

A close-up, low-angle shot of a basketball player, Stephanie Clark, in mid-air. She is wearing a white jersey with "UNION" and the number "2" in red and black lettering. She is holding a basketball with both hands above her head, looking up at it with a focused expression. Her left arm is extended upwards, and her right arm is also reaching up. The background is dark and out of focus, showing the silhouettes of other players and spectators in a gymnasium.

THAT CHAMPIONSHIP

Stephanie Clark beats four Oklahoma City defenders for a shot during Union win in the championship game of the NAIA National Tournament.

SEASON

BY TIM ELLSWORTH

It was late January when the bottom seemed to fall out.

After starting the season 17-0, including wins over nearly all the top teams in the country, the Union University Lady Bulldogs seemed invincible. They were not.

The first loss of the year came Jan. 20 to Trevecca Nazarene. One week later, another loss – this time to Lyon College. A third loss came the next week to Freed-Hardeman.

Three losses in seven games. Questions, doubts and anxiety followed.

“I think we were all just kind of confused, just trying to figure out what was going on,” said senior forward Stephanie Clark.

“It just hit us by surprise,” senior guard Monica Elliot said. “We weren’t expecting it at all.”

Off the court, frustrations were mounting. Some parents were unhappy with their daughters’ playing time. Some players were having attitude problems of their own.

“From that either you respond to it or you react,” Coach Mark Campbell said. “I think our team responded.”

The Lady Bulldogs rebounded by going 14-2 over the rest of the season and capturing the university’s second NAIA Division I national championship March 22 with a 67-63 win over Oklahoma City.

For Baptists, this year’s women’s basketball season provided a Division I sweep, as Baylor University won the NCAA Division I crown.

For Campbell, in his sixth season as the Union coach, it was his first national title.

And for the Lady Bulldogs, the championship was the culmination of a season filled with high hopes from the beginning.

“Our goal the whole season was to win a national championship – not to win conference, as great as that would be, and not to go undefeated, as great as that would be,” Clark said. “Ultimately what was in our sights was a national championship.”

Campbell recruited this year’s team for that purpose specifically, and some of his decisions initially caught the attention of his returning players. He brought in more guards than some of his players thought were necessary. He added players that he knew would take playing time away from his veterans. He heard about that from parents.

“Everybody’s allowed to be biased towards their own child,” Campbell said. “As a coach, I know that. I knew that was going to be the biggest thing with this year’s team, because we brought in eight players and we lost one player who played last year. One.”

But Campbell convinced his team that the additions were necessary if the Lady Bulldogs were to be serious contenders for the national title. The new players helped contribute to practices filled with intensity, because they all knew they had to earn their time on the floor.

The hard work in practices paid off immediately, as Union opened the season with 17 straight wins, including a 92-70 trouncing of Oklahoma City in a preview of the national championship game. The Lady Bulldogs weren’t really even tested, as their closest game was a four-point win over Berry College. Things couldn’t have been better for the team. Signs began to emerge, however, that the Lady Bulldogs’ season wouldn’t be

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problem-free. For one, Paola Ferrari quit the team at Christmas.

"I think ultimately that has some sort of affect on everybody," Campbell said. "When someone chooses to not be a part, it automatically makes other people more committed. I think that had an impact on our team."

But a positive impact was not immediate. Campbell noticed a lack of intensity in his team after returning from the Christmas holidays. Although the Lady Bulldogs won their first four games in January, pushing their record to 17-0, they hit a wall that began with their 74-64 loss to Trevecca at home.

"I think everybody tends to relax when things are going good," Campbell said. "I think we all did that to a certain extent."

Some of the team's meetings got emotional as Union struggled through a couple of weeks of uncertainty. Campbell even broke down.

"I don't want to ever feel like I care more than they do – which is always going to be the case, since it's my job," he said. "I think when you care about people it's important to you. So for me, crying's never been a big deal. And usually when men cry, girls respond."

Though confused with what was happening to the team, Clark said the players fought through it.

"We decided we were going to pull together as a team and it wasn't just going to happen," she said. "It was going to have to be intentional, every day in practice. It was something that we actually didn't start doing very well until the end of the season."

Her battles on the court weren't the only ones for Clark, the NAIA national Player of the Year who averaged 21 points and 12 rebounds per game. Off the court, Clark faced some spiritual struggles that her teammates and coaches helped pull her through.

That spoke loudly about how much her teammates and coaches cared for her.

"I had some junk going on that wasn't glorifying to God," Clark said. "Nothing illegal, but I wasn't where I needed to be spiritually. Knowing that my coaching staff was praying for me, that I had teammates who were there to support me – that's the first time I've ever been on a team where that happened."

After losing to Freed-Hardeman on Feb. 5 (the first of three Union losses to the Lady Lions during the season), the Lady Bulldogs started clicking again. They began encouraging each other more in practice. They picked up the intensity they had lost.

"I think the confidence we had in each other on the floor played a big role," Elliot said.

Amid the frustration of losing the conference title game to Freed-Hardeman, Campbell saw some positive attributes in his team. In fact, he thought it was Union's best game of the semester. He challenged his team to build on that performance as they prepared for the NAIA national tournament.

"No one remembers what happens in the conference tournament," he said. "They always remember what happens in March."

As they did earlier in the season, the Lady Bulldogs responded. They weren't tested in their first round game against Lubbock Christian University, but they needed overtime to finish off North Georgia College in round two.


After victories in the quarterfinals and semifinals, and edging Oklahoma City in the finals, the Lady Bulldogs could look back and reflect on a completed season – a season that brought them a national title. A season they will tell their children and grandchildren about for years to come.

"I definitely feel blessed by God to be a part of that," Clark said. "Not that you're always going to win and come out successful in the world's eyes. We're not here to be patted on the back by other people but to be faithful to our heavenly Father."

For Campbell, the moment in the spotlight is an opportunity to thank God for the blessing.

"I don't think he cares about us winning a basketball game, but he does require us to glorify him in it," he said.

Campbell also knows the best part of the season wasn't necessarily a national title, but the process to get there – and the relationships forged along the way.

"The whole thing that's success for me is the journey," he said. "Without the previous six and a half months, it's impossible to enjoy the last month. A lot of people win championships, but not everybody goes about the journey the right way." 

The Union players celebrate with each other on the court after their 67-63 win in the championship game of the NAIA National Tournament.



The entire Union Lady Bulldog team poses with the NAIA National Championship banner after Union win in the title game.



THE CHAMPIONSHIP RUN AT A GLANCE

GAME ONE

• **Union 77, Lubbock Christian 55**
After a low-scoring first half, the Lady Bulldogs held a slim 18-14 lead. But then they went on a 23-6 run to open the second half. Stephanie Clark, Monica Elliot and Tiffany Fisher all finished in double figures.

GAME TWO

• **Union 83, North Georgia 75 (OT)**
The Lady Bulldogs built a comfortable 43-27 lead at halftime—perhaps too comfortable. North Georgia stormed back to tie the game in regulation, but Union dominated the overtime period to earn a berth in the quarterfinals. Stephanie Clark and Merideth Richardson combined to score 46 points.

GAME THREE

• **Union 87, Vanguard 72**
Top-seeded Vanguard took a 7-0 lead, but Union grabbed control of the game moments later and never trailed again. Ena Daniels led the Lady Bulldogs with 21 points and 8-for-12 shooting from the floor. Union was in the Final Four for the first time in three years.

GAME FOUR

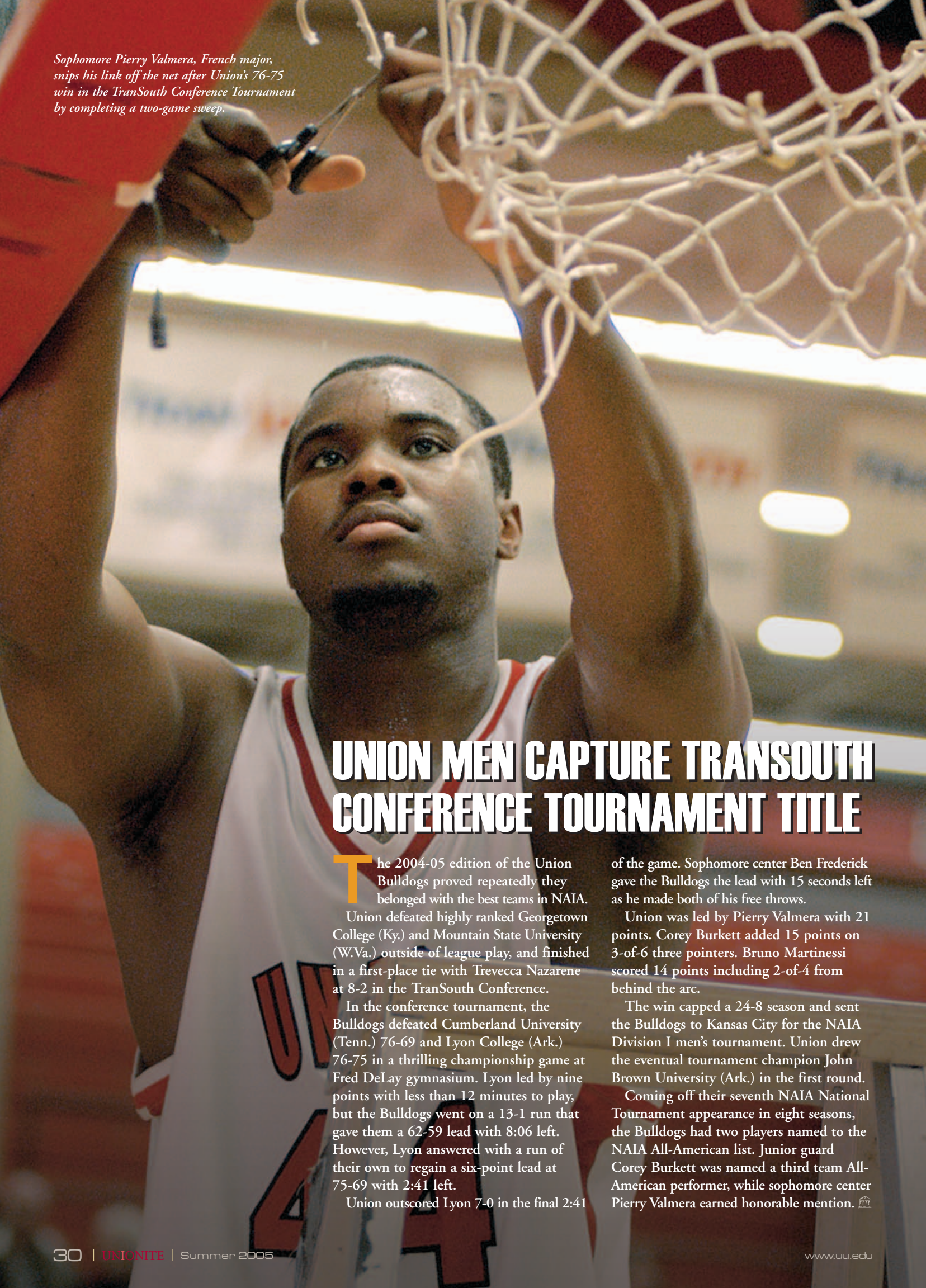
• **Union 84, Point Loma Nazarene 58**
Teams usually look to upperclassmen for leadership in Final Four games, but freshman guard Merideth Richardson set the pace in this game, scoring 31 points and connecting on nine shots beyond the 3-point arc. The Lady Bulldogs survived a strong Point Loma run near the end of the first half, and came up with seven steals.

GAME FIVE

• **Union 67, Oklahoma City University 63**
Union canned nine more 3-point shots to set a tournament record of 51, but the game was iced at the free throw line. With Union holding a 65-63 lead, Ena Daniels stepped to the line with eight seconds remaining and hit both free throws. Oklahoma City finished its seventh-consecutive title game appearance with a tournament scoring record of 418 points. Merideth Richardson led Union scorers with 15 points.

TOURNAMENT ACCOLADES

- **Tournament Most Valuable Player:** Stephanie Clark
- **Tournament Hustle Award:** Monica Elliot
- **Coach of the Year:** Mark Campbell
- **All Tournament Team:** Stephanie Clark, Merideth Richardson, Ena Daniels



Sophomore Pierry Valmera, French major, snips his link off the net after Union's 76-75 win in the TranSouth Conference Tournament by completing a two-game sweep.

UNION MEN CAPTURE TRANSOUTH CONFERENCE TOURNAMENT TITLE

The 2004-05 edition of the Union Bulldogs proved repeatedly they belonged with the best teams in NAIA.

Union defeated highly ranked Georgetown College (Ky.) and Mountain State University (W.Va.) outside of league play, and finished in a first-place tie with Trevecca Nazarene at 8-2 in the TranSouth Conference.

In the conference tournament, the Bulldogs defeated Cumberland University (Tenn.) 76-69 and Lyon College (Ark.) 76-75 in a thrilling championship game at Fred DeLay gymnasium. Lyon led by nine points with less than 12 minutes to play, but the Bulldogs went on a 13-1 run that gave them a 62-59 lead with 8:06 left. However, Lyon answered with a run of their own to regain a six-point lead at 75-69 with 2:41 left.

Union outscored Lyon 7-0 in the final 2:41

of the game. Sophomore center Ben Frederick gave the Bulldogs the lead with 15 seconds left as he made both of his free throws.

Union was led by Pierry Valmera with 21 points. Corey Burkett added 15 points on 3-of-6 three pointers. Bruno Martinesi scored 14 points including 2-of-4 from behind the arc.

The win capped a 24-8 season and sent the Bulldogs to Kansas City for the NAIA Division I men's tournament. Union drew the eventual tournament champion John Brown University (Ark.) in the first round.

Coming off their seventh NAIA National Tournament appearance in eight seasons, the Bulldogs had two players named to the NAIA All-American list. Junior guard Corey Burkett was named a third team All-American performer, while sophomore center Pierry Valmera earned honorable mention. 🏆