

The W&L Men's Soccer Team Recounts Its Historic Season

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By Teddy Jacobsen

LEXINGTON – The home crowd erupted in cheers as sophomore midfielder Grant McCarty gracefully received a pass in the 86th minute and punched it in for the go-ahead score.

This piercing goal just inside the left post also punched the 2021 Washington and Lee men's soccer team's ticket to the Sweet 16 in back-to-back tournaments.

But the Generals didn't stop there. The squad reached the Final Four of the NCAA Division III Men's Soccer Tournament a week later for the first time in program history and cemented their place in the history books with countless other accomplishments.

The numbers and accolades, while impressive, only scratch the surface of what made this team so successful. A culmination and combination of talent and chemistry provided the backbone for a historic season that can be sustained for many years to come.

This season was head coach Michael Singleton's eighth year at W&L. Over that time, he has led the Generals to 112 wins, three Old Dominion Athletic Conference (ODAC) titles and five trips to the NCAA tournament.

"In the time that I've been here, we've taken steps forward every single year and that's what culminated in this year being so good," Singleton said in an interview.

The Generals lost in overtime in the Sweet 16 to Tufts University in 2019, who went on to win the whole tournament. Senior captain and All-American Jack Rawlins said the program found a silver lining in the defeat.

"That was really the turning point for the team to realize that we can do this," Rawlins said.

The 2020 season unfortunately halted this progress made by the Generals because of the pandemic. The team played a shortened schedule in the spring and lost in the quarterfinals of the ODAC tournament.

Assistant Coach Jon Freeman said the team was not allowed to scrimmage or do many team-oriented drills because of the COVID-19 restrictions.

Junior All-American Michael Kutsanzira said many players were quarantined on and off throughout the season, which made chemistry difficult to maintain.

"We didn't have the ability to do that much team bonding," Kutsanzira said.

Singleton reminded his players that the game is a privilege. He told his team that they should appreciate the opportunities that they have and take advantage of it.

"COVID can't take away your ability to become a better player," Singleton said.

Singleton said this year felt much more normal, which allowed the team to get back on track.

Singleton said during preseason, the team meets to discuss goals for each particular year. This season, he said the team ultimately decided to legitimately strive for a national championship and perpetuate their desire for improvement.

Kutsanzira said a normal season really helped him get closer with his teammates.

“I saw them literally six days a week,” Kutsanzira said. “You spend so much time together, and I thought that was a really positive thing for me.”

Singleton said this team is special because of the depth of its roster. Rawlins said this really helps them in games as well as practices.

“I think the better the players are you’re surrounded by, the more you’re pushed to do better yourself.” Rawlins said.

The team’s chemistry and talent were reflected consistently throughout their victories in tough nonconference games. Most notably, the Generals romped Centre College, who made the Final Four in the 2019 national tournament.

W&L went on to record an undefeated regular season where they even topped the national rankings.

Although a number one ranking was extremely encouraging for the team, Rawlins said the excitement faded into the background because their focus was on one game at a time. Kutsanzira said they didn’t let the ranking give them a big head.

“The pressure is on you to execute because everyone wants to beat you,” Kutsanzira said.

Both coaches reminded their players to put the ranking into perspective.

“The ranking doesn’t mean anything until the last game is played,” Freeman said.

The team finished their season last Friday after a heartbreaking overtime loss to Connecticut College in the national semifinals. Kutsanzira, who was named to the all-tournament first team, received a controversial red card in the final minutes of regulation. The team then had to finish the game with only ten players.

Connecticut College went on to beat Amherst College in penalty kicks in the finals the next day.

The Generals finished the season with a 18-2-2 overall record, which was one win shy of tying the program record set in 2000. The team's 0.864 winning percentage was also the second-best in program history.

This year’s team did achieve program records such as best NCAA tournament finish and total goals scored. The team scored 70 goals throughout the season and held their opponents to just 19.

On an individual level, the squad had three players with national All-American team selections, which is a first for the program. Rawlins received a first-team honor and Kutsanzira and junior Samuel Bass both earned a second-team honor.

Kutsanzira had a record-setting junior season. He had an ODAC-high 13 assists, which is also a program record. His 13 assists were also tied for the fourth-most in all of Division III men's soccer.

Sophomore forward Adrian Zimmerman had a standout performance in the national tournament with 11 goals and 22 points, breaking the all-time Division III single-tournament goals and points records.

Senior goalkeeper and captain Michael Nyc finished his career with a program-record 0.65 goals-against average in over 5,000 minutes played.

Kutsanzira put all these statistics and titles into perspective in his interview.

"People will remember us for how much we won, the history and the records we made," Kutsanzira said. "But I think for us, the friendships made the season what it was."

Both coaches said that they are optimistic about the future of their program. Singleton said the team will be one of the favorites to win the national championship next year.

Freeman said despite the loss of three great senior captains in Rawlins, Nyc and defender Seth Chapman, the team is adding a lot of talent with next year's class.

"It's a bright future," Freeman said. "The guys just have to grab it and run with it like each team before them."