

Women's lacrosse seeks A-Sun Conference Championship

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Senior Reporter

Coming off a winning record and claiming the No. 2 seed in the Atlantic Sun Conference Tournament, the Elon University women's lacrosse team is on the hunt for a conference tournament title that would send them to the NCAA tournament.

"Anyone is beatable on any day, and the beauty of tournaments is that sometimes it's not the No. 1 seed or the perceived best team that always wins it," Elon head coach Josh Hexter said. "I do think we can win it."

Although he said anything is possible, Coach Hexter isn't trying to predict an outcome. Knowing success could bring a trip to the NCAA Tournament, the coaches are sticking to what has been their goal all season — getting better every day.

"We're trying to stay with the focus of trying to improve," Hexter said. "[The NCAA Tournament] is a fun motivator for the staff and the girls, but if you focus on that too much then you lose track of the little things that get you there."

The little things are what the team needs to focus on to win the A-Sun Tournament, and that is preached at practice.

"We're entering the exciting time," assistant coach Virginia Crotty said. "I didn't know what was going to come of this year, but because they focus on getting better and better and not taking those big losses as a huge hit, they used every challenge like that to grow as individual players and as a unit. And that to me is success."

The opposition

The No. 1 seed Jacksonville University is the reigning A-Sun Conference champion and has been a powerful force in the A-Sun since it joined the league in 2010. In a single elimination tournament such as this one, every game matters, and any team is beatable, but the Dolphins are going to be the toughest opponent the Phoenix will have to overcome.

"Tactically, we're going up against a really fast, aggressive Jacksonville team that likes to score off the break," Hexter said. "They put a lot of pressure on you on the ride and get shots and opportunities off of causing turnovers. We have to handle their pressure and be poised."

Luckily, the Phoenix won't be completely

shell-shocked by this fast-paced style of play, as the team had experience playing against Atlantic Coast Conference teams early in the season.

"They're not going to be as fast as Duke [University] or [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill], and that's why we play those ACC teams, to try to simulate where we want to be," Hexter said. "Hopefully when conference tournament comes around we're ready to go."

How Elon can win

According to Crotty, who has experience on the field at Duke University with this kind of pressure, the key is sticking to the game plan and believing they belong there.

"If you focus on the little things, the big plays will come," Crotty said. "If you get back to the basics, the fundamentals, trust your instincts, trust what [you've] been through all year to propel you forward, [you] should be confident being on the big stage."

The team isn't changing how it plays, and without having the experience of tournament

play, they need to stay focused and consistent throughout the game in order to win.

"The biggest thing will be handling the tournament pressure experience," Hexter said. "A lot of the girls have won state championships and been through that kind of process, but there's a difference to how conference tournaments are run."

As a former player who has been on the big stage, Crotty offered advice to her players.

"If you're nervous, embrace it," she said. "It's the first step in conquering nerves. Start with communication and backing each other up. The game might be messy, but you have to think about what you want that team saying about you when you walk off the field, and all that is based on what you yourself can contribute."

Impact on the team

This young team has earned some bragging rights in its inaugural season with an undefeated record at home, a 4-1 record in conference and 8-8 season overall headed into the tournament. A trip to the NCAA tournament for a

first-year program is almost unheard of, but the team has a shot at making history for Elon.

"There's nothing like the NCAA [Tournament]. It would be such a great accomplishment in our first year to be even included in the tournament," Crotty said. "It's quite a stage with the most elite teams in the country. It would be the experience of a lifetime, but obviously, we need to focus and not get ahead of ourselves. If we do that, we have a really good shot at making it."

Having to overcome major challenges and work to play catch up as a first-year team hasn't set the Phoenix back, and the team is ready to get after it in the A-Sun Tournament with a championship in sight.

"[A championship] would be incredible," Hexter said. "There are so many challenges along the way but I'm lucky. I really do have a phenomenal bunch of girls on this team who work hard and are selfless and just give all of themselves for the team. At the end of the day, if we are able to hold that trophy at the end of the season, the looks on my players faces will be the coolest thing for me."



Despite being a first-year program, the Elon women's lacrosse team is in position to qualify for the NCAA tournament should they win the A-Sun Conference.

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