

Special Edition '26 Bearcat Champs



WRESTLING CHAMPION:

Hunsberger Wins 3rd Consecutive National Title

David Hunsberger capped off the most decorated career in Lander athletics history as he took a 9-4 decision over Nebraska-Kearney's Trenton Munoz to claim his third-straight

Lander has now had at least one wrestler compete in the final session of the tournament in every season except the first two in program history and now boasts four total national champi-

ons. added a late takedown to secure a 7-4 victory.

At 174 pounds, Maxwell Kiel faced top-seeded Hunter Jump of Central Oklahoma in a defensive battle. Jump secured an escape early in the third period and held on for the 1-0 decision, sending Kiel to the consolation bracket.

At 197 pounds, Marvelous Rutledge saw his championship hopes end in the consolation rounds after a tight match with Gannon's Joey Lyons. Lyons secured the deciding riding-time point to earn the victory, sending Rutledge to the seventh-place match.

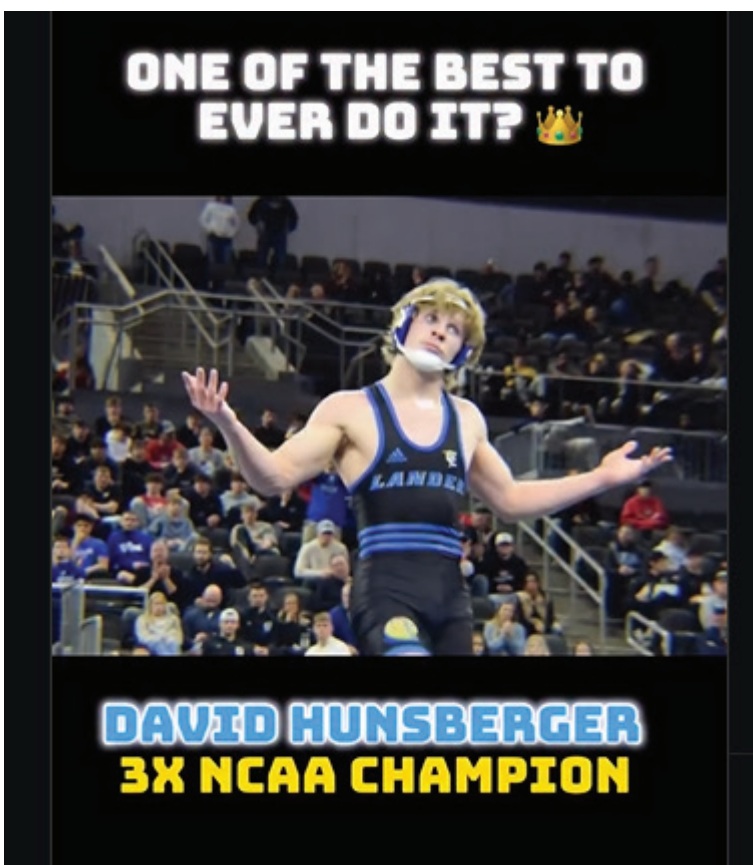
Lusk later returned to the mat in the consolation semifinals but fell to Minnesota State's Colton Hush, moving him to the fifth-place match.

Kiel also competed in the consolation semifinals but dropped a decision to St. Cloud State's Bryce Dagel, placing him in the fifth-place match.

In the placement matches later in the session, Kiel closed out his collegiate career in strong fashion with a 10-3 decision over San Francisco State's Lima to secure a fifth-place finish.

Lusk finished sixth at 141 pounds after falling to Nebraska-Kearney's Airola in the fifth-place match.

Rutledge capped his tournament with a dramatic finish in the seventh-place match. After tying the bout with an escape early in the third period, Rutledge countered a late shot and secured a takedown at the buzzer. The call was upheld following a challenge, giving Rutledge the victory and his second consecutive seventh-place finish at the national



165-pound national title Saturday night inside the Denny Sanford PREMIER Center at the 2026 NCAA Division II Wrestling Championships.

Hunsberger finishes his career 123-9, earning four All-Conference honors, two Conference Wrestler of the Year awards, and soon-to-be a second Super Region Wrestler of the Year. He is also a four-time Super Region II Champion, national qualifier, and All-American, and now stands as the 25th three-time national champion in Division II history. He was also named the tournament's Most Outstanding Wrestler, marking the first Lander and Conference Carolinas wrestler to earn that honor.

His title win helped Lander finish with 64.5 team points, good for a fifth-place finish in the country and the fourth-straight top-five finish for the Blue and Gold.

victory at the 2024 championships.

At 141 pounds, Elijah Lusk fell just short of the championship match, dropping a narrow 4-3 decision to West Liberty's Khyvon Grace. Lusk battled back late in the match and came close to securing a takedown in the final seconds but was unable to finish the shot before time expired.

Hunsberger advanced to his third consecutive national final at 165 pounds with a strong semifinal performance against Sam Richardson. After escaping to take the lead in the third period, Hunsberger

Session III

Lander entered Saturday morning with four wrestlers in the championship semifinals and another competing on the backside of the bracket.

At 133 pounds, James Joplin secured his first career national finals appearance with an 8-6 decision over St. Cloud State's Dominic Ducato. Joplin jumped out early with two takedowns in the opening period and maintained the lead throughout the match, earning redemption after falling in the semifinals in sudden

The win made Hunsberger the first three-time national champion in program history, and he also became the program's first four-time All-American, capping one of the most accomplished careers in Lander wrestling history.

championships.

Continued on page 11

The Standard Was Set

By Graeme Simpson

A midweek loss at Georgia Southwestern on January 7 could have become the kind of result that lingers. Instead, it became the moment that sharpened Lander’s season.

Two days later, with Augusta in town and the game slipping away, the Bearcats found themselves in a moment that now feels larger in retrospect. A late shot from Tommy Moore forced overtime, and Lander finished the comeback. From there, everything changed.

What followed was more than a winning streak or a postseason run. It was a winter in which Lander University pushed itself onto one of the biggest stages in Division II athletics. The men’s basketball team rode that January turning point all the way to the NCAA Division II national championship game, while on the mat, David Hunsberger capped one of the most decorated careers in school history with a third consecutive national title. For weeks, the Bearcats were not simply competing. They were carrying Greenwood, South Carolina, onto the national stage.

Under Omar Wattad, the Bearcats did not just respond to that early January loss—they took control of their season. Lander won 21 of its next 22 games, closing the regular season with authority and carrying that momentum into the Peach Belt Conference tournament.

As the top seed, the Bearcats moved

“I’m proud of the guys. Just like they have all year, they were resilient. They pushed through. They fought.”

Head Coach Omar Wattad

through the bracket without hesitation, turning consistency into dominance and positioning themselves for a deeper run. That control followed them into March, where a comeback win over Lincoln Memorial tested

them early and a dominant performance against Columbus State reinforced



what they had become.

It was the regional final against Lenoir-Rhyne that defined the moment. Facing one of the most efficient offenses in the country, Lander delivered its most complete performance of the season—disciplined on defense, composed in possession and confident in execution—securing the Southeast Regional title.

“I think we just did what’s probably the hardest thing to do in college basketball, which is win the conference regular-season championship, win the conference tournament and then win the regional tournament,” Wattad said.

That stretch did more than produce wins. It established identity. Each game demanded something different, and each time, the Bearcats responded. By the time they reached the national stage, Lander was no longer building momentum—it had become it.

That success was not confined to the court.

While the Bearcats were building a run that would carry them across the country, Hunsberger was doing what he had done throughout his career—winning, and doing it with control. By the time he stepped onto the mat for the national championship at 165 pounds, the outcome felt familiar, as he dictated pace, created separation and closed the match with authority to secure his third consecutive national title.

Dominance had come to define his run. Match after match, Hunsberger separated himself from the field, controlling position, building leads and adding points even when the result was no longer in doubt. His ability to remain composed in high-pressure moments turned close matches into decisive ones and expectations into results.

That approach had defined his run long before his final title.

“We have a great culture at Lander,”
Continued on Page 5

Super Proud of Our Bearcats



Proud doesn't begin to cover it

Special to the Forum By Dr. Kara Harris McAlister
Lander Accounting Professor

The Lander Men's Basketball team's run to the NCAA Division II National Championship was extraordinary. While the final result didn't end the way we hoped, what this team accomplished goes far beyond one game. They represented Lander University with heart, discipline, humility, and leadership on a national stage.

Championship seasons are not defined only by the final score — they are defined by resilience, preparation, teamwork, and the ability to compete with purpose. This group modeled all of those qualities. They brought our campus together, inspired our students, and showed what it looks like to pursue excellence.

There's a leadership lesson here: success is not always measured by the outcome, but by the standard you set, the culture you build, and the way you compete. This team raised the bar and left a legacy.

As Scripture reminds us: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

— 2 Timothy 4:7

Photos by Lander Alumnae Maddie Bishop (2021)

A Season of Winning

Continued from page 3

Hunsberger said. “We’re all connected. We all work together.”

By the end of his career, that culture was no longer something the program was building—it was something it had become.

“We were just looking for fight and effort,” head coach RC La-Haye said. “I’m proud of the guys. Just like they have all year, they were resilient. They pushed through. They fought.”

At Lander, that standard extended beyond one sport. While Hunsberger was finishing a championship career, the Bearcats on the court were still building theirs.

That stage took them to Pittsburgh, where the margin narrowed against Daemen in the national quarterfinals. For one of the first times in weeks, Lander was forced into a game that demanded response.

Trailing late, the Bearcats steadied themselves. Possession by possession, they absorbed pressure, found rhythm and answered the moment.

“I don’t want to go home,” Grayson Pritzl said. “I love this team. I love all the guys. I didn’t want this to be our last game together.”

They moved on, advancing to face Nova Southeastern—the defending national champions and the top seed—in the national semifinals.

For many, the matchup framed Lander as a surprise. Inside the locker room, it did not.

“People think this is some sort of Cinderella story,” Wattad said. “We’ve been to three of the last four NCAA tournaments. We’ve been to two of the last three Sweet 16s.”

“The guys in the locker room expected this to happen,” he said. “There was no fear. We weren’t afraid in any fashion whatsoever.”

That belief showed. From the opening minutes, Lander matched Nova Southeastern possession for possession, refusing to be overwhelmed by pace, pressure or expectation. When Nova pushed, the Bearcats responded. When the game tightened, they remained composed.

“I told them, ‘This is what we came here for,’” Wattad said. “Our roster is built for this game right here, right now. Just keep your head.”

By the final minutes, the tone had shifted. What had been framed as a challenge became a statement, as Lander did not just compete with the best team in the country—it outplayed them.

In the national championship game, Lander’s run came to an end against Gannon. But the result did not define the season.

“I’m super proud of my guys,” Wattad said. “Are you kidding me? Thirty wins—they’re amazing.”

“It’s a very sad locker room in there,” he said. “They put their heart out there for nine months.”

This was a team that had been tested, that had responded and that had carried itself—and its community—further than ever before.

“They care for one another. They love one another. They work hard on a daily basis,” Wattad said.

What they built lasted longer than a final score.

“Everybody’s going to remember 2025–26 Lander,” he said. “It’ll never be forgotten.”

For the Bearcats, the season did not end with a loss. It ended with a standard.

Fan Support Fueled Team

By Olivia Carbone

As Lander University’s men’s basketball team made its historic run to the DII National Championship, students did not just watch from afar. They came together.

For senior Abigail Zubieta-Robinson, the watch parties



quickly became one of the most memorable parts of the experience.

“It was super fun, super hype,” she said. “I really liked the community coming together.”

For many students, the watch parties created an opportunity to experience the excitement of the tournament in a way they otherwise could not.

“Not being able to attend games sucked, but I really loved that Lander provided everything, and I was happy to experience that with everyone,” Zubieta-Robinson said.

One of her favorite moments came during a close 77 to 74 win.

“We were holding our breath down to the wire, and it was fun to celebrate,” she said.

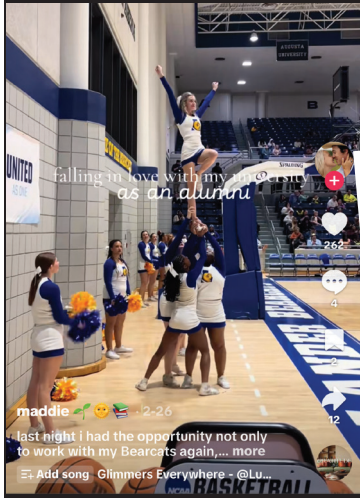
She also noticed a shift in the overall atmosphere on campus.

“It brought it together. There has been a lot happier energy on campus, and it is great that people outside of Lander came and that we had the whole Greenwood community there.”



Continued on page 8

Lander Comm



Lander University was live.
10h · 🌐
We're going LIVE to welcome our Bearcats home! 🏀💙💛
#cLawsUp

Customize your own seat cushion, No more dust-clinging stains on your car seats... more

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Lander University was live.
10h · 🌐
We're going LIVE to welcome our Bearcats home! 🏀💙💛
#cLawsUp

Chris Trainor
1d · 🌐
Holy smokes, Lander University's men's basketball team is going to the national championship game in Division II

Jacob Lethoc

Katie Whatley
1d · 🌐
BEARCATS WIN!!!!! 💙💛 #nattybound

Ethan Roark + 51

Fox Carolina News
23h · 🌐
One to Go: Lander Beats Top Seed Nova Southeastern 91-81, Will Play for National Championship Game!

LANDER TO TITLE GAME!

How the university from Greenwood, Lander University, earned a spot in the National Championship game.

Trentsie Williams + 70 7 shares

Most relevant

Kristi Crowder McElrath · 22h
Way to go, Lander Basketball!

WE'RE IN

2025 DIV II MEN'S BASKETBALL CHAMPIONSHIP

678 20 61

Liked by basmanbee and others
landermmbb LET'S GO DANCING 9:32

Index-Journal 1d
Lander will be playing Gannon for national championship in NCAA Division II

31

POV: YOU GOING TO THE NATTY

talktoemdc
WE GOING TO INDIANAPOLIS

Add comment...

Index-Journal 2d
Congratulations to the Lander men's basketball team for making it to the NCAA...

heraldcourier.com
COLLEGE BASKETBALL: Omar Wattad (Science Hill) will coach the Lander Bearcats

Omar Wattad (Science Hill) just coached the Lander Bearcats to a win over top-seeded and defending national champs Nova Southeastern in the NCAA Division II Final Four. His squad plays for the national championship on Easter Sunday.

David Hays
1d · 🌐
The national pundits might be surprised but many of us in Greenwood and at Lander believed the Bearcats could slay the giants (Nova Southeastern) and now they are in Indianapolis for the NCAA Division II national championship on Easter Sunday.

Bearcats Beat Top Seed Nova Southeastern 91-81, Will Play for National Championship Game

16 comments 6 shares

Lander University
1d · 🌐
BEARCATS WIN!!!

For the FIRST time in school history, the Lander men's basketball team has won the NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP!

#cLawsUp

Like Comment

Madelyn Bishop + 1.6K

Most relevant

Stacey King Hart · 1d · 🌐
Congratulations to our athletes! So proud of our athletes!

Amanda Darby · 1d · 🌐
It's a great day!

The Greenwood Building
1d · 🌐
Today, we're trading green for blue at the Greenwood Building. Cheering on Lander University men's basketball as they head to the... See more

Like Comment Share

Madelyn Bishop + 92

Peach Belt Conference
Lander Men's Basketball have punched their ticket to the NCAA National Championship for the first time in school history 🏆🏀🎉

34 97

Robert Stevenson
22h · 🌐
The Lander University Bearcat is going to take down Gannon University's Drake the Golden Knight at the NCAA Div. II national championship - 1 p.m. on April 5 in Indianapolis. Proud to be a BEARCAT!!



1,592 8 27 141

Liked by trentsie and others
landerstudents These Bearcats are out for our @landermmbb 1 day ago

PROUD BEARCATS:

Lander Community Came Together as a Family

Continued from page 5

“Not every student can attend games in person, so we wanted to create an accessible, high-energy environment where everyone could come together,” said Coordinator of Campus Involvement Molly Sutton. What began as an event expecting around



100 to 200 students quickly exceeded expectations. More than 400 students showed up to the first watch party.

“It did not matter if you knew the person next to you or not,” Sutton said. Everyone was cheering on the same team.”

Planning these events required quick coordination and collaboration across campus, including support from the Special

scale without them.”

The energy from these events did not go unnoticed by the players themselves.

Sophomore forward Jake Tringone said the support from campus played a major role in motivating the team.

“It’s everything for us, just to know we have the support back home,” Tringone said. “It excites us and gives us momentum.”

Junior forward Navaughn Maise shared a similar perspective.

“It feels great to know that we got such a great family behind us,” Maise said. “It makes us want to win this even more.”

Freshman guard Jacob Daniels added that the crowd’s energy directly impacted their performance.

“The energy they bring, we feed off that,” Daniels said. “It is a big part of our success.”



Events team.

Blake Sweezy, Production Manager for Special Events, focused on creating an atmosphere that matched the intensity of the moment.

“For this event, I knew that we needed to really bring the energy and create an atmosphere that would provide students with the space to enjoy the game,” Sweezy said. “We put up our large projection screen in the plaza and added blue and gold lighting, visuals, and other elements to enhance the experience and draw out school spirit.”

Behind the scenes, the production relied heavily on student involvement.

“All 12 of our student workers helped in some way to make this event happen,” Sweezy said. “We would not be able to support events of this



Some Special Moments To Remember



Photos by Lander Alumnae Maddie Bishop (2021)

Knopp, Russell Win College Fishing National Championship



Lander University Bass Fishing teammates Matthew Knopp and Logan Russell captured the 2026 MLF College Fishing National Championship on Lake Murray on Saturday, securing the program's third national title in the past three seasons.

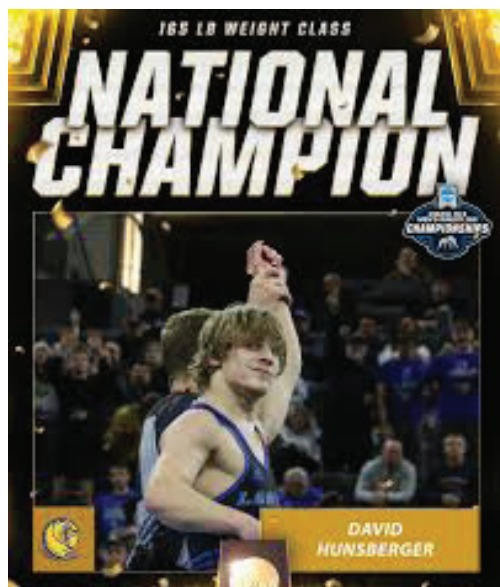
The duo posted a three-day total of 70 pounds, 10 ounces to win the national championship event, edging teams from the University of Montevallo and Carson-Newman University in a tightly contested field featuring more than 150 college teams from across the country. Competing close to home on Lake Murray, Knopp and Russell delivered two of the largest daily totals of their careers during the event, including a strong final-day performance that secured the title.

The national championship marks Lander's third overall collegiate national title in bass fishing. Garrett Smith and Andrew Blanton previously won back-to-back Bassmaster College National Championships in 2024 and 2025, establishing the Bearcats as one of the premier programs in the country. Saturday's victory also represents Lander's first MLF College Fishing National Championship.

In addition to earning national titles, Knopp and Russell both qualified for the 2026 Toyota Series Championship this November. The higher finisher at that event will advance to compete for a \$300,000 prize at REDCREST 2027, one of the sport's premier professional tournaments.

Hunsberger: A Truly Phenomenal Bearcat

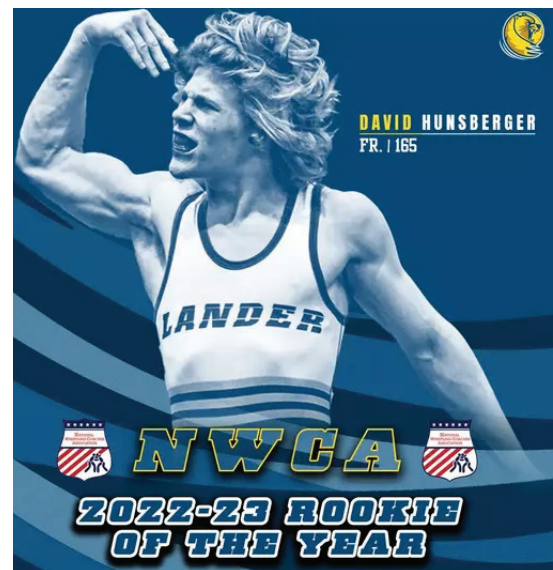
Continued from pag2



entering the final frame. Strausbaugh quickly escaped to cut the deficit to one before a lengthy scramble sequence resulted in the deciding moment of the match.

Strausbaugh secured a takedown late in the third period to take the lead, and Joplin was unable to escape before time expired, falling 5-3 and finishing the tournament as the national runner-up.

At 165 pounds, David Hunsberger closed out his decorated career in dominant fashion against Nebraska-Kearney's Trenton Munoz. Hunsberger wasted little time getting on the board, scoring an early takedown before quickly cutting Munoz to keep the action neutral. He added



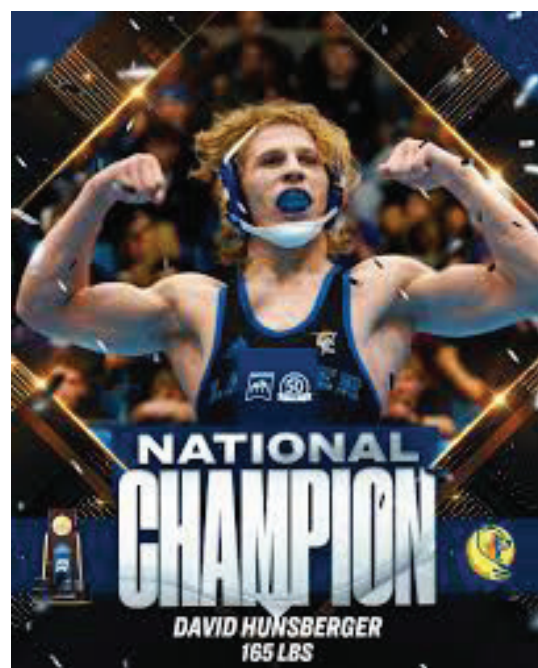
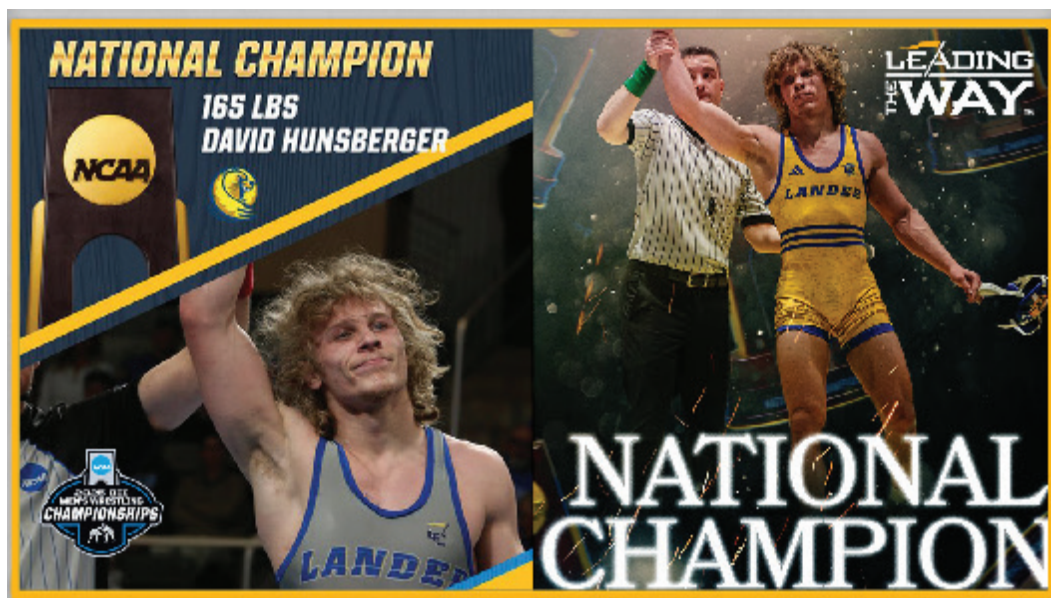
late, but Hunsberger controlled the remaining seconds to secure a 9-4 victory and his third career national championship.

Session IV

Two Bearcats competed under the lights Saturday night with national titles on the line.

At 133 pounds, James Joplin squared off against Mary's Jacob Strausbaugh in the national championship match. Joplin struck first with a quick takedown to take an early 3-0 lead before Strausbaugh escaped to make it 3-1 heading into the second period.

The middle period saw several scrambles and shot attempts from both wrestlers, but neither was able to convert, keeping Joplin in front



another takedown midway through the opening period to build an early cushion.

Munoz battled back with an escape and attempted to generate offense from the front headlock position, but Hunsberger continued to control the pace of the match. After riding through the second period and maintaining his advantage, Hunsberger extended his lead in the third with a takedown on the edge of the mat that was confirmed following a Lander challenge.

Munoz managed an escape

The win made Hunsberger the first three-time national champion in program history, and he also became the program's first four-time All-American, capping one of the most accomplished careers in Lander wrestling history.

In six seasons, Lander Wrestling now has four national champions, seven national finalists, 22 All-Americans, and 41 national qualifiers.

The 2026 season saw Lander win its third-straight Conference Carolinas West Division title, fifth-straight conference title, and fourth-straight NCAA Super Region II title.

Lander Calendar of Events - April

This Forum Calendar includes on-campus events. For more information, visit lander.edu/events.

April 1

Bearcat for a Day

XLR in the Plaza
11 AM - 1 PM

Intramural - 4v4 Grass
Volleyball, 7 - 10 PM

April 2

Meet Kyle Freeman,
Candidate for US Senate
5 - 6 PM

Baseball, 5 - 8 PM
Bearcats vs. USC Aiken

Lander's Got Talent
7 - 9 PM

Intramural - Outdoor
Soccer, 7 - 10 PM

April 3

Women's Rugby

Women's Tennis, 1 - 4 PM
Bearcats vs. Georgia
Southwestern

Men's Tennis, 2:30 - 5:30
PM, Bearcats @ North
Georgia

Acrobatics & Tumbling
4 - 7 PM

Bearcats @ Emmanuel

Softball, 5 - 8 PM
Bearcats vs. Augusta

Baseball, 5 - 8 PM
Bearcats vs. USC Aiken

Mr. Lander Pageant
6:30 - 9 PM

April 4

Women's Rugby

Women's Lacrosse,
12 - 3 PM
Bearcats vs. Montevallo

Softball, 12 - 5 PM
Bearcats vs. Augusta

Baseball
3 - 6 PM
Bearcats vs. USC Aiken

April 6

Intramural - Ultimate Frisbee
7 - 10 PM

April 7

Baseball, 5 - 8 PM
Bearcats vs. Francis Marion

Community Lecture Series
5:30 - 7:30 PM, Presenter:
Kevin Witherspoon Reception:
5:30 p.m. Presentation: 6:00 p.m.

Intramural - Men's 7v7 Flag
Football, 7 - 10 PM

April 8

Senior Picnic, 5 - 7 PM

Intramural - 4v4 Grass Volley-
ball, 7 - 10 PM

April 9

Women's Tenni2:30 - 5:30 PM
Bearcats @ North Georgia

BFA Exhibit & Art Walk
5 - 8 PM

Intramural - Outdoor Soccer
7 - 10 PM

April 10

Junior Preview Day
9 AM - 5 PM

Softball, 6 - 9 PM
Bearcats vs. Flagler

Baseball
Bearcats @ Georgia College

April 11

Men's Rugby
SRC 7s Championship

Men's Tennis
10:30 AM - 1:30 PM
Bearcats vs. Middle Georgia

Women's Lacrosse
11 AM - 2 PM
Bearcats vs. Alabama-Huntsville

Softball, 12 - 5 PM
Bearcats vs. Flagler

Women's Tennis, 1 - 4 PM
Bearcats vs. Middle Georgia

Men's Lacrosse, 1 - 4 PM
Bearcats vs. Alabama-Huntsville

Baseball, 2 - 5 PM
Bearcats @ Georgia College

Baseball, 1 - 4 PM, Bear-
cats @ Georgia College

April 13

Fall Registration for New
Students Begins

Women's Tennis, 2 - 5 PM
Bearcats vs. Erskine

Campus Engagement
Awards, 5 - 6 PM

Meet Jermaine Johnson,
Candidate for SC Govern-
or, 5 - 7 PM

April 14

Potting Plants with Pur-
pose, 11 AM - 2 PM

Baseball, 3 - 6 PM
Bearcats @ Erskine

SGA Transition
Ceremony, 3:30 - 5 PM

Pathfinders - Entrepre-
neurship and Young
Leaders, 5 - 6 PM

April 15

Women's Tennis, 2:30
- 5:30 PM, Bearcats @
Columbus State

April 16
Chamber Orchestra
7 - 9 PM

April 17

Softball, 6 - 9 PM, Bear-
cats @ Georgia College

Baseball, 6 - 9 PM
Bearcats @ USC Beaufort

April 18
Softball, 12 - 5 PM
Bearcats @ Georgia
College

Women's Tennis.1 - 4 PM
Bearcats vs. Augusta

Men's Lacrosse, 1 - 4 PM
Bearcats @ Montevallo

Women's Lacrosse
2 - 5 PM, Bearcats vs.
Virginia State
Baseball, 2 - 5 PM
Bearcats @ USC Beaufort

April 19

Baseball, 1 - 4 PM

Bearcats @ USC Beaufort

Choral Concert, 7 - 9 PM

April 20
BDes Exhibit

April 21
Softball, 2 - 7 PM
Bearcats vs. Tusculum

Baseball, 4 - 7 PM
Bearcats @ Wingate

Jazz Ensemble, 7 - 9 PM

April 22
Green Goals Bingo
6 - 7:30 PM

April 23
Wind Ensemble

April 24
Softball, 6 - 9 PM
Bearcats vs. USC Aiken

Baseball, 6 - 9 PM
Bearcats @ St. Leo

Mays Historic Site 15th An-
niversary Program, 7 - 9 PM

April 25
Accepted Students Day
9 AM - 5 PM

April 25
Softball, 1 - 6 PM
Bearcats vs. USC Aiken

Baseball, 1 - 6:30 PM
Bearcats @ St. Leo

April 27
Last Day to Withdraw from
all Courses

Classes End

CAB Outdoor Movie Night
7 - 9:30 PM

April 28
Stress Fest / Bearcatapalooza

Community Lecture Series
5:30 - 7:30 PM, Presenter:
David Zinn Reception: 5:30
p.m. Presentation: 6:00 p.m.

Reading Day

April 29
Final Exams