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MEN'S LACROSSE

Loss to Endicott serves as wake-up call for top-ranked Tufts

BY PHILIP DEAR Daily Editorial Board

The No. 1 men's lacrosse team lost one game by one goal to one of the top teams in the nation on Tuesday night. Really, there's no reason to panic.

The 9-8 loss on the road to the No. 18 Endicott Gulls on Tuesday night will be a thorn in the Jumbos' side for quite some time, though. It ends a 19-game winning streak and a chance at a perfect season — the only possible way to improve upon last year's 20-1 National Championship-winning campaign. Just thinking about the satisfaction Endicott is feeling after beating the top-ranked defending champs may cause the Jumbos to lose sleep for days.

But such is the nature of competitive sport. More often than not, the champion at the end of the season has to work through some adversity. Just ask Tim Tebow, who as quarterback for the Florida Gators famously declared after a 31-30 loss to Ole Miss in 2008, "A lot of good will come out of this. ... You will never see a team play harder than we will the rest of the season." He stuck to his word, and the Gators won their second BCS title in three years.

The Jumbos now turn to Saturday's NESCAC home matchup against Conn. College, the only team to beat them last year, where they hope to right the ship and make further progress toward their foremost goal of a NESCAC regular-season title. But as much as the Jumbos will focus on moving forward, the Endicott loss will likely always be in the back of their minds.

"We are taking our medicine amd focusing on never letting that happen again," senior quad-captain attackman Ryan Nolloy said. "I can't even describe how we fel currently because losing is unacceptable toolerate in our program. As far as the rest of he season, we are focusing on Tufts lacrosse today, tomorrow and especially on Saturday in a huge league game."

The Gulls were able to take down a commanding Tufts team Tuesday night with overwhelming intensity from the get-go, catching the Jumbos on their heels.

"I don't think Endicott had some genius game plan that we couldn't decipher," senior quad-captain longstick midfielder Alec Bialosky said. "They came out of the gates fired up and they flat-out outplayed us [on Tuesday]. Going into the game we

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knew they were good, but we expected to win as we do every game; we just didn't perform like we know we can. The only thing we can do now is learn from it and prepare for Conn."

Tufts' leadership did all it could to keep the game within reach, as Molloy and fellow senior quad-captains D.J. Hessler and Matt Witko combined for 10 points, including five of Tufts' eight goals.

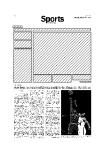
However, Endicott was successful in slowing down the pace of the game dramatically, which the Gulls knew would be the best way to beat the Jumbos' vaunted fast-paced offense and transition game. Tuesday's eight-goal total for the Jumbos was by far the lowest of the season for a team that came into it the averaging over 15 goals per game. Though Tufts didn't execute to the best of its ability, the Jumbos give most of the credit to Endicott.

"Endicott is a very talented team who has given us great games for the four years I have been here," Molloy said. "Endicott came out extremely fired up in an excellent environment. They out-ground-balled us and outworked us. I am not really sure how to pinpoint our weakness [tonight], but overall it just seemed as though they wanted it more, which is inexcusable."

Of course, the Jumbos expected to win the game, but by no means did they underestimate this team. The Gulls came in with a solid 9-2 record, including a close 11-10 loss to Amherst, one of the best teams in the NESCAC this season. They also entered the game having scored over 20 goals in six of their 11 games. And for all the upperclassmen on the Endicott squad with several years of frustrating losses to Tufts, there was something left to prove.

"We never underestimated them," Molloy said. "We knew going into this game they were going to give us a game and they were going to be fired up. We ended their season last year and defeated them twice on the year. We knew they were going to be a fast, scrappy, well-coached team, and that is exactly what we saw."

A young Tufts defensive unit that includes three sophomore starters in Matt Callahan, Sam Gardner and John Heard, with freshman goalie Patton Watkins making his fourth start of the season, did all it could to stifle the Gulls' attack and get the ball up to the offense. Watkins made 10



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saves, and the defense caused nine turnovers to Endicott's seven.

But the difference in the game may have come when neither team had the ball — when the ball was on the ground, in the middle of blurs of sticks and bodies. Endicott won the critical ground-ball battle by a tally of 43-31, a big part of which was lost at the faceoff X, in which Endicott face-off specialist Sam Ozycz beat Tufts junior Nick Rhoads in 13 of 21 of the draws. Winning the ground balls enabled the Gulls to slow the game's pace and keep the ball out of the hands of one of the top attack units in the nation in Molloy, Hessler and junior attackman Sean Kirwan, who scored twice on the night.

The Jumbos know how important Saturday's game against the Camels is. It is a NESCAC game, an opportunity for revenge on the only team that beat them last season and, perhaps most importantly, a chance to prove wrong anyone who thinks the Jumbos are weaker than their high ranking implies.

"Obviously the loss from last year is in the back of our minds and this loss is fresh on our minds, and we are going to be doing everything we can to focus on getting better and fixing all of our mistakes," Molloy said. "Other than that, this is just a huge league game for us and for our season. Hopefully this loss is a wake-up call that rankings don't mean anything other than being a reflection of a few coaches' opinions."

The hope is that the loss will build team character. It's not easy to lose, especially while on such an impressive win streak, but sometimes it helps. For now, the Jumbos needn't worry and should heed the words of American Pulitzer Prize-winning author and journalist Anna Quindlen, who said, "The thing that is really hard, and really amazing, is giving up on being perfect and beginning the work of becoming yourself." Should the Jumbos truly become themselves over the next few weeks leading up to the conference and NCAA tournaments, it's doubtful that there's a team out there who will beat them.

MEN'S LACROSSE (9-1, 5-0 NESCAC) at Beverly, Mass.

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VIRGINIA BLEDSOE/TUFTS DAILY

Sophomore face-off specialist Nick Rhoads, shown here on March 28 in a game against Western New England, won eight out of 21 face-offs against Endicott's Sam Ozycz on Tuesday night. The Jumbos struggled to gain possession for much of the game, which they lost 9-8.