

# SPORTS

## Bishops Rampage through Conference, Fall in NCAAs

The NCWC men's soccer team claimed the USA-South Conference championship in a season highlighted by a 14-match win streak and culminating in the first NCAA tournament berth since 2008.

The Bishops placed first in their division and then took three more matches in the conference-wide tournament. A week later, playing at Washington & Lee University in Virginia, the Bishops fell to Oglethorpe, 5-2, in the first round of the NCAA national tournament.

"Oglethorpe was the better team but not by much," Coach Frankie Taal said.

Despite the disappointing loss, Taal was gratified by his team's success, which earned him the first berth in the NCAAs during his tenure as head coach. "It felt great, fulfilling and very satisfying," he said. "I congratulated the entire team and told them I was very proud of them."

The talented Wesleyan team under-achieved early in the season, losing its first four games—all non-conference match-ups—by a combined score of 12-2.

Taal blamed weak midfield play and faulty defense for the team's lethargic start.

"When a team performs well or poorly, it's usually because of a number of factors," the coach said. "We weren't sharp early in the season. Our midfield play was weak, which led to a lack of goals."

He added that the team struggled with its defense in set pieces—corner and penalty kicks. In the first six games, the team yielded 13 goals, 10 on set-piece plays. "Our set-piece defending was poor," the coach said.

Then conference action began and so did the Wesleyan rampage. On September 15, the Bishops beat Covenant, 4-0, as midfielder Baboucar Nije fired 10 shots and tallied three goals to lead the way. After a 1-0 setback at Piedmont a day later, Wesleyan reeled off 11 straight regular-season wins, eight by shutout, to finish 10-1 in the conference (12-5 overall).



Coach Frankie Taal SI photo

## Bishop Profile: Two-Sport Athlete Nate Gardner

By Quinn Tobias  
Senior Staff Writer

"Let's just sit at the bar," said Nate Gardner as we walked into San Jose Mexican Restaurant one night back in October. The rest of the tables looked busy, there was no host available to seat us, and most importantly there were sports on at the bar. After ordering a sweet tea, Gardner lamented how he was sad his Red Sox were out of the playoffs but at least the Astros were beating the Yankees 4-0 in the bottom of the 7th.

As a two-sport athlete at Wesleyan, sports consume Gardner's life. He returned as the starter at quarterback for the football team and serves as a multi-purpose player on the baseball team, pitching and playing the infield. "I came to Wesleyan to play both football and baseball," Gardner said.

During the summer he plays in the Coastal Plains League (CPL) for the Edenton Steamers, a local summer league team near his hometown of Columbia, near the Outer Banks. "Edenton called me up and offered me a 10-day contract last year," Gardner said, "I just signed a full-season contract for next summer." A contract for a summer league team does not have monetary value; it simply formalizes an agreement between the player and the club. Highly regarded college baseball players flock to the CPL to hone their skills in a minor league atmosphere in hopes to get a better look for the next level.

Gardner has played baseball his entire life and through baseball found football. "In seventh grade a coach saw me pitch and had me try out playing quarterback," he said. Baseball remains his favorite sport and the one where he feels he excels. According to Gardner, being a two-sport student-athlete is taxing. "I would definitely be better at one sport if I dedicated all of my time to it," he said. "My grades would improve as well. Sports year-round takes up so much time I don't feel like I can give any one thing all of the attention it needs."

While watching the game on TV, Gardner asked himself, "Can you imagine hitting a 95-mile-an-hour fastball solid?" as the Astros' pitcher battled Aaron Judge. "Last summer with Edenton I struck out on three straight 95-mile-an-hour fastballs. The bat never left my shoulder," Gardner recalled. Minutes later, he got his food, chicken and rice smothered in cheese as well as a refill of sweet tea. After Gardner's first bite, Judge sent a moonshot well over the centerfield fence to make the game 4-1. "The pitcher must be getting tired. He just hung that 2-2 curveball," Gardner said. Right on cue the Astros' manager made a call to the bullpen.

As if the sensory overload of playoff baseball, the opening night of basketball and a soccer game wasn't enough to satiate Gardner's appetite

for sport, he turned his phone on its side, leaned it against the basket of chips and began to live-stream the Wesleyan volleyball game being played in Raleigh. Gardner tries to go to as many games on campus as possible and always live-streams the away games. Although he had prior interest in volleyball, his attention increased after he started dating Kelly Ammons, a setter for the Bishops. "Alright, they got the second set," Gardner said as his eyes darted back and forth from TV to phone as if he were driving in heavy traffic and checking his mirrors constantly. Unfortunately the girls couldn't pull out a win, losing 3-1 against Meredith.

A man was overheard offering a job to another patron at the bar. The job happened to be a beverage distributor, something Gardner's father does. However, he does not want to follow in those footsteps. Instead, he plans on working for the FBI. "I want to get an internship with the FBI or the State Bureau of Investigation (SBI) to help with my criminal justice degree," Gardner said. "I've always been good at figuring things out and I want to do good, so law enforcement seems like a great career field."

Right before the opening tip of the basketball season, three of Gardner's football teammates walked in and joined him at the bar. They greeted each other with half handshakes, half hugs and sat down in the seats next to him. Their interests lie mainly with basketball so the conversation switched seamlessly to NBA predictions. "Both the Celtics and the Cavs have so many ball handlers, with Derrick Rose, LeBron James, Dwayne Wade and Isaiah Thomas all on the court," Gardner said. "They know there's only one point guard, right?" In addition to playing baseball and football in high school, Gardner played basketball.

A glance back at baseball revealed the Yankees climbing back into the game. Judge returned to the plate with the tying run at third. "All he has to do is get a deep fly ball to do his job," Gardner said. After a monster cut, he noted, "He's trying to do too much." After the next pitch, the Yankees fans went crazy as Judge sent a double off the wall to tie the game.

While Yankee Stadium erupted when the home team came back and tied up the series, the Celtics home crowd fell silent as their new star lay immobile on the court 10 minutes into the first game. "Oh my God, did you see that?" Gardner said. Gordon Hayward had just injured his ankle in his Celtics debut. "Hayward's leg just snapped. His ankle and leg are pointing different directions."

In an odd paradox one TV showed true jubilation, while, right next to it, the other depicted tragedy. Meanwhile Gardner and his teammates were caught in the middle, trying to enjoy some Mexican food, sweet tea and some games on a Tuesday night.

The streak featured key victories over rivals Methodist and Greensboro and non-conference opponent Pfeiffer. By amassing the most wins in the USA South, Wesleyan earned the right to host the conference tournament at Scalf Field.

Throughout the tourney, the Bishops' offensive prowess was on display for the home crowd, as players exhibited their speed, ball-handling wizardry and deft passing. Supported by a stout defense, freshman goalkeeper Jordan Williams recorded three of his 10 shutouts.

The team opened with a 2-0 win over Ferrum, getting goals from Sheriff Secka and Joseph Brooks and solid goaltending by Williams, who repelled five shots for the shutout.

In round two, the Bishops vanquished Covenant, 3-0, after racing to

## Soccer Captains Reflect on Four Years at NCWC

The women's soccer team upset Greensboro in the first round of the USA South playoffs, but then lost at Meredith, 1-0, on a fluky second-half goal.

After losing 9 of their first 11 matches, the Bishops came on strong at the end, winning 5 of their last 6 prior to facing Meredith. This season the team saw its record dip to 6-11-1 from 10-6-2 in 2016.

The Decree interviewed senior captains Lucia Davids and Hannah Tolson about their careers as Bishops.

**Q:** The team got off to a slow start this fall, after a successful year in 2016. What were the main factors that led to the string of defeats?

**HT:** What we thought was going to benefit us in the beginning turned out to bring our confidence down during conference play. We had the opportunity this year to play against high-ranked teams outside of our conference with hopes of us getting better as a team. If we were able to play against high-level teams, then conference should have been a breeze. Although it definitely made us better, we started getting down on ourselves individually because the stats were not showing our team talent. This was a hard obstacle to overcome, but we eventually worked through it together and proceeded to the conference tournament.



Hannah Tolson SI photo

**LD:** With the start of every season, it takes a little while for all of the girls to get used to playing with each other. We had new styles of play coming onto the team with the freshmen, and it just took us a little longer to find a rhythm with each other. We did kick off the season with some tough opponents in our non-conference play (teams like Virginia Wesleyan and Stockton). These teams really tested our skill and cohesion, but I believe this tough competition gave us a push we needed for the season ahead.

**Q:** Then the team caught fire toward the end, when you won five or your last seven, three by shutout. Describe the keys to the team's success in the final month.

**HT:** The keys involved positivity, team work, support and trust. We realized something needed to change. We had a team meeting so we could fix any issues we saw as players on and off the field. This resulted in a lot more positivity all around and carried over to each game. Teamwork and support were huge components to our success. We got involved with a team-bonding experience, so that we could all realize how important each player is to this team and also show how much support we all have for each other even when things are not going our way. Players needed to trust the system as well as each teammate when they're out on that field.

**LD:** I don't really know if there's one key factor or detail that can be attributed to our success at the end of season. After the losses we suffered at the beginning, I feel like we had finally reached a point where "Enough was

a first-half lead on goals by Nije and forward Ignacio Lerech.

Then in the title match, Wesleyan beat Maryville, 1-0, as Lerech scored the only goal in the first half and the defense, led by Williams, withstood a Scots rally in the waning minutes.

"Maryville is always an intense match," Taal said. "It's a very good team and so is Wesleyan."

In the NCAAs, seeking to avenge an early-season loss in Atlanta, the Bishops kept the game close against Oglethorpe, but then lost momentum after a red card was assessed against Kobi Boompong. The infraction meant Wesleyan played one man down.

"To be quite honest, the red card was the ultimate deciding factor," Taal said. "At that point, the score was 3-2 in their favor, but we had so much

enough." We knew we had the talent and that we needed to step up and show the competition that we were a formidable opponent. We started to focus on what was working well and what strategies weren't beneficial in past games. For example, communication and accountability became two of our biggest focal points going into games because we would sometimes struggle with these concepts in the losses.

**Q:** What were each of you thinking in the immediate aftermath of the tourney match against Meredith? The Meredith goal came after what looked like a weird bounce that gave their player almost an open net.

**HT:** Immediate thoughts: "How could we lose our last game on such a foolish goal?" I was in shock because I believe we deserved to win that game. We outworked them, outplayed them, and definitely wanted to win more than them, and to see them win from such an unexpected goal seemed to me as undeserved. It was very upsetting. It was a hard game to accept, not just because it was the last, but because it did not go the way anyone thought it would go.

**LD:** I was sadder than I thought I would be after that loss. I've had a pretty packed and stressful semester this fall, so during the season part of me looked forward to a little extra free time. That game against Meredith sort of triggered the realization that the end of my college soccer career was happening and it was an upsetting moment. Meredith has always been a big rival of ours, so this game was a bit of a grudge match and it would've been such a confidence booster for the team to win. It was like a tease, we got so close to going to the big tournament again, like we did my freshman year. That was a great experience and I was hoping to get to do it again.

**Q:** When I was in college, I felt that I learned almost as much in extra-curricular activities as I did in my coursework (perhaps a rationalization for mediocre grades). What will each of you take from your four years on the soccer team?

**HT:** I gained a lot from soccer. A huge part of my experience was through leadership. I had to learn how to handle each individual player, but also figure out what was best for the team. These four years have made me more vocal, confident, and patient; that will help me down the road to my career path as an occupational therapist.

**LD:** I learned a lot about collaborating and working with others, especially with individuals who don't always have the same opinions. I feel that I learned how to read social cues better and how to recognize different learning styles. For example, some girls needed guidance with activities while others were capable of taking charge of situations. It was important as a leader to accommodate different needs on the team without taking away from any authority that I was expected to maintain. My four years have provided me with numerous lessons on accountability, trust, compassion, and more; I'll remember all this and take it with me as I move on in the world.

**Q:** What will you take from your experiences as team captains?

**HT:** Being a team captain is way more than talking to the referees during a game. I learned that it's often better to listen to everyone on the team, instead of me speaking. It's crazy what you learn by even just paying attention to a player's body language. If any issues arise, it's best to deal with it right then

momentum. I was confident we would have scored the equalizer, had we not been reduced to ten players."

Taal hopes the high level of NCAA competition will help the young Bishops team as it seeks a return to national tourney next year. "The players learned that if we're a bit more disciplined on the field, we'll be much more successful," he said.

**Team Notes:** Nije, a sophomore from Gambia, led the Bishops in scoring with 12 goals and 9 assists for 33 total points. Lerech, a freshman from Argentina, and Secka, a junior midfielder, tied for second in goals with 7 apiece. Williams posted a 0.82 goals against average and .792 save percentage after he replaced incumbent goalkeeper Alex Magner, who suffered a season-ending arm injury in the early going.

and there so everything is cleared up.

**LD:** I learned a lot about leadership. I'm a more reserved person, but I'm confident in myself and my talents. I think this position really taught me how and when to step up as an authority figure without losing respect from my peers. I was grateful to have Hannah as a co-captain. I think we balanced out each other and were able to handle team issues together.

**Q:** What will you miss most about your time here?



Lucia Davids SI photo

**HT:** Most of all I'll miss the friendships and support that I've gained through being a member of the women's soccer team. When I see my teammates every day, we'll often complain that we're sick of each other, but the instant we don't get to see one another for more than a few days, it'll be a different story. This team would back up each other in a heartbeat, and I'm going to miss being around every single one of these players once I graduate.

**LD:** I have a whole little family with the girls on this team. We watch out for each other, we fight, we hang out, and most importantly we have love for each other. I think I'll miss that immediate bond that I was able to make with a lot of these girls. I'm a bit of an introvert, so socializing doesn't come to me as easily as it does for others. I'll miss the loyalty and friendships that I have with my teammates now.

**Q:** The women's team is recognized for the academic excellence of its members. What's led to that success?

**HT:** I believe the coaches and players hold a high standard for each other revolving around academics. When needed, the players are always there to assist each other with homework or assignments, and players participate in study hall twice a week for extra assistance. We come up with goals for the season and ever since I've been here, we've always made it a goal to achieve at least a 3.0 GPA and we've stuck to it. Not only do all the girls help one another, but I believe each player is individually motivated to achieve this GPA goal, so they feel a sense of accomplishment toward their college years and toward their career path.

**LD:** We have a team with incredibly smart and goal-oriented girls and I think that's a major contributor to this recognition. Academics absolutely contributed to my decision to attend NCWC because I knew a smaller classroom setting would fit my learning style. Many of us are here on full scholarships or partial scholarships, which are based on previous academic success. This need to succeed has carried over into our college careers and so many of us strive to get the best grades possible. I think that gaining this recognition has only pushed us to want to succeed even more.

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