It's been a long road for North Carolina, but the defending DI women's college South champion is back atop the podium and returning to nationals after today's 31-14 victory over East Carolina.

"The team has come so far since the last time we played ECU," UNC coach Johnathan Atkeison reflected on the team's 26-6 loss to ECU in early February. "Even though the loss of fullback Katie Lorenz is only one player, our offense was built around putting her into space. We had to readjust everything and learn to move the ball more and wait for space to appear as opposed to forcing it."

The adjustment process meant that UNC finished second in its conference had to win the South play-in seed just to advance territorial championships. Two wins over Georgia (10-0) and Florida (38-5) last weekend enabled UNC to take the fourth seed to Souths. The Tar Heels didn't waste any time in securing its return to the championship, beginning the weekend with a 28-0 semifinal win over Clemson on Saturday.

"We felt really good after last weekend and came out on the front foot," Atkeison said. "We

controlled the tempo for a full 80 minutes."

Clemson was missing its star flyhalf Sam Lauring, whose dynamism was missed in the backline. Try-scorer No. 8 Julia Schmidt was difficult to contain, but the typically high-scoring player came off with an injury.

UNC flanker Erin McGee terrorized Clemson, putting lots of pressure on the flyhalf and was all over the field. Flyhalf Kimber Rozier led with 15 points on a try, two conversions and two penalties, while wing Holly Zoeller and Hanna Samad added five-pointers.

North Carolina watched as East Carolina rallied to a 24-20 semifinal win over Central Florida, a victory that didn't evolve until UCF's red card opened up the space for Katie Erb to score the go-ahead try. As UNC sized up ECU's strengths, Atkeison began making some adjustments to account for their final's opponent.

"We were missing some props and had some trouble with the scrum," Atkeison said. "We changed our front row lineup for the final, and knew we had to hold our scrum as a minimum. We also adjusted our backline defense to nullify their advantages."

ECU's Missy Ritt was the notable advantage. The inside center scored two tries in the team's semifinal, and flyhalf Jessica Peterson proved difficult to contain.

"Heading into the final, the girls were excited to be playing in a game that they weren't nervous to be playing," Atkeison said. "We've played in so many big games this season, and the team has adapted well, evolving with every game."

UNC hit the ground running and put up 31 unanswered points after 60 minutes. Zoeller logged another two tries, and Samad, Jamie Sebaaly and Payce Madden also scored. Rozier slotted

three conversions.

North Carolina pulled up in the last 10 minutes and ECU's Ritt powered through for another two tries. Peterson hit the extras for a 31-14 final score.

"Losing to ECU [in the regular season] was one of the best things that could've happened to us," Atkeison said. "It made us realize that we needed to get better and retool everything to make sure that never happened again.

"They've done an incredible job this year being able to adapt to a variety of adverse situations, from learning a new style of play, to injuries and schedules, and have remained focused," Atkeison praised.

There's still some fine-tuning to be done, especially in the scrum. As UNC prepares for nationals, where the team will see UC San Diego, the team will look to amp up its pace and work on consistency. They'll have the opportunity to test itself once more - against UVA next weekend - before heading to Blaine, MN, for the Round of 16.