills

Senior Writer
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Almost three minutes into the NCAA tournament semifinals, Virginia drew the first penalty corner of the game.

UVA sophomore midfielder Daniela Mendez-Trendler inserted to the UVA players at the top of the circle, who passed it between each other before junior back Jans Croon launched the ball towards the goal. UNC graduate goalkeeper Maddie Kahn took the brunt of the shot with her body and trapped the ball with her legs. Denied.

A few seconds later, UVA recorded another penalty corner and, once again, Kahn used her full body to make the save.

Despite Virginia's opportunity to set the tone early by converting its first two penalty corners, the North Carolina backline held steady. Then, in the seventh minute, UNC sophomore forward Ryleigh Heck scored, and the No. 1 Tar Heels never looked back — recording a 2-0 victory over No. 5 Virginia on Friday to advance to their second consecutive NCAA championship game.

Containing UVA on key penalty corner opportunities helped UNC



Senior back Ciana Riccardo (8) and sophomore back Grace Pottebaum (16) defend the goal during the NCAA tournament semifinal game against Virginia in Karen Shelton Stadium on Friday.

DTH/GRACE RICHARDS

post its fifth shutout this season.

"[It was] definitely really important to set the tone for the game and show UVA, 'Hey, you're not just gonna come down here, get a corner and score,'" Kahn said. "It put them on the back foot."

Minutes before the match began, during team introductions, video clips from UNC's 3-2 loss to Virginia during the regular season played on the video board

of Karen Shelton Stadium. On Friday, the Tar Heels refused to suffer a similar fate.

UNC head coach Erin Matson said that the team takes pride in its defensive penalty unit, and the Tar Heels displayed that on Friday — becoming a "brick wall" — thanks to their preparation.

Four of Virginia's six goals during its NCAA tournament run came off penalty corners, so

UNC senior back Romea Riccardo said that the Tar Heels focused all week on getting stops off the corner. While UVA managed to outshoot North Carolina 3-1 in the first 15 minutes of play, Matson said the two stops early in the game were crucial in setting the UNC's momentum.

"[I was] just thinking about, 'Hey, I have to do my role, the other four girls in the cage with

me will do their role and we'll do our best,'" Kahn said. "I can't ask for anything more."

With the Tar Heels up 2-0 in the final quarter of play, the Cavaliers grabbed one final penalty opportunity in the 49th minute.

But this time, rather than a stop from Kahn, it was Riccardo who stepped up for UNC's defense.

Sprinting from the goal line to the top of the circle, she dove toward Croon with her stick outstretched, blocking the shot before it could be fully released into the air. The ball ricocheted out of bounds and the Cavaliers didn't break into the circle for the rest of the game.

"It's actually something that I thrive off of," Riccardo said. "I kinda wanna get hit. I don't want the ball to go through me. So honestly, if I can get a touch, I'm diving for it. I'm putting my body on the line, my stick on the line, everything that I can so it does not go past me."

While Riccardo said the team is excited to advance in the tournament, their celebration will only last about five minutes. Then, it's back to work. There's one more team to prepare for — the one-loss, No. 2 Northwestern Wildcats.

"We're not done yet," Riccardo said. "Yes, we're going to the national championship, but we haven't done shit yet."

X: @carolinewills03

'It was her turn to end the game'

Continued from Page 1

But with less than three minutes remaining in the first overtime period, Heck had an early opportunity to put the game away for good.

It didn't go as planned.

Awarded a penalty stroke in the 68th minute, Heck stood in the middle of the circle and scooped the ball towards the left side of the cage. The shot ricocheted off Skubisz's stick, and the Northwestern bench erupted, screaming and banging against the wall of their sideline in celebration of the save.

Play would have to continue for a little longer.

Despite the missed stroke, Heck said she relied on a lesson from her dad, Roy Heck. After a mistake, he always told her to repeat one simple mantra: "Next play."

"Sometimes they don't all fall," Matson said. "And no one remembers those if you're sitting here with the national championship hat on and smiling."

The remaining minutes of overtime dwindled down to zero, and the sophomore had two more opportunities to ensure that no one would remember her missed stroke. For the first time this season,



Sophomore forward Riley Heck (12) dribbles the ball past the goalkeeper during a penalty shootout at the NCAA Championship game against Northwestern at Karen Shelton Stadium on Sunday.

DTH/LARA CROCHIK

UNC's matchup was decided on penalty strokes. It was also the first time in 29 years the NCAA Championship would be decided in a shootout. While some players might have crumbled under the pressure, Heck didn't. In fact, she said a shootout is one of her favorite things.

"For me, I thrive off of adrenaline," Heck said. "So I love it."

Although she had yet to experience a shootout in her two seasons with the Tar Heels before Sunday, the New Jersey native said she had a lot of experience in that situation. With the U.S. U-21 Women's National Team in April, Heck put the first point on the board in a shootout against Argentina, helping the U.S. team take home the gold medal in the final of the 2023 Junior Pan American Championships.

Channeling that experience, Heck's behind-the-back shot in

the first round of the shootout slammed into the back of the cage. Then, after graduate goalkeeper Maddie Kahn made her fourth consecutive save, Heck had one more chance to win it all.

"I was happy that I was able to go first and kind of put it on Ryleigh's shoulder," Kahn said. "It was her turn to end the game."

Once the final Northwestern stroke bounced off Kahn's legs, the door was opened. With all eyes in Karen Shelton Stadium on the Tar Heels, Matson turned to her leading point-scorer and had just one thing to say.

"Go win a national championship."

X: @carolinewills03

ROAD TO VICTORY



DTH/GRACE RICHARDS

The UNC field hockey team celebrates after winning the 2023 ACC Championship in the Nov. 3, 2023 game against Duke in Charlottesville, Virginia.

The path to UNC's 11th national championship

The Tar Heels won their 26th conference title in November

By Jarrett Kidd

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The North Carolina field hockey team closed out its 2023 national championship run on a seven-game winning streak, finishing with an 18-3 record.

UNC opened up the season by defeating Michigan in the ACC-Big Ten Challenge. After going undefeated in 2022, the Tar Heels' hopes of repeating a perfect season were cut short in their second game, falling to Iowa, 3-2, in overtime. UNC led with just over six minutes remaining, but Iowa tied the game on a penalty corner and the Hawkeyes struck again just less than two minutes into overtime.

After defeating Penn and Princeton in the ACC-Ivy

Challenge, the Tar Heels beat Old Dominion, Louisville, Wake Forest, Appalachian State, Saint Joseph's and Boston College. Then, the squad suffered its second loss of the season to Liberty in double overtime. Despite being tied at halftime, UNC ultimately conceded its second straight game to Liberty at Karen Shelton Stadium.

The Tar Heels then defeated Syracuse and UAlbany before losing to Virginia. After accruing a 2-0 lead at halftime, UNC surrendered three unanswered goals in the third quarter in Charlottesville.

North Carolina's seven-game win streak started with a senior night victory over Duke. Then, in the ACC tournament semifinal, the Tar Heels defeated Virginia, followed by a 2-0 shutout over Duke to claim the program's 26th conference title. UNC defeated William & Mary, Harvard, Virginia and Northwestern to complete its NCAA tournament run.

X: @j_kidd03



DTH/LARA CROCHIK

Riley Heck (12) hits the ball during the NCAA Championship against Northwestern at the Karen Shelton Stadium on Sunday.

A look at the pivotal players behind UNC's championship run

PAITYN

WIRTH



In her final season in Chapel Hill, Wirth – a member of the U.S. National Team – made a noticeable impact on both sides of the ball. She racked up seven goals and 10 assists, playing in every game this season. In 734 minutes of playing time, she inserted the majority of North Carolina's penalty corners, proving to be a critical part of one of the strongest aspects of the Tar Heels' game.

Notably, the Thompsettown, Pa., native tallied seven assists during the NCAA tournament and scored two goals during the 4-game stretch. All of her season-high statistics came during the NCAA tournament, including a career-high four assists in the Tar Heels' second-round win over Harvard, showing how crucial Wirth was to the team when it mattered the most.

Throughout four seasons as a Tar Heel, Wirth has notched 20 goals and 30 assists through 2,511 minutes on the turf. Her versatility helped boost the Tar Heels to their 11th national championship.

As a sophomore, Heck tallied 13 goals and eight assists, ranking second on the team in both of these categories. A daughter of former James Madison field hockey player Kerry Heck, she was often a primary scoring option, typically found right in front of the net to clean up penalty corners or receive a pass. Her goal-scoring abilities were crucial in filling the offensive gap that now-head coach Erin Matson left after her final season in 2022.

Heck contributed either an assist or a goal in the first three games of the NCAA tournament and scored the deciding shootout goal in the title game. Throughout the season, she started in each of North Carolina's 21 games this year, tallying 940 minutes of action.

Heck, a member of the 2022-23 U.S. National Team, won gold as a member of the U.S. U-21 team at the 2023 Junior Pan American Championships earlier this year. In addition to these accolades, she was crowned the ACC tournament MVP after scoring the game-winning goal against Duke in the ACC title game.

RYLEIGH

HECK



SIETSKA

BRÜNING



Brüning played 1,105 minutes during the 2023 season, including all 80 in Sunday's championship game. She recorded two goals and four assists this season.

The sophomore midfielder is tough. Starting in all 42 games of her career, she has helped fortify the Tar Heel defense. Goalkeeper Maddie Kahn described her as a "brick wall."

Brüning is from The Hague, the Netherlands, and has accumulated an impressive resume back home, too. She competed on the Dutch U-21 team, and in April 2022, she represented the Netherlands as a member of the Dutch National Team at the NIL Pro League games in India.

A first-team All-ACC selection in 2023, Brüning was a pillar for the Tar Heels in 2023. She was named to the All-ACC second team as a first-year. The two-time All-ACC performer came up big for the Tar Heels in the NCAA tournament.

Brüning's second goal of the season came at a crucial moment in UNC's victory over Virginia in the semifinals. Brüning scored off an assist from Romea Riccardo on a pivotal penalty corner that helped seal North Carolina's spot in the NCAA title game on Sunday.

Now, she is a two-time NCAA champion.

ROMEA

RICCARDO



During her final season in Chapel Hill, Riccardo, a longtime defensive stalwart for the Tar Heels, recorded eight assists in 1,261 minutes.

Riccardo transcended the typical college career and was able to tack on two more years after redshirting her first-year in 2018 and taking advantage of another extra year due to COVID-19.

Her time as a Tar Heel hasn't just been defined by its longevity – it's been defined by rings. Riccardo is a five-time NCAA champion and a six-time ACC champion. Three of those national championship years were undefeated seasons for UNC.

Riccardo is the oldest of eight siblings and she even brought part of her family with her to Chapel Hill – her younger sister Ciana is a senior on the field hockey team at UNC as well.

Dixon, a Cary native and team captain, was a leader on all parts of the field this season. She able to put the ball in the cage five times and facilitate goals through her nifty passing, and was also a hound on the defensive side of the ball. The midfielder could often be seen sprinting from one side of the field to the other in pursuit of a steal.

The senior started in all 21 of the Tar Heels' games this year and tallied 1,160 minutes on the field. Notably, Dixon accounted for a career-high three assists in North Carolina's second-round NCAA tournament win against Harvard.

Dixon has earned numerous national accolades, including being named to the 2023-24 U.S. National Team, the U.S. U-21 Junior Pan American Championship team and the U.S. Junior World Cup team.

KATIE

DIXON



LISA

SLINKERT



Slinkert recorded five goals in 443 minutes during the 2023 season, including 54 minutes in the championship game.

The junior midfielder has never experienced a postseason that didn't end in a matchup with Northwestern. Since falling in her first ever NCAA tournament game in a 2-0 first round lost against the Wildcats, Slinkert and the Tar Heels have gone undefeated – including claiming back-to-back national titles – over the very team that sent them home in 2021.

Like Brüning, Slinkert is from The Hague, the Netherlands, and had the chance to represent the Dutch as a member of the U-15 National Team for two years.

Slinkert helped set the tone for the Erin Matson era, scoring two of UNC's three goals in its 3-2 season opening win over Michigan. She even netted the program's first goal under Matson.

Two of her five goals this season came during the first two rounds of the NCAA Tournament. Slinkert has been a steady force for the Tar Heels during her tenure, and she played a large part in helping UNC claim yet another title – the second of her career.

MADDIE

KAHN



After earning her first start on Sept. 1 at Penn – the third game of the year – Kahn quickly carved out a permanent starting role on the team and finished the season with 54 saves.

Before arriving to Chapel Hill, Kahn was a four-year starter as goalkeeper for Lehigh, where she was the Patriot League Goalkeeper of the Year her sophomore year. So when her number was called by Matson early in the season, Kahn was ready to protect the cage for the Tar Heels.

The graduate student from Ocean City, N.J., came up with two instrumental saves on back-to-back penalty corners in UNC's 2-0 semifinal win over Virginia.

Kahn played a massive role in closing out the 2023 NCAA Championship for the Tar Heels, protecting the cage during the second shootout and opening the door for Ryleigh Heck to score the winning goal.

When Northwestern tried to dethrone the defending champions on Sunday, Kahn was consistently there to deny them. She came up with three saves in the title game against the Wildcats to earn MVP honors and help UNC claim its 11th NCAA Championship.

MOST OUTSTANDING PLAYER

Graduate goalkeeper is 'a solid rock'

Maddie Kahn comes up big in penalty shootout to close the game

By Jarrett Kidd

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Standing on the goal line, graduate goalkeeper Maddie Kahn could do nothing but hope.

There were three minutes left in the second overtime period of the national title game, and the score was tied. Northwestern forward Olivia Bent-Cole had just received a pass at the center line and turned the engines on. As Bent-Cole raced down the field, Wildcat midfielder Lauren Wadas paced her on the opposite side of the turf. With three UNC defenders trailing, Kahn faced a 2-on-1 situation and knew the game was in her hands.

When Bent-Cole passed the ball to a wide-open Wadas, Kahn sprinted out of the cage and slid to block the ball and save the game.

"I saw I had one defender left and I was honestly just hoping that Olivia Bent-Cole was going to pass it across cage," Kahn said. "I saw that Lauren Wadas received the ball head-down and I was just praying that she was going to shoot it and it was going to hit me and go out of the circle."

Kahn held steadfast in UNC's 2-1 national championship win over Northwestern. After recording eight saves in North Carolina's previous NCAA tournament games, she tallied three saves — including two

in the second overtime period — on Sunday to earn Most Outstanding Player honors. In the clutch, Kahn denied four Northwestern players during shootouts to allow the Tar Heels to hoist another championship trophy.

Despite being the go-to keeper the entire season, Kahn put on a UNC uniform for the first time in August. She was previously a four-year starter for Lehigh, earning Patriot League Goalkeeper of the Year honors during her sophomore season.

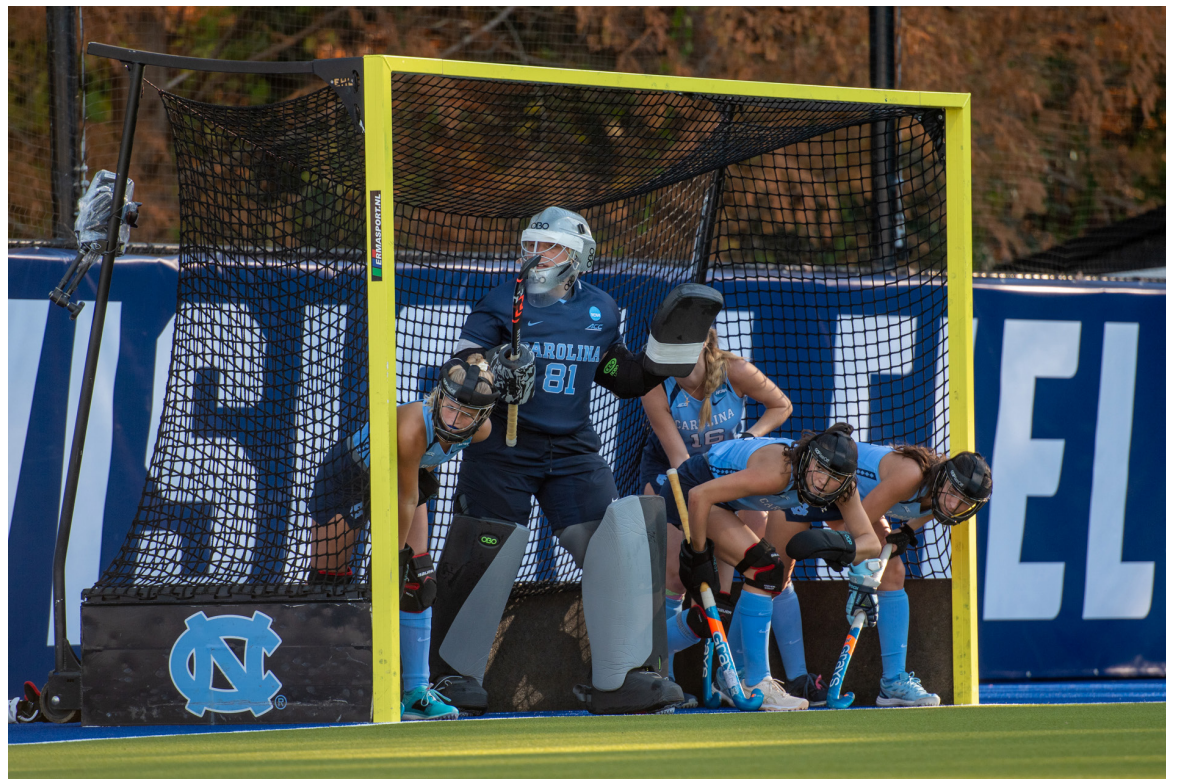
After winning the 2022 Patriot League Championship with the Mountain Hawks, Kahn entered the transfer portal. She soon received an e-mail from former UNC head coach Karen Shelton and was immediately excited about the prospect of joining such a competitive program.

"Seeing an email in my inbox from Coach Shelton was absolutely insane," Kahn said. "I ran around my house and said 'Guys look what I got, Coach Shelton sent me an email!'"

Kahn's grit was apparent throughout the whole season. She saw the field in 20 of UNC's matchups this year and started in 19. Through 1,147 minutes of playing time, Kahn tallied 54 saves and earned a 0.711 save percentage.

The one game Kahn did not play in was the first of the season. In UNC's opening matchup against Michigan, junior goalkeeper Abigail Taylor was the only protector of the cage. After that game, the role was only assigned to Kahn.

Head coach Erin Matson said she did not take this goalkeeping



Graduate goalkeeper Maddie Kahn (81) stands with her teammates during a penalty corner at the NCAA Championship game at Karen Shelton Stadium on Sunday. DTH/LARA CROCHIK

decision lightly: "Every season, these guys know whether they're a senior, fifth-year, or freshman, playing time is never guaranteed — it's earned."

"At the end of the day, Maddie stepped up in those big moments early on and has been able to withstand that the entire season," Matson said. "There was never a doubt in our mind that she wasn't going to be a solid rock back there."

After her game-saving stop against a two-player Wildcat fast break, Kahn said she felt confident. Her save served as a "momentum swing" for the remainder of the game and instilled faith in her teammates that they would walk away with the program's 11th national championship.

Kahn went from a newcomer to a national champion, and was arguably the most important factor

in UNC's national title victory. And if the scene of her leaping across the field at Karen Shelton Stadium following the win was any indication, Kahn won't be forgetting this game anytime soon.

"Moments like these are why anyone comes to UNC for field hockey," she said.

X: @j_kidd03



Maddie Kahn (81) smiles with her teammates after the NCAA Championship game against Northwestern at Karen Shelton Stadium on Sunday. DTH/LARA CROCHIK



Maddie Kahn (81) hugging head coach Erin Matson after the NCAA Championship game on Sunday. DTH/LARA CROCHIK



Maddie Kahn (81) blocks a penalty shot during the NCAA Championship game against Northwestern on Sunday. DTH/GRACE RICHARDS



Maddie Kahn (81) poses with her trophy after the NCAA Championship game against Northwestern. DTH/LARA CROCHIK



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PHOTO ESSAY

FIELD HOCKEY SCHOOL.

Head coach Erin Matson and the UNC field hockey team secured its 11th national championship in front of a home crowd at Karen Shelton Stadium on Sunday. The win over Northwestern followed a lengthy battle.

After a goal in the 32nd minute from first-year forward Charly Bruder was matched by Wildcat midfielder Peyton Halsey in the 43rd minute, regulation ended with a 1-1 tie.

Then, following a scoreless double overtime, UNC won the national championship — due in large part to graduate goalkeeper Maddie Kahn’s four saves and sophomore forward Ryleigh Heck’s game-winning shootout goal.

This marks Matson’s fifth national championship, making her the first Tar Heel to win a national championship for UNC as both a player and a coach. With the win, Matson also became the youngest coach to win a NCAA Division I national championship at 23 years old.

Postgame celebrations included rushing the field to embrace Kahn, dumping a cooler of Powerade on Matson’s head and hugs shared between loved ones and supporters. After the celebrations, players were awarded their celebratory hats and shirts and given their trophies. Kahn was then announced as the tournament’s Most Outstanding Player, joining Heck, Bruder and senior captain Katie Dixon in the All-Tournament team accolades.



PHOTOS BY LARA CROCHIK