

University of Virginia Women's Arena Polo Team Secures 11th National Intercollegiate Championship

UVA Women's Arena Polo Team Secures 11th Championship Title After Thrilling Finals Against Texas A&M University

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/EINPresswire.com/ -- Representing the nation's top women's talent, seven teams united at Virginia Polo Inc. in Charlottesville, Virginia, from Wednesday, April 10 to Sunday, April 14 to battle for the Division I Women's National Intercollegiate Championship (NIC). Capping-off a week of competition and camaraderie, the finale came down to a 2023 rematch between defending champions Texas A&M University (Josie Dorsey, Cara Kennedy, Olivia Reynolds, Francesca Felhaber) and hometown challengers University of Virginia (Mackenzie Craig, Lea Jih-Vieira, Alana Benz, Philipa Harris, Hannah Thomas). Determined by a slim margin, Benz led [UVA](#) in a breakout fifth chukker to overcome a two-goal deficit and pull the Cavaliers into the lead. Tied with moments remaining in regulation, Benz stepped up to the penalty line and delivered UVA's 11th women's national intercollegiate championship title.



UVA Women's Team Celebrates Championship Title- 2024 Division I Women's National Intercollegiate Championship winner University to Virginia_ Alana Benz, Mackenzie Craig, Lea Jih-Vieira, Philipa Harris, Hannah Thomas

[Arena polo](#) is a ball and mallet sport played via horseback. Arena polo is played in an enclosed arena with two goal mouths set into either end of the 300 by 150-foot dirt arena. The game is played with teams of three players each mounted on horseback. All players are equipped with bamboo cane mallets and attempt to move the ball into their respective goals to rack up points.

Periods of play last for 7.5 minutes and are known as "chukkers" or "chukkas". At the end of a

game, typically consisting of four chukkers, the team that has the highest number of goals wins. Teams must abide by all rules to ensure the safety of players and horses. Teams that commit any infraction upon these rules may be subject to penalty as dictated by the umpire officiating the match. Many players start off in arena polo during college and compete for a shot at the national title throughout their years of study. Over 30 universities coast-to-coast host arena polo clubs for students of all experience levels. Though many clubs are co-ed, varsity men's and women's teams compete annually for a shot at their own national titles.

Receiving a bye into the semifinals as the competition's number one seed, [TAMU](#) opened against University of

Kentucky (Grace Beck, Joscelin Gallegos, Taylor Nackers, Ava Nunes). TAMU's Dorsey ignited the scoring, followed by goals from Kennedy and Reynolds. UK's Beck responded for the team in blue, but TAMU's powerful defense held the Wildcats scoreless in the second and third chukkers.

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This win means more than just redemption after last year. [It was] winning for ourselves and proving we're a really strong team.”

Alana Benz - UVA Women's Arena Polo Team Captain

Adding to their lead throughout the second half, a two-pointer from Reynolds sealed the win and sent the Aggies to defend their national title.

Soaring through the quarterfinals against University of California-Davis (Emilynn Angie-Buss, Elise Pardue, Marisa Carelli, Liliana Gonzalez), UVA continued their charge against University of South Carolina-Aiken (Brianna Jordan, Kaylin Bender, Summer Kneece, Shona Adams). In a high scoring first half, Benz led the offensive for UVA, while a

two-pointer from Kneece at the end of the third gave USC-Aiken a narrow lead at the break. Storming back in the fourth, four goals from Benz brought UVA back within one. Following a two-pointer from Jih-Viera, Bender kept USC-Aiken within reach at the penalty line, but UVA ultimately pulled away in the sixth 20-16 to secure the rematch against TAMU.

Assembling a new UVA team, the return of Benz was complemented by the additions of Jih-Vieira bringing previous playing experience from Cornell University alongside intercollegiate polo



2024 Division I Women's National Intercollegiate Championship winners. University of Virginia - Alana Benz, Mackenzie Craig, Lea Jih-Vieira, Philipa Harris, Hannah Thomas. ©Oana Moore.jpg

newcomer Craig. A former member of UVA's club team, Craig detailed her journey from learning the sport to competing at the height of the national spotlight, "I had some prior polo experience, but never really playing, so my first chukkers really were here at UVA last year." Establishing a connection to carry them throughout the year, Craig noted, "Alana and Lea have done such a good job bringing me up into intercollegiate polo. They both have so much experience, it's been really great to learn from them." Recognizing the importance of building trust between the boards, Benz added, "When we started out, we weren't really sure what the team was going to be. We came together not knowing what to expect, then we just bonded really well."

Falling to TAMU earlier in the season, Jih-Vieira detailed the strengths of their familiar opponents, "They're a really offensive team and really fast in transitions. The biggest thing is marking them really tight in those transitions and not letting them get on any runs. When they have time to think, they're really accurate." Preparing to enter the arena against the Aggies for a final time this season, Craig recounted UVA's confident mentality combined with the home arena advantage, "We know we're a good team, we know we've worked hard for this. We know what this team is going to be like, we've lost to them twice already—let's not make it three!"

Striking early, Benz did not waste any time, scoring two quick goals. Answering for TAMU, Dorsey and Reynolds tied the game, with UVA's Jih-Vieira adding her first goal to finish the first chukker ahead 3-2. Matching each other stride-for-stride in the second, TAMU pulled ahead in the third with three unanswered goals for an 8-6 advantage moving into the break.



TAMU's Olivia Reynolds and UVA's Alana Benz go head-to-head. ©Oana Moore.jpg



TAMU Olivia Reynolds, Josie Dorsey. UVA Alana Benz, Lea Jih-Vieira. ©Oana Moore.jpg

Within two goals at the end of the first half, Craig detailed her role throughout the tournament, "Take the extra man out and be the next one on the play. [Lea and Alana are] such confident hitters, I did have my moments for sure, but they know if I take that man out hard, then they're going to get those awesome two-pointers."

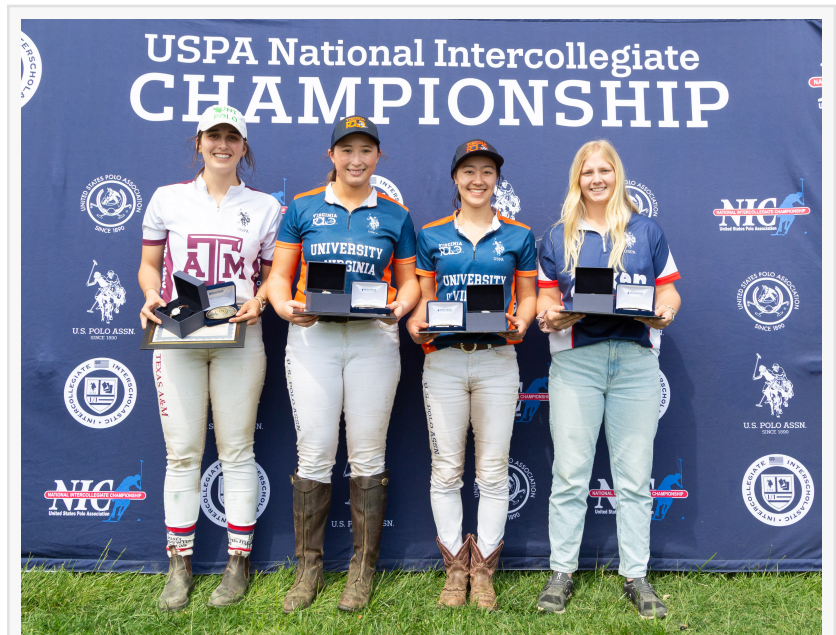
Kennedy and Dorsey increased TAMU's lead in the early stages of the fourth, but back-to-back goals from Benz maintained the gap to finish the chukker on a strong note. Chipping away at their deficit in a momentum shifting fifth chukker, Benz drilled a two-pointer, followed by two field goals before the horn to put UVA on top 12-11. Tipping the game towards UVA, Benz recounted, "I think the most

impactful part of the game was when I got on Whiskey—one of my favorite horses here at UVA, in the fifth chukker. I just feel like I have so much confidence on her, we gel really well together. I think when I got on her, I just felt like I could make any play. We got a lot of momentum that chukker [and] we carried that to the last chukker."

Answering each other tit for tat with less than a minute left in regulation, the two evenly matched teams found themselves deadlocked 13-all. Leaning towards the possibility of overtime for a second year in a row, a Penalty 2 awarded to UVA presented the opportunity to stake their claim with less than thirty seconds on the clock. Jih-Vieira detailed their strategy in the final moments of the chukker, "Alana and I went back-and-forth, [...] but I was like 'you gotta take it' and I'm glad we were right about that." Stepping up to the line with confidence, Benz's accurate swing sent the ball straight to the goal sealing UVA's electric 14-13 triumph.

"This win means more than just redemption after last year," stated Benz, "[It was] winning for ourselves and proving we're a really strong team." Earning a title in her first NIC final, Craig joyfully added, "I started this year off brand new to the women's team, brand new to intercollegiate polo and really rising from the bottom to the top. I'm still in shock that we did it and I'm so proud of myself and my teammates."

All-Stars were awarded to Summer Kneece (USC-Aiken), Lea Jih-Vieira (UVA), Alana Benz (UVA) and Cara Kennedy (TAMU). The Connie Upchurch Memorial Sportsmanship Award was presented to USC-Aiken's Kaylin Bender for her continued positive attitude, fairness and support for her



2024 Division I Women's National Intercollegiate Championship All-Stars Award Winners: Cara Kennedy (TAMU), Alana Benz (UVA), Lea Jih-Vieira (UVA) and Summer Kneece (USC-Aiken). ©Oana Moore.jpg

peers on and off the field. Demonstrating consistent riding ability and equine care throughout the tournament, Bender also received the David Wenning Memorial Horsemanship Award. Earning top honors for a second consecutive National Intercollegiate Championship final, Ola Jagger, owned by Ola Polo was named Best Playing Pony, with Best Playing String awarded to the University of Virginia.

Despite missing the opportunity to compete in the NIC's for two seasons due to COVID cancellations, Jih-Vieira reflected on her experience as a graduate student athlete at UVA, "I was a little bit nervous because all of us had to get to know each other. But just being here, the way the program supports you—the amount of riding time, the stick-and-ball time and hanging out with my teammates." Ending her intercollegiate career a champion, an elated Jih-Vieira added, "First and last [national final]! I'm done, I'm out!"

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