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Men's Water Polo Team Takes Fourth Place at NCAA Water Polo Championships



The Tritons end the season at 17-11 overall, their most wins since 2006. Courtesy: Ken Grosse/UCSD Athletics.

No. 3-seed UC San Diego men's water polo team fell to No. 4-seed Princeton 9-7 in the consolation game of the NCAA Men's Water Polo Championship on Sunday at Spieker Aquatics Center on the campus of UC Berkeley. The Tritons finished in fourth place at the tournament after falling to second-seeded UCLA in the national semifinal on Saturday.

UCSD ends the year at 17-11 overall while accounting for the most wins in a season since 2006, the last time the Tritons appeared in the NCAA Championship. UCSD finished fourth for the third time in school history.

Down by two in the fourth quarter, Josh Stiling scored consecutive goals to pull the Tritons even at 7-7 with 3:49 to play. However, Princeton's Thomas Nelson answered with two scores in the final 94 seconds to hand the Tigers a 9-7 win. The victory marks Princeton's second third-place finish in the past three years.

"I told the guys yesterday that the only way to feel better after losing to UCLA was to win this third-place game and obviously that didn't happen," said UCSD head coach Denny Harper. "We have a lot of student-athletes that are a little bummed out now. But, we'll be alright."

The Tritons came out firing as Graham Saber scored twice within the first 90 seconds to take a 2-0 lead. Princeton clawed its way back, evening the score on a pair of goals by Drew Hoffenberg by the 5:11 mark. Luke Syka put the Tritons up two minutes later and UCSD took a 3-2 lead into the break.

The teams traded possessions at the start of the second quarter until Princeton's Mike Helou scored a cross-cage shot to make it 3-3 two and half minutes in. The Tigers had a chance to take their first lead after a Triton turnover at mid-tank, but David Morton made a point-blank save on Tim Wenzlau.

UCSD again took the lead its next time down the pool, as Brian Donohoe capitalized with a man-advantage off a cross-court dish from William Brown. The Tritons came up empty on their next two possessions and Hoffenberg knocked in his third goal of the game off the cross bar to help to force a 4-4 scoreline at the half.

"Our offense was pretty stagnant. We weren't moving around, and when we did, we weren't successful," said Stiling. "One of their players, Drew Hoffenberg, I thought played extremely well today, and carried that team through every single quarter, especially the final, fourth quarter."

Hoffenberg tested Morton early on in the second half, but the senior net-minder did his best to keep the Tigers from taking their first lead by palming the attempt outside the post. Saber gave the Tritons the lead for the fourth time 2:43 into the third, catching a napping Tiger defense offguard with a back-handed shot from three meters out.

The lead wouldn't last long, however, as Nelson converted from close range off a deep lob inside from Hoffenberg to make it 5-5. Matt Weber connected on a turnaround shot 30 seconds later to give Princeton its first lead of the game at the 3:08 mark of the third quarter.

Hoffenberg extended Princeton's lead to two from five meters 29 seconds into the fourth after drawing the penalty shot. The Tritons won two man-advantages their next trip in the offensive zone, but could only come away with a shot off the crossbar.

The Tigers hit the post to keep the deficit and two and Stiling made them pay, converting a back-hand from two meters off a quick restart to make it 7-6. Morton came up with consecutive stops on Princeton's next two possessions. Saber started a fast break along the right side before floating a pass

to Stiling at the back post. Stiling touched it in from a meter out to pull even at Tritons even at 7-7.

Morton snuffed out the Tigers on their next trip down the pool, providing an opportunity for the Tritons to take the lead. However, UCSD was unable to regain the advantage as the Tritons turned the ball over their next three trips down the pool.

Hoffenberg led the Tigers on a counter attack before flipping it across the pool to Nelson. Nelson bounced a shot into the top of the net to give Princeton an 8-7 lead with 1:34 left. The Tigers then dug in defensively and forced UCSD into a shot clock violation. Nelson scored a final time for Princeton as the shot clock expired with 28 seconds left.

The Tritons have much to build on as the team will graduate only four seniors this season- Saber, Morton, Brown and Matt Kerchner. Morton will leave UCSD as the school's career leader for saves.

"We're only losing four seniors. We have some excellent players that we left at home that are redshirts. It's going to be an opportunity for a few kids to step up," said Harper. "We do start two freshmen an awful lot. I think of myself as a pretty decent coach but cannot duplicate this type of experience in practice. It's a good thing - one of the few things that we will be able to take back with us."

UCSD advanced to the NCAA Championship by virtue of its 15th Western Water Polo Association title. The Tritons downed UC Davis 8-7 on November 20 to earn the WWPA's automatic berth to the tournament.

"To a certain extent, my job is to make sure that this team does not now bury a great season. It was a great accomplishment to get here, playing in our conference, and we literally play every MPSF (Mountain Pacific Sports Federation) school. I think getting here is quite an accomplishment and I'm going to have to be reminding them of that," said Harper.

Donohoe earned the Elite 89 Award at Friday's Championship banquet at the Doubletree Berkeley Marina. The honor goes to the participating player with the highest GPA. Donohoe boasts a 3.9 GPA in History.

Princeton --2-2-2-3--9

UC San Diego --3-1-1-2--7

Princeton Goal Scorers - Drew Hoffenberg 4, Thomas Nelson 3, Mike Helou, Mike Weber

UC San Diego Goal Scorers - Graham Saber 3, Josh Stiling 2, Luke Syka, Brian Donohoe

Goalie Saves: Ben Dearborn, Princeton - 5 (1, 2, 0, 2)

David Morton, UC San Diego - 15 (2, 4, 3, 6)

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