The women's DI college side of the Mason Dixon Conference has nearly shaken out, as the Gray division wrapped up its matrix matches last weekend, and the Blue division has a few more games in March.

North Carolina took the top seed in the Gray division after a slim win over Virginia last weekend. The Tar Heels enjoyed comfortable lead into the last 10 minutes of the game, until UVA rallied with two tries to pull within three points. But time ran out for the national top-eight team, and UNC held on to the 24-21 win and 4-0 record.

“UVA’s a disciplined, well patterned team, and they pushed us in the open field,” UNC coach Johnathan Atkeison said. “But we had an edge in the set pieces and a little more ability to make things happen on the corners. UVA made a late push and were knocking on the door when time ended. It made those final minutes really uncomfortable.”

UNC has made a steady comeback after losing many experienced players – most notably USA 7s resident Kimber Rozier – during the last couple of years. Last year, Atkeison took 13 first-year players to the national round of 16, where UNC lost 62-5 to Brown. Against UVA, North Carolina only had two players with more than one year of experience on the pitch.

“Last year was a positive experience,” Atkeison reflected on nationals. “But the players were probably shocked at how different the level of play was. But you can’t expect any different until you see what a team like Brown is capable of doing. We had no exposure, but they took positives out of those losses, are really motivated and know what it takes to be competitive.”

The players had a good attitude after nationals but needed much more game time. Atkeison lined up a busy fall schedule against DI and DII schools around the South, and found the right style of game for a team composed of freshmen and first- and second-year players.

“They’re young but they’re the most athletic group, top to bottom, I’ve ever coached,” Atkeison took stock of his players. “We’ve done a couple of things differently, but a lot of things the same. When you lose someone as dynamic as Kimber at 10, for instance, it affects how the back line plays. We’ve moved toward not having a 10 do as much, sending the ball across the back line on attack. We’ve been able to move more maturely toward how we’ve wanted to play over the last couple of years.”

Atkeison has been pleased with how his young players are growing into their roles, and a couple of players have started to garner attention. The box scores themselves have highlighted wing Ariel Esperancilla, who is a dazzling finisher for the Tar Heels. And fellow 5’10” wing Naya Tapper has already attended a USA 7s camp. She’s super physical, solid muscle, and to put her speed into context, she tied 7s Eagle Vix Folayan during the 40-meter sprint. And Tapper’s only 18.

The patient rebuild paid dividends, as UNC went undefeated with recent wins over East Carolina (71-10), North Carolina State (22-12), Virginia Tech (70-0) and UVA (24-21). The team heads to the Virginia Women’s Invitational Tournament (VWIT) this weekend in Charlottesville, as the players prepare for their conference quarterfinal against the Blue division’s fourth team, James Madison, on March 23.

“This tournament comes right at the tail end of a six-week build to a peak,” Atkeison said. “Now we’ll rebuild, treat this tournament as a chance to develop players, and look toward the rest of the year. Teams like UVA, we never used to face them in the regular season. It’s made a huge difference [in our development], since the team had to click if they wanted a chance against a nationally competitive team. We’re ahead of where we usually are, and that allows us to view [the goals of the] VWIT differently.”

Atkeison hopes to see this group of young, promising group return to nationals, and the Mason Dixon conference has a good case for additional seeds beyond their automatic bid. But even if UNC should miss the big show this year, the core of players have several more years together,

and the potential for a standout squad down the road is just as exciting.