

## VMA gives coach a parting gift with the Class 2A title

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Theresa Giunta won't forget this group anytime soon. The coach completed her fourth and last season as head coach of the Villa Maria Academy Hurricanes by guiding them to their first PIAA Class 2A state championship since 2018, beating area power Strath Haven, 12-8, on Saturday.

Much of Giunta's team was 10 and 11 years old the last time the Hurricanes last won a state title.

She will have much to remember by the play of Sophia Tray, Lila Traynor, Jack Shaw, Remi Burns, Ellie Rayer, Lily Ippolito, Quinn Hechler, Mary Grace Gormley, Elle Toto and Kayla Cellucci.

"It was great to see our team thrive, and that state title game was the game I always envisioned us playing," Giunta said. "Winning a state championship was always on the forefront of our minds. The system we were building came along at the right time. When you make others shine, you shine brighter. This was a really talented team. We have six Division I players and a really strong sophomore class. We knew we had something special. We built our schedule to be really tough to prepare for the state tournament. Our team put the work in. They were determined to make it here."

The Hurricanes finished 17-9 overall. Defense was the backbone led by Hechler (La Salle), who had eight saves in the state title game, Rayer, Ippolito and Shaw, a sophomore who is considered one of the best field hockey players in the country. Offense came from Tray (Loyola), who scored four goals in the state championship, Traynor (Drexel), Toto and Burns, a sophomore who scored three goals in the title game.

"I would say this is the best team I ever had here," Giunta said. "They really bought into playing as a team and they bought in to playing for each other. They really loved each other. They attacked the ball. We all wanted to go with a win. The seniors were with me and built this legacy for four years. Everyone got behind the seniors to do that."

Rayer, who will be going to Purdue for academics, and Hechler said the turning point came after the Hurricanes lost to Strath Haven, 10-7, in the District 1 championship. The next practice, the seniors called a players' only meeting. Players stood up and took accountability. The team's bond grew even tighter, they said, after everything came out in the open.

"We coordinated the meeting ourselves and everyone decided we were going to win the state title," Rayer said. "We told our coaches about the meeting and I think that made us better. That was it for me. No more lacrosse. Winning the state championship with these girls will be one of the best moments of my life."

Hechler thought from Day 1 the Hurricanes could win a state title. "We had some rocky roads along the way, but we trusted one another through everything. We faced adversity. We lost to teams that we should have beat. There were conflicts that every team faces. We weren't playing to our fullest potential. At some point, we had doubts, for sure, and losing in the district championship was one of them. What kept us together was each other, coming back every day to practice. I'm never going to forget the family we created this year."

Neither will Tray. She will miss Giunta, she said, but it looks like the program will be placed in the capable hands of Hurricanes' assistant coach Emily Considine moving forward.

"We didn't have it easy," Tray said. "The district championship game was a turning point. We had a really hard schedule. We got tested. We challenged a lot of great teams. The meeting after the district loss meant everything. Our seniors kept us together.