

Hokies steal conference crown



AARON PALSGROVE | LIBERTY CHAMPION
RALLY—Luke Branham scored seven goals.

The Liberty Flames' men's lacrosse team ended its season with a 12-2 record, but fell short of the conference crown. After a dominant victory over the Tennessee Volunteers in the first round of the ALC Championship, the Flames were defeated in double overtime by Virginia Tech 14-13 in the ALC Championship game.

By Aaron Palsgrove
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"To Tennessee's credit, they were hitting everything that they were shooting," Flames Head Coach Kyle McQuillan said after game one. "They were on fire. They were moving the ball well, everything was rolled. And honestly, in the first half, it just didn't feel like it was kind of going our way, and we weren't getting a lot of the bounces. It didn't feel like Liberty lacrosse. Fortunately, there's two halves every game, and we were able to have a second half that was

a little bit more indicative of what Liberty lacrosse is like."

The Flames led the Volunteers by just one at halftime, but the Flames all season have been a second-half team. Led by their superstar senior attackman Cooper Branham, Liberty soared to a dominant lead.

Branham ended the first game with four goals, and he wasn't the only Branham to do so. Luke Branham, the freshman attackman and the younger brother of Cooper, also ended the matchup with Tennessee with four goals.

The Flames, after being down one goal early in the third, defeated the Volunteers 20-11, advancing to face Virginia Tech in the championship game. The Branham brothers were responsible for eight of the Flames' 20 goals, with three more coming off the hot track of sophomore midfielder Will Geary.

"I think it was everybody just kind of flipping the switch," Luke Branham said. "But I think our goalie (junior) Eric Warnstrom just made a huge difference. He was stopping everything, giving Tennessee no momentum. That makes our job really easy on offense (knowing) that they're having trouble scoring on the other end. It gives us lots of security."

The matchup with the Virginia Tech Hokies came under a sheet of dark grey clouds that left a foreboding sense lingering on the field. There was no lightning, but this matchup didn't require any more electricity. In the first half, it was a back-and-forth affair, and neither team seemed able to pull away.

Warnstrom played one of the best games of his career in the crease, singlehandedly holding back a barrage of shots from the Hokies. He ended the game with 24 saves officially, while allowing just 14 goals. At the half, the Flames were down just one to the Hokies, and a low-scoring third quarter saw them take the lead 11-10 heading into

the fourth. Braden Landry, a junior attackman who returned from injury against Tennessee, played a key role in helping the Flames pull ahead.

The Flames managed to hold onto their lead until the bitter end, and with one minute left in the game they led by one goal and began a game of keep-away as they tried to run down the clock. After a timeout by Liberty, the Hokies swarmed the Flames' ballcarrier, forced a turnover and gained possession, and with less than 20 seconds left on the clock the Hokies tied the game at 13.

With the game tied, neither team scored in the waning seconds of the fourth, and the ALC Championship game was sent to overtime. After a brief four-minute overtime period, neither team was able to get past the others' goaltender, and the game went into double overtime. In double overtime the Hokies were able to slip a shot past Warnstrom and their celebration ensued.

"We played them very early on in the year," McQuillan said. "So, we knew that when we played them the second time around, things were going to be very different. We did everything we needed to take that game and just fell a little bit short."

Warnstrom, who tallied 24 saves against Virginia Tech, five of which came in overtime, was named the Defensive MVP of the tournament.

"(Warnstrom) just continues to again and again just be our centerpiece," Cooper Branham said. "He's our rock. He's our foundation. Without him, we wouldn't be anywhere. So, it's just amazing having him on the team. He filled some really big shoes this year and he did it tremendously. So, it's been a blessing to play with him and I am expecting big things out of him for the rest of the year."

Warnstrom wasn't the only Flame to leave with some individual hardware. Luke Branham won the award for ALC Rookie of the Year, and his performance this tournament reaffirmed that decision.

"I couldn't be more proud as an older brother," Cooper Branham said. "You just want your younger brother to succeed. It feels like I've spent my whole life training him, so to see him perform at the level he is, I'm just super proud of him. And it's awesome having someone out there that I can really count on and has my back."

PALSGROVE is the asst. sports editor.



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FIGHTERS—Cameron Carter and the Flames took the Hokies to double overtime.



VICK BECKER | @VICKBECKER12 | LIBERTY PHOTOGRAPHY
COMMAND—Liberty outscored the Austin Peay Governors 20-12 in the weekend series.

Flames en fuego

Softball sweeps ASUN foe Governors

After a historic win over the Clemson Tigers on April 26, the Lady Flames skated into their final ASUN home series against the Austin Peay Governors with undeniable momentum.

By Brigh Cote
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With a 13-5 ASUN record and 31-17 overall, redemption was on the mind of Liberty, seeking to improve upon a series loss the previous weekend against the No. 1 ASUN Central Arkansas Bears.

The Flames didn't have to search long for dominance in game one of the series, which began with Liberty bringing four runs home in the first inning.

Half of those runs came from the hitter with the team's highest batting average, sophomore outfielder KK Madrey. While the Governors scored two runs in the top of the third inning, junior infielder Sierra Kersten brought Madrey home in the bottom of the third to extend the lead to 5-3. Elite pitching in the circle from Flames junior pitcher Karlie Kenecey fended off the Governors. As the game came to a 6-3 final, Kenecey earned the win, allowing three runs (one earned) on six hits, walking two and striking out one.

The Governors attempted to enforce their dominance and spoil Liberty's Senior Night in game two, scoring two runs in the first inning of what would become a sheer slugfest. After numerous errors, however, the Lady Flames jumped ahead to a 3-2 lead. Madrey scored two out of the three runs in the inning, in which Liberty tallied five hits.

Austin Peay, with a mere two hits, brought their bats in the third inning. A two-run bomb from infielder Gabi Aptagall-

lowed the Governors to surpass the Flames in thrilling fashion.

"(Our girls) need to keep doing what they are doing," Flames Head Coach Dot Richardson told media mid-game. "We must keep them off the bases, rip the cover off the ball and get runs. We need to hit the body off the ball. Senior night is a very emotional day for my three seniors, Emily Estroff, Devyn Howard and Caroline Hudson, but we need to keep that emotion in play with them and focus on the game."

Junior outfielder Mary Claire Wilson did just that, rapping a two-out RBI double to tie the game at 5-5. Just one inning later, Wilson launched a three-run home run to propel her team forward to a 9-5 advantage. While both teams continued to duel back and forth, an 11-7 final gave the ladies the Senior Night success they were hoping for.

In the series finale, Liberty simply imposed its will on the Governors. Back-to-back home runs from sophomore infielder Rachel Craice and junior infielder Megan Fortner in the third pushed Liberty to a daunting 7-1 lead in the fourth inning. In the following inning, the Flames ran away with the contest, with a moon shot from sophomore outfielder Rachel Roupe sealing the series sweep with a three-run home run, extending the lead to a final of 11-2.

As the home stretch to the ASUN tournament continues, Liberty is now 2-1 all-time against Austin Peay in softball. Every Liberty batter in the lineup on Saturday had at least one multi-hit game in the doubleheader, with Hudson, Roupe and Wilson notching multiple hits in both games.

The Lady Flames will close out their home slate May 3 at 6 p.m., welcoming the Virginia Tech Hokies to the Mountain for a Commonwealth clash.

COTE is a sports reporter.

BOUND FOR THE BIG LEAGUES

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Demario Douglas and Durrell Johnson find new homes in the NFL

Every spring, the 32 NFL clubs gather for an annual selection of college players entering the league. The NFL Draft is an event known for its excitement, drama and life-changing nature. This year's Draft was dramatic as ever. Three of the first four selections were quarterbacks, trades ran rampant and many teams made some unusual moves.

The Carolina Panthers selected Alabama quarterback Bryce Young first overall to be the next face of their franchise, while the Houston Texans snagged Ohio State quarterback CJ Stroud and Alabama defensive end Will Anderson as the cornerstones of their offensive and defensive units, respectively, in back-to-back picks.

Like the last few years, there were several players from Liberty eligible for the Draft. Only one, however, had the honor of hearing his name called.



DEMARIO DOUGLAS
NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

Flames wide receiver Demario Douglas was selected by the New England Patriots in the sixth round with the 203rd overall pick. He joins LSU's Kayshon Boutte as second receiver taken by the Patriots in the sixth round.

Douglas was projected to be selected somewhere in the later rounds, with many predicting he would fall to the sixth. He finished the 2022 season with over 1000 receiving yards and six touchdowns. Despite being a smaller receiver, at only 5 foot, 8 inches tall and around 180 pounds, his draft stock improved after a strong showing at the NFL Scouting Combine in March.

Douglas is known as an understated yet athletic receiver. He possesses elite speed and the ability to make defenders miss in space. He also has valuable special teams experience, having been a kick and punt returner during his time at Liberty.

Bill Belichick and the Patriots will likely make Douglas earn his stripes—and initial roster spot as a special teamer. His athletic ability should open doors for him as a receiver and a gadget receiver in the NFL.



DURRELL JOHNSON
DALLAS COWBOYS

Although no other Flames were selected in the Draft, one former Liberty player found his way into the league. The Dallas Cowboys signed edge rusher Durrell Johnson as an undrafted free agent when the Draft concluded April 29. Johnson had a visit with the Cowboys in the weeks leading up to the Draft, which created speculation about him being a potential late-round selection.

Johnson, who is 6 foot, 3 inches tall and 250 pounds, finished last season with 58 tackles and nine sacks. He was a feared pass rusher for his three seasons on Liberty Mountain, and he made a big enough impression to earn projections as high as the fifth round.

Johnson did not participate in the NFL Combine and is seen by some analysts as a candidate to make a practice squad.

Johnson, like Douglas, will have to quickly adapt to the speed of the NFL, and will have to earn his roster spot through training camp and the preseason at the end of the summer.