

SPORTS

Bishop Briefs: Men's Tennis Continues Dominance, Softball Team Goes 27-13

The Wesleyan men's tennis team grabbed its 14th straight USA South Conference title, won its first-round match in the NCAA regionals, but lost a tense match in the next round to Emory University.

Led by junior John Falke, the Bishops rampaged through the conference regular season, winning six matches by 9-0 scores and one, over Methodist, by an 8-1 score. The team, playing on its new indoor courts April 27-28, then blanked Methodist (5-0) and Pfeiffer (5-0) in the conference tournament to claim the title.

Falke, the USA South Player of the Year, anchored Wesleyan's number-one singles position for most of the year and sometimes



John Falke

teamed with Luca Knese to form a dominating doubles tandem. In the conference

finals, the duo hammered Pfeiffer's Dylan Masters and Michael Harancyzk, 8-3.

Joaquin Cabello, a new member of Wesleyan's team, has been impressed all year by the play of Falke and Knese. "Both have strong serves and good volleys," he explained. "They complement each other very well, as they understand each other."

Tshepo Mosarwa/Diego Segovia won, 8-4, at second doubles, while Augusto Roca/Andy Fanzaga won at third, shutting out their opponents, 8-0, to build the team lead to 3-0. Mosarwa (#2) and Segovia (#3) claimed their singles matches, providing the Bishops with an insurmountable 5-0 lead over the Falcons.

The USA South championship qualified Wesleyan for the NCAA Division III regional playoffs. Playing host in the first round, the Bishops defeated Washington & Lee, 5-1. They took two of three doubles matches, with Falke shifting to the third pairing to team with Roca for a key win, 8-6. In singles, Knese led the way as he won at #2, 6-4, 6-2, over Will Kistler.

"Besides Luca's serve, what most impresses me is his forehand, that and his unique fighting spirit," Cabello said.

The match was clinched when Roca turned in a winning performance at #5 singles, 6-3, 6-3, and Fanzaga triumphed at #6, 7-5, 6-4.

Emory was the next obstacle. The Atlanta university was once Wesleyan's perennial nemesis, ousting the Bishops from the NCAAs seven times within an eight-year span (2011-2019). Would this be the year the Bishops got past the Eagles and advanced from regional play?

Wesleyan got off to a promising start as it took two of three double matches. Knese and Albert Sitwell won at #1 doubles, 8-4, while Falke and Roca edged their opponents, 8-7 (7-5), at #3.

Then Emory evened the team score by taking three of the first five singles matches, with Falke and Fanzaga winning their matches for the Bishops. It came down to the match at #3 singles. After losing the first set, 2-6, Mosarwa battled back to take set two, 6-4. He then jumped to an early lead against his opponent, Nolan Shah, before losing the

third set, 6-4, leading the Eagles to a hard-fought 5-4 victory and more heartbreak for the Bishops.

Having just completed his first semester at Wesleyan, Cabello, a native of Argentina, was asked two final questions:

Did he think that it was a disadvantage for the Bishops to play against teams in the less competitive USA South Conference?

"I don't think so," he replied. "It's an excellent opportunity to try different lineups or doubles teams."

Experiencing the top-flight competition among the Bishop players, wouldn't Cabello rather play for a decent program with a greater chance of making the top six?

"I would rather play on a team like this," he said, "as the level is very good and I'm always motivated to compete for a spot in the top six."

Dule Leads Women to Title

Sophomore Kristal Dule led a young women's tennis team to a USA South title after it recorded a perfect record in regular season matches.

Playing host for the conference tourney, the Bishops breezed through Salem, Brevard and Methodist by identical 5-0 scores to claim the title. On May 5, the team traveled to Lexington, Virginia, to face Washington & Lee in the opening round of NCAA regionals play. Against the 22nd ranked Generals, Dule teamed with Cristal Mendoza to take the #1 doubles match, 8-6, and Wesleyan's Elisa Mariotti defeated her opponent at #2 singles. But it was not enough to advance to round two, W&L winning 5-2.

Dule, a native of Italy, was interviewed by the Decree after the season for the following mini-profile:

Q: What attracted you to NC Wesleyan in the first place?

A: I liked the fact that it's a small college, so there aren't too many people, and that there were a lot of internationals. I fell in love with the tennis facility. When I had my video call with my coach, he explained to me the team dynamics, the practices and how the team becomes your second family. That all made me realize that this is where I wanted to come.

Q: Describe your hometown of Pove Del Grappa?

A: It's a town of 3,000 in the province of Vicenza, northeast Italy. The downtown is small, with two schools, a church, and couple bars/restaurants. The landscape is beautiful with all the mountains and hills. The people are really friendly, and everyone knows everyone. The region is a center for olive oil production.

Q: What do you miss most about Italy?

A: It's spending time with my family and others back home. Yes, there are social media that help me stay in contact with them, but it's very difficult not to physically be with them during birthdays, festivities, and especially during hard times. I'm used to it now, but there are still times when I think about this a lot.

I also miss Italian food; I feel like the freshness and quality of Italian food is something that could never be found anywhere else.

Q: What's your major? What do you want to do after college?

A: I'm doing a double major in mathematics and accounting and after college, my dream would be to become a professional tennis player. If that doesn't work out, I would like to find a job in finance.

Q: How much do you practice each day?

A: Usually, team practices last around two hours, sometimes a little more. Beyond playing tennis,

I also do one hour of conditioning, mostly body-weight workouts focused on rapidity, endurance, and strength.

Before going to bed, I spend 30-40 minutes doing yoga. Sometimes I put in an extra hour of practice by working on my serve, usually during the weekend or mornings when I don't have class.

Q: What do you consider the strongest part of your game?

A: I would say that shot-wise, the backhand is my best shot and the one I prefer the most. I'm an aggressive player, and I always like to dictate the point, but I also have good running skills, so I'm able to defend when necessary.

Q: It's fair to say that the men's team benefits from a deep roster (30 athletes)—the top six players face internal challenges in practice from teammates who want to take their spots. Do you feel that the women's team—with seven on the current roster—would benefit from more athletes?

A: I believe we would definitely benefit from having more athletes; there are several reasons. First, if a teammate gets injured, having more players would make it possible to play all nine matches because someone else could take the place of the injured player. The other reason relates to competition. With more players, and more healthy competition, that would provide incentive for all the girls to give 100 percent in every practice. They would help each other get better every day while they try to retain their spot on the team.

Q: What was the highlight of this past spring season for you?

A: I would say it was winning the conference. Last year, unfortunately, we didn't play for much of the season because of injuries. It was amazing to win the conference this year; all our hard work paid off in the end.

Q: Do you feel that the lack of serious competition during the conference schedule hurt your team in the NCAAs?

A: A little bit. During the conference schedule, we faced a level of competition that was lower than ours; this can affect us because you "get used" to that level. When it came to facing teams that, on paper, were better than us, we were disoriented.

On the other hand, we played a lot of good teams on spring break and amidst our conference schedule. By the time we competed at the NCAA regionals, I felt like we were used to that level of play and our team spirit was higher. With a little bit more belief, I think we could have won the first round because there wasn't a lot of difference between the two teams.

Q: You're still a young team with only one senior. What makes you optimistic the Bishops can win the conference and advance farther in the NCAAs next season?

A: It's true that we're a young team, but I've seen a lot of improvement in the team spirit and the willingness to fight in every match, both in me and my teammates. If we keep playing with this spirit, if we start believing more in ourselves, and if we keep working hard every day at practice, this will lead to great results next season.



Kristal Dule Photo courtesy of K. Dule

Softball Finishes 27-13 Season

The Wesleyan softball team lost its first two games in the USA South tournament after finishing third in the conference during the regular season with a 12-6 record (27-13 overall).

Playing in Greensboro May 4-5, the Bishops lost the first game of the tourney, 4-3, to Mary Baldwin. The Bishops built a 3-1 lead on an RBI single by Molly Alejandrino and two unearned runs. But the Flying Squirrels took the lead in the top of the seventh, producing three runs with run-scoring singles. Emily Humphrey pitched a complete game for the Bishops and absorbed the loss.

A day later, facing elimination, the Bishops took on a lower-seeded Methodist team (19-19). A pitcher's duel, the game remained scoreless until the fifth inning, when the Monarchs pushed across the game's only run on an RBI single by S. Sizemore. Freshman pitcher Morgan Aycock took the loss, despite a four-hit complete game.

The early elimination was hard for the Bishops to process. "I was proud of my performance," Aycock said, "but it was devastating to know that our season was over."

Alejandrino concurred. "I think many people, including myself, were shocked that we went home from the tournament so early," the third baseman said. "Morgan pitched a great game, but we didn't have her back offensively. I was very proud that Morgan was able to do her job even as a freshman pitcher. Conference play is all about performing in every aspect of the game and unfortunately, our team didn't execute."

Aycock finished with a 9-8 record and 3.46 earned run average and recorded 57 strikeouts in a team-leading 107.1 innings. Asked to identify the biggest difference between college and high school softball, the Clayton native said it's the pressure to produce. "In college it's well known that your academics come first," she said, "but softball is a close second. You must perform well, at a high level. In high school, softball was done for fun with less stress and fewer consequences after losses."

Aycock said the second Methodist game, April 11, was her personal highlight as she threw a complete-game, four-hit shutout, her first as a college athlete, as she led the Bishops to a 7-0 win and a two-game sweep. The performance earned her conference Rookie of the Week.

"It served as a huge confidence boost and gave me a sense of clarity," she said. "I came to realize I was doing what I needed to be doing in college even though I had questioned myself in the first year."

Despite the early exit in the playoffs, Alejandrino was pleased with the progress the team made in 2023, citing, in particular, impressive non-league victories over Randolph Macon and Waynesburg. With the young team gaining a year's experience and Aycock and Humphrey anchoring the pitching staff for at least two more seasons, Alejandrino is optimistic about Wesleyan's future.

"I'm very excited for next year due to the success we had this year as such a young team," she said, referring to a team loaded with freshmen and sophomores. "With a number of players returning and everyone working hard in the off-season, I'm confident that we'll come back with more success in the tournament."

Statistical Notes: Humphrey, a sophomore, led the team with a 12-4 record, 60 Ks, and a 1.92 ERA (third best in the conference). Alejandrino was the team leader in all major batting categories—8 homers, 38 RBIs and a .435 batting average (she was first in the conference in average and RBIs and second in homers). Savannah Thompson was tied for second on the team with 4 homers and second in RBIs (35), while batting .300 in her first season.

Golf's Patterson Places Third

Paced by sophomore Myles Patterson, a young NC Wesleyan golf team finished fifth in a competitive field at the USA South Conference championship, held in Spartanburg, South Carolina, April 24-26.

Playing at the Carolina Country Club, Patterson carded a 45-hole total of 185, or 5 over at the par-72, course. He tied for third place, 1 stroke behind Greensboro's Andreas Huber and 12 behind medalist Cameron Cappuzzo of Methodist, the only player to break par.

The tournament was shortened from 54 holes following a severe rainstorm. "Sunday began with a light rain," Patterson related, "and then it became heavier, leaving casual water all over the course, even on the putting greens."

In a typical tournament, Wesleyan would have been represented by five golfers, with the lowest four scores figuring into the team's total for each round. But, due to illness, the Bishops played one man down all three days.



Myles Patterson finished third in the USA South golf tournament in South Carolina. The team placed fifth. SI photo

For Patterson, the individual highlight was the 2-under par 70 he shot on day two, tying him for the second lowest individual round of the tournament. He hit 14 greens in regulation and needed only 27 putts, or an average of 1.5 per hole.

"My putting and ball striking were somewhat poor the first day," he said, "but I settled down and then I made some important, momentum-boosting putts. After a rough start on day two, I struck the ball and putted well."

Patterson explained that the 6,800-yard course was challenging, with the change in the weather making a dramatic difference. "The layout was simple, tight, and scoreable, but you had to place the ball in certain spots," he said. "The greens were difficult, quick and firm early in the tournament and then wet later, making them difficult to judge."

Patterson was followed by teammates Alvaro Toro (14th place, 17 over par), Lucas Perez (18th, +23) and Guido Guevara (21st, +29). Patterson and Perez are sophomores, while Toro and Guevara are freshmen.