



# BACK ON TOP

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## UNC women's soccer downs Wake Forest Olivia Thomas' free kick secures NCAA Championship title

**By Emma Moon**

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CARY, N.C. — Olivia Thomas took quick, shallow breaths. She fiddled with one of her ponytails. She started singing in her head.

Thomas ran track in high school before she committed to playing soccer full-time in college. The sophomore forward used to sing songs silently to “mask the pain” while running. So, with UNC’s best chance to score on the line in the national championship, Thomas began to sing “2 You” by Mariah the Scientist. She wasn’t even sure why it was stuck in her head. She just needed something to help her fight through it.

“That’s an issue,” Thomas said. “It wasn’t a good hype song at all.”

It didn’t matter. After Thomas drew the foul right outside the box, giving North Carolina a set piece opportunity, she bent the shot into the far corner to score the goal in the 62nd minute.

“And then, I blacked out,” Thomas said. “I don’t really remember the goal, but I remember us being up 1-0. That’s all I got. Really happy.”

And it proved to be the title-winning goal the No. 2-seeded UNC women’s soccer team needed to defeat No. 2-seeded Wake Forest, 1-0, in the national championship. Thomas’ goal was her fourth of the NCAA tournament and ninth of the season. It’s the program’s 23rd national title and the first

since 2012. It’s also the first under interim head coach Damon Nahas.

But during the first half, the title looked out of North Carolina’s reach after recording only one shot to Wake Forest’s five.

Players were quiet when they entered the locker room.

Wake Forest recorded three shots on goal in the first half. The Demon Deacons applied such pressure that the Tar Heels were surprised to come out unscathed.

“We talk a lot about how do you feel comfortable being uncomfortable?” Nahas said. “And when you are under stress and all that kind of stuff, and when you’re playing against a high-level team at this stage, it’s going to happen.”

So, he rested in the discomfort, and then he made his team comfortable. Nahas told his players first and foremost they needed to raise their energy. They needed to take a breath.

It’s no secret Wake Forest dominated North Carolina in the first half. Nahas knew it. His team knew it. But that was irrelevant.

“Being 0-0 on that half time was a win for us based on how that performance went,” Nahas said. “And that to me was the biggest message.”

His players took to the sentiment. The worst part was over. Now, it was time for them to bring the intensity.

“It was a really good halftime talk,” redshirt junior defender Emerson Elgin said. “There was no blaming. No negativity. It was all positive going into the second half.”

The Tar Heels outshot their first-half performance just over 10 minutes into the second. In the 56th minute, junior forward Kate Faasse recorded UNC’s first shot on goal. UNC found another opportunity five minutes later. Thomas received the ball from Elgin inside the box. The shot went wide. Wake Forest failed to record a

shot in those opening minutes. North Carolina applied the pressure.

And then came the 62nd

minute. Thomas felt the discomfort Nahas preached about. She stepped up for the free kick.

She had the same opportunity against Duke in the ACC semifinals on the same field a month ago. Although UNC ended up winning

2-1, Thomas admitted she embarrassed herself by “skying it” way over the goal, and said she’s been working on it after practice.

First-year defender Trinity Armstrong approached Thomas. Armstrong told the forward she could do it.

“You know what?” Thomas said. “You’re right, Trin. I do got this.”

This time, she placed it perfectly. Wake Forest never found the equalizer.

The white confetti eventually came, and the Tar Heels made snow angels. They received their trophies and national championship garb. Every player brought their trophy with them to the postgame press conference.

And it all happened because of what they have been doing all season. They found comfort in the discomfort.

### BY THE NUMBERS

6

shots it took for North Carolina to score the game-winner

9

goals Olivia Thomas scored this season

12

years since UNC women's soccer won a national championship

23

national titles



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**Top photo:** UNC sophomore forward Olivia Thomas (33) celebrates with the team after scoring.

**Cutout:** Thomas (33) chases the ball during the women's soccer NCAA Championship game.

DTH/OLIVIA PAUL

“ This is a women’s soccer school. We’re just trying to keep up with them. ”

DEAN SMITH

# The Daily Tar Heel

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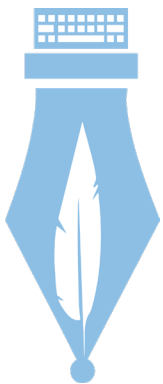
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## LEADERSHIP

# Damon Nahas recommended to be head coach

### Board of Trustees to decide on Bubba Cunningham's pick

By Harry Crowther  
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CARY, N.C. — Emerson Elgin saw UNC Director of Athletics Bubba Cunningham at the team hotel, the Raleigh Sheraton, on Monday before the national championship game.

"I was like, 'Guys, Bubba's on the premises,'" Elgin said. "There has to be good news."

And there was.

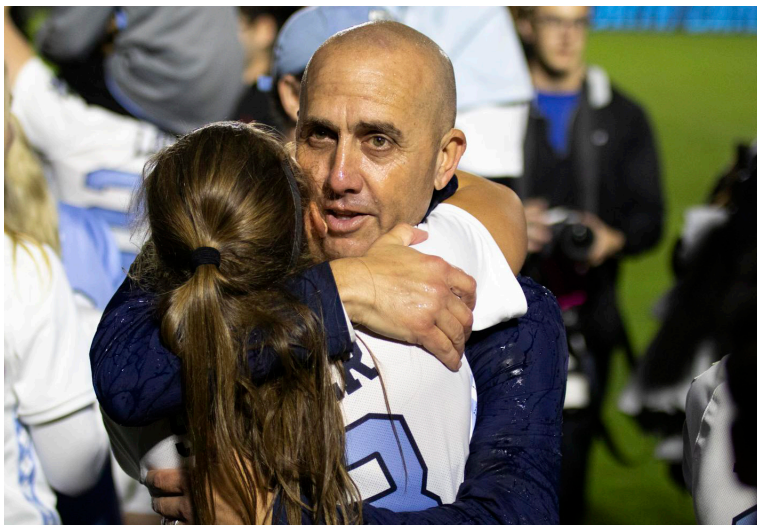
Elgin led Cunningham to interim head coach Damon Nahas' room. There, along with Senior Associate Athletic Director Vince Ille, Cunningham delivered the news to Nahas.

"They let me know in that moment that I had the head coaching job at the University of North Carolina," Nahas said.

As Cunningham's recommended candidate, Nahas now awaits approval from the UNC Board of Trustees.

Nahas put together a 20-win season and made it all the way to the College Cup with a brand new team, managing injuries and absences along the way. He stepped in for retired legendary head coach Anson Dorrance four days before the start of the season, becoming the second coach to lead the UNC women's soccer program.

And on Monday night, hours after Nahas was rewarded for his performance, the Tar Heels defeated Wake Forest, 1-0, to win the program's 23rd national title



DTH/OLIVIA PAUL

Interim head coach Damon Nahas hugs senior Bella Sember (18) after the UNC women's soccer team won their 23rd NCAA title on Monday, Dec. 9.

and first in 12 years.

Nahas is the second first-year head coach to win the NCAA women's soccer championship, joining Margueritte Aozasa of UCLA, who did it with Bruins over the Tar Heels in 2022. He is the fourth UNC coach to win a national title as a first-year coach, joining Erin Matson of field hockey, Carlos Somoano of men's soccer and Dave Klarman of men's lacrosse.

"Deep down we knew Damon deserves this whether we got [the championship] or not," Elgin said.

Junior forward Maddie Dahlien was asked following the semifinal victory over Duke if she or any of her teammates had talked with Cunningham about wanting Nahas to be their permanent head coach.

Dahlien paused and leaned into the microphone.

"Multiple times, yes."

She laughed and added, "We believe in him, and he believes in us, and I think that he should 100 percent have the head coaching job."

Nahas decided not to tell his team before the championship match. Though Elgin said they had a sense. Some of her teammates ran to Nahas' floor to try to eavesdrop.

"I knew they would have been excited in their emotion," Nahas said. "But I also didn't want their emotions running so high that it potentially would distract from what we were trying to accomplish."

He formed a huddle on the pitch amidst the post-game celebrations. Then, he delivered the news. His players screamed and engulfed him in the middle, patting his bald head.

While the team received their trophies, Nahas FaceTimed Dorrance on the field. In his

press conference, Nahas thanked Dorrance for everything he has done for him and the program. He said the title was a gift to him.

Nahas reiterated, as he has to his team and the media throughout the run in the NCAA tournament, that his goal has not been to remove the interim designation from his title.

"The girls have been so supportive," Nahas said leading up to the College Cup. "I just have really focused on the girls and the team. I genuinely have. It's kept me clear-minded without worrying about my future or what it will or won't be. I'll be OK no matter what. It's more of me just trying to do something special with this team that works so hard and try to accomplish something for the rest of our lives. And regardless of what the outcome will be, this is a unique season of an extraordinary accomplishment from a group of 27 girls that most people would never have gambled on. There's a lot to be celebrated. So I'm really secondary in this one."

After his press conference following Monday's title win, Nahas took a phone call and walked onto the pitch at WakeMed Soccer Park one more time. The stadium was quiet and empty besides a few maintenance workers and the humming sound of blowers.

Nahas looked down at the trophy in his hand.

"I did this because I just love coaching them," Nahas said. "This national championship is really the gift. This is a greater gift than the head coaching position here at North Carolina. I get to share this with them for the rest of our lives."

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## The Daily Tar Heel

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## TIMELINE

# The path to the Tar Heels' 23rd national championship

By Emma Moon

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After losing in the ACC championship game, the North Carolina women's soccer team won six do-or-die games in the NCAA tournament to secure the program's 23rd national title. The Tar Heels ended the season with a 22-5 record.

Four days before UNC's season began, long-time head coach Anson Dorrance announced his retirement. Interim head coach Damon Nahas took the reins during North Carolina's season opener against Denver.

UNC's 2-1 victory over Denver kicked off a six-game winning streak against Colorado, then-No. 16 Georgia, Arizona, North Dakota and Seton Hall to start the year. Against Colorado — where UNC won 3-2 — junior forward Kate Faasse scored two late-game goals in the last three minutes of regulation.

But North Carolina's winning streak ended against Duke in early September. For the first time in program history, the Tar Heels lost to the Blue Devils at Koskinen Stadium. Still, UNC moved forward, winning the next seven games, including two ranked wins against then-No. 19 Virginia and then-No. 17 Cal.

In October, North Carolina lost, 1-0, to its first top-10 opponent in then-No. 7 Stanford. After a 6-0 rebound win against Clemson at Dorrance Field, the Tar Heels suffered an ugly 4-2 loss to conference foe and then-No. 17 Florida State in Tallahassee. To cap off the regular season at home, North Carolina was swept by top-ranked Duke, 3-2, in the regular season for the first time in program history.

Things seemed to shift in the ACC tournament. After earning the No. 4 seed, the Tar Heels shut down No. 5 seed Virginia Tech, 2-0, thanks to Faasse's third brace of the season.

In the semifinals, North Carolina met a familiar rival in Duke. After earning a bronze medal with the U.S. U-17 Youth National Team, first-year defender Trinity Armstrong returned to Chapel Hill. Against the Blue Devils, Armstrong notched a goal line save and recorded the go-ahead goal.

Then, UNC lost to No. 3 seed Florida State, 3-2, in the ACC championship. After taking a 2-1 lead entering the second half, the Seminoles tied North Carolina after junior defender Tessa Dellarose fouled inside the box. FSU took the lead five minutes later.

Then, Nahas' squad was named a No. 2 seed and opened the NCAA tournament with an 8-0 win over USC Upstate. In the second round, a last-minute goal at the end of regulation saved UNC from an extra time decision against Santa Clara.

North Carolina defeated Minnesota, 3-0, in the third round. Against No. 4 seed Penn State, the Tar Heels advanced to the College Cup in an overtime 2-1 win. Faasse scored in the 98th minute.

And in a full-circle moment to make it back to the championship game, UNC had to go through Duke once again. Thanks to North Carolina's front three who each tallied a goal, the Tar Heels advanced to the national championship winning 3-0.

In the national championship game against Wake Forest, sophomore forward Olivia Thomas curled a free kick into the back of the net in the 62nd minute for the winning goal, launching UNC to its 23rd national title with a 1-0 win over the Demon Deacons.

X: @emmahmoon

## LEGACY

# UNC women's soccer 'Refuse. To. Lose.'

Team etches its season into the record books despite obstacles

By Harry Crowther

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CARY, N.C. — UNC women's soccer came up with a mantra for the 2024 season. Three simple words.

Refuse. To. Lose.

They refused to lose in the national championship match, overcoming Wake Forest, 1-0, Monday night at WakeMed Soccer Park. It's a campaign that will forever be writ large in the remarkable history of the program for ending a 12 year NCAA title drought. Sophomore forward Olivia Thomas scored the winning goal in the 62nd minute, a stunning strike from a direct free kick. Of the 43 NCAA Championship games played, UNC has won 22 of them.

"It's just been so special to go on this journey with these people," graduate goalkeeper Clare Gagne said. "The national championship doesn't mean anything if you're not doing it with people you love."

The Tar Heels wanted to make their own unique history alongside the legendary names of Anson Dorrance, Mia Hamm, Kristine Lilly, April Heinrichs, Carla Overbeck and many more. Names that built the program from the ground up into the greatest dynasty in college sports history. UNC women's soccer has won more national titles than any other ACC program. Only one school has won more in all of their sports combined.

Now, the names Damon Nahas, Kate Faasse, Maddie Dahlien, Olivia Thomas, Tessa Dellarose,



DTH/TAYLOR NOCK

The UNC women's soccer team celebrates their win in the College Cup Championship at WakeMed Soccer Park in Cary, N.C. on Monday, Dec. 9.

Trinity Armstrong, Linda Ullmark, Emerson Elgin, Bella Sember, Bella Gaetano, Aven Alvarez, Aria Nagai, Clare Gagne and all the other 2024 Tar Heels are immortalized in history too.

"We have so much respect for everything [and] everyone [that] has paved the way," Nahas said after the semifinal victory over Duke. "This is a different situation. And for this group to do what they've done this year, I don't know, this will be a good documentary one day maybe."

The 2024 team was so different and unfamiliar they had name tags on the first day of practice. 21 players from the 2023 team transferred, turned pro or graduated. 15 of the

27 players on this year's roster were new this season.

Dorrance, previously the only head coach in program history, retired only four days before the season began, with Nahas stepping in as interim head coach. "For many out there, publicly speaking or privately speaking, this was a team under .500 before the season started," Nahas said.

The Tar Heels went through difficult times. They've had tears. With injuries and players gone, they struggled to have full belief early on.

They adopted an underdog mentality with the strong desire to prove doubters wrong amid all the adversity and turnover.

"I think that's what really thrived in moments where we suffered," redshirt junior defender Elgin said. "We knew we were going to have to get through it. We knew it's not going to go our way. Just having faith and trust in each other."

With the whole group together behind Nahas and strong leaders, North Carolina entered the College Cup knowing they could do it, even in the face of demons from the 2022 national championship game against UCLA. The Bruins scored a controversial last-second equalizer and went on to win in extra time.

Nahas was the associate head coach then. Seven of the players on this year's team were part of that heartbreak. Nahas himself was devastated. The Tar Heels were 16 seconds away from a championship. He said that many of the players on the '22 team were in the stands Monday night and texted him throughout the NCAA tournament run.

"They had so much hope and want for us to win this," Nahas said. "To me, this is almost a championship for them as well."

Although maybe the most unlikely year for UNC women's soccer to win it all, North Carolina overcame the obstacles. The Tar Heels refused to be denied, completing their goal. They added special lore to the history books, forever enshrined with the greats and titles of years past.

"We didn't really know how this season was going to go," Elgin said. "We didn't know how everyone was going to adapt. And everyone bought in immediately. It's just been a wonderful experience."

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## FLASHBACK

# UNC beat Duke 3-0 in semifinals on Friday



DTH/SAMANTHA LEWIS

The UNC women's soccer team celebrates a goal during the College Cup Semifinals against Duke at WakeMed Soccer Park in Cary, N.C. on Friday, Dec. 6.

Maddie Dahlien, Kate Faasse, Olivia Thomas led team to victory

By Harry Crowther

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Editor's note: This story was originally published on Dec. 7.

CARY, N.C. — Maddie Dahlien remembers what she told teammate Kate Faasse at halftime.

"Kate, I'm going to be there if you whip a cross in."

UNC was already up 2-0 exiting the first half in the College Cup semifinals against Duke. Still, in the 59th minute on Friday night,

Olivia Thomas won the second ball in the middle of the park after a goal kick from goalkeeper Clare Gagne. The junior forward carried it into the Duke half and held it up before playing Faasse on the right wing. The forward looked toward the penalty area where she saw Dahlien making a run toward the spot. Faasse whipped in the cross, and Dahlien was there.

Dahlien's first touch was good. She controlled the ball, sorted her feet and squared up her defender 12 yards from goal. She took one touch to her right and shot across her body with her right foot. Duke's goalkeeper Leah Freeman had no chance.

"Her composure to set it aside and tuck it in, that's a world-class finish," interim head coach Damon Nahas said.

The lethal and dynamic front three of Thomas, Faasse and Dahlien combined to provide North Carolina's third goal — the death blow — in its 3-0 win over the rival Blue Devils to advance to the program's 28th national championship match on Monday.

The trio up top for the Tar Heels dominated, scoring all three goals and tallying one each. Friday was the first time Duke conceded a goal in the NCAA tournament this year.

"I just wanted them to be aggressive, confident," Nahas said. "I want them to be the players that are willing to make as much as miss it. And not be worried about that and go from good to great."

Thomas, Faasse and Dahlien have only started 11 of UNC's 26 matches together this season. Thomas missed over a month with an injury, and Dahlien missed nine games while she was away with the U-20 U.S. National Team.

Nahas said it was a challenge integrating the two back into the lineup.

"It took a little time for us to get the pieces together," Faasse said.

UNC was disjointed in attack during the first half of the second round of the NCAA tournament against Santa Clara. Nahas said he wanted Thomas and Faasse to be more connected. In the second half, they were. Nahas felt it was an important step in their relationship on the pitch even though they missed several good chances in that game.

He watched them walk off the field together after a narrow 1-0 victory.

"That is as valuable as the win," he said.

Nahas made sure Thomas and Dahlien knew their roles. Dahlien

is the focal point of the UNC attack with the ball at her feet and Thomas is a strong striker, who can make explosive runs in behind. Faasse brings a little bit of both skill sets, combined with clinical finishing in front of goal.

And it all came together in the College Cup.

In the 10th minute Friday, Dahlien picked up the ball on the left wing and darted into the penalty area. She touched the ball past Duke defender Nicky Chico, who stuck out a leg and chopped her down.

Nahas said Dahlien "terrorizes" teams. Of UNC's 10 spot kick goals, Dahlien has drawn six of them.

Faasse stepped up and coolly converted the penalty into the top corner. With 20 goals on the year, she is the nation's outright top scorer.

Fourteen minutes later, UNC ramped up its counter press and won the ball near midfield. Defender Bella Gaetano played a perfect first-time ball over the top for Thomas, who used her strength to get behind her defender in on goal. Freeman came off her line, but Thomas finished with poise into the bottom-right corner.

"That was the best game she's played all season," Dahlien said about Thomas.

All three produced the clincher in the second half. It finally culminated on the biggest stage.

"Now we're gelled," Faasse said. "We have dialogue, and we have confidence in each other."

The comfort and confidence could not have come at a better time. With one more game to win. For a 23rd national championship.

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# ENDING THE DROUGHT

Interim head coach Damon Nahas and the UNC women's soccer team captured its 23rd national championship at WakeMed Soccer Park in Cary, N.C. on Monday night. After a silent first half against Wake Forest, sophomore forward Olivia Thomas scored a goal in the 62nd minute with a free kick outside the penalty box to secure the win. Graduate goalkeeper Clare Gagne shut out the Demon Deacons, recording three saves.

The game marked Nahas' first title with the team after the retirement of former head coach Anson Dorrance four days before the start of the season.

At the sound of the buzzer, the Tar Heels rushed the field to celebrate Thomas, share tearful hugs with fans and loved ones and pour a cooler of Powerade over Nahas' head. Players received their national championship shirts and hats and were awarded trophies.

— Olivia Paul, sports photo editor



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