

Making History: The Varsity Field Hockey Team's Championship Journey

By Aarav Dalal

Cover Image:



Source: Vera Koontz

“Thrilling”

“Tenacious”

“Determined”

“Grit”

“Redemption”

These are all words used by the Fieldston Varsity Field Hockey Team to describe their prolific season. This fall, the team made history by winning the New York State Association of Independent Schools (NYS AIS) Championship for the first time in Fieldston History.

Charting the Course

“As with any team at the start of the year, it’s all about finding balance,” said Head Coach Diane Toth, who has coached the Fieldston Field Hockey team for 24 years. From last year's season, with a large senior class graduating and underclassmen moving up from JV, the team had to find

and rebuild its dynamic. “It usually takes a team 5-6 games to find their rhythm and chemistry. Our team was no exception,” added Toth.

Captain Lily Saal (Form VI), who tore her ACL during the 2023 season, made a robust comeback this year. She reflected on the early growth of the team. “The team finding their chemistry early on allowed me to focus on my own health and recovery,” said Saal.

“A game cannot be won by one player, it is won by a team,” added Toth when reflecting on Saal’s recovery and team chemistry.

And balance is what they found. The team completed 16 games with only three losses, two in overtime. Whether it was going into overtime or having a landslide win, the girls didn’t crack under pressure.

From Doubt to Determination

Early in the season, when the team first played the 14-time NYS AIS Champions, Rye Country Day School, they suffered a crushing 6-0 defeat. The loss took a huge toll on the team, “We knew that if we had any plans on winning NYS AIS, that we would have to be able to Defeat Rye Country Day,” said Captain Holly Daykin (Form VI).

Nevertheless, the team used the game as motivation and worked harder. Later in the season, they made more history by sweeping Hackley (defeating them twice in the same season) for the first time in 13 years!

Captain Lily Burnside (Form VI), an exceptional goalkeeper, commented on the importance of the Hackley sweep, “ Hackley knocked us out of the semi-finals in overtime last year. So, when we played them again at Hackley, although it was not a playoff game, it determined our seeding in the Ivy League and if we could go on to win the Ivy League.” After beating Hackley twice, Fieldston beat Riverdale and Horace Mann, claiming the title of outright Ivy League Champions.

Burnside continued, “The rivalry with Hackley goes beyond field hockey. That victory also marked Toth’s 300th win as a coach.” In celebration, Toth took home the game ball.



Source: Lily Saal

As the season progressed, the team’s morale and hunger to win the NYS AIS title skyrocketed. They began a 42-day win streak on September 25, beating Chapin right before Homecoming, and continued it through the championship game. They ended their regular season with a triumphant 6-1 win over JFK Catholic High School.



Source: Fieldston Varsity Field Hockey Instagram Page.

Sealing the Legacy.

After a bye-week in the quarterfinal round and a tense rematch with Hackley in the semifinal round, the day arrived. November 6, 2024. The Fieldston Varsity Field Hockey team faced Rye Country Day School at SUNY Purchase. On the line? A NYS AIS Championship.

The game started intensely, with both sides determined to take home the title. Rye struck first with a goal in the second quarter. Fieldston quickly roared back, as Saal scored on a penalty stroke. The teams were deadlocked at 1-1 until Rye scored early in the third quarter. Time began to slip away and Fieldston's desperation flared. With a few minutes left, Lucia Mastroianni (Form IV) saved the game, and season, as she slipped a ball past Rye's goalkeeper, tying the game 2-2.

The game going into overtime was nothing Fieldston hadn't been through already. They played four overtime games during the season, giving them much-needed experience. After a tough double overtime, it came to shootouts. Burnside, as the goalie, knew that it rested on her shoulders. She said that she wanted to ensure that on every shot, the ball didn't reach the back of the net. Burnside did her job spectacularly, and the shootouts remained tied at 2-2, with one player left to shoot – Fieldston's Sophia Thompson (Form V).

“I was so nauseous, before taking that one vs one, the fact that it was still tied was comforting and it meant that stakes were not as severe if we were down a point,” said Thompson, reflecting on the moment. “I just took a deep breath and I went for it.”

Her goal cemented it in the history books: Fieldston's first-ever Field Hockey NYSAIS championship

The Secret Sauce

Captain Vera Koontz, who her teammates call the “Vacuum” because of her extraordinary defensive play, reflected on the team's mentality. “We four [the captains] have been on this team together since sophomore year,” said Koontz. “We focused on balance, team dynamics and chemistry because we hadn't experienced that when we were underclassmen on the team. We knew that if we trained well and put in all our effort, nothing could stop us.”

Conclusion

In the end, the team's season was more than just a series of games – it was a testament to teamwork, perseverance and the power of collective effort and ambition. From navigating early challenges, like double-overtime losses, to clinching the championship in an unforgettable final, the players etched their names into school history. Their story will inspire future generations of VFH athletes to aim high, work hard and believe in the team's strength.



Captains at the beginning of the season. Source - VFH instagram.



Captains after the Championship. Source - Vera Koontz.