

A1 Grand Final – Wanilla 57 vs Boston 38

Grand Finals are rarely pretty, and this one was no exception. From the opening whistle, Wanilla and Boston were prepared to throw everything at each other, with pressure, physical contests and momentum swings keeping the crowd well and truly entertained.

Wanilla took the first centre pass and quickly worked the ball towards the circle, but Boston were ready for them. An early stepping call handed Boston the first turnover, before another stepping call returned the ball to Wanilla. They made no mistake the second time around, with GS Emily Woolford opening the scoring.

Boston responded strongly, with WA Shakaya Walsh and GA Lakeesha Pickett combining beautifully through the court. But Wanilla's defensive pressure was already making itself known. Hands were everywhere, passing lanes were being shut down and Boston were being made to work hard for every metre. A missed shot allowed GK Jess Nielsen to pull down the rebound and send Wanilla racing back down court, only for Hannah Barker and Chloe Howe to stand their ground and force another turnover.

Wanilla were quick to punish the mistake. C and Times Medallist Ellie Cooper was injecting plenty of speed through the midcourt, driving hard towards the circle before finding Summer Pedersen, who calmly converted.

Boston opened their account through GS Lauren McDonald, putting their first goal on the board. Down the other end, a battle was brewing in Wanilla's attacking circle, with Woolford and Barker going head-to-head under the post. Barker came away with the rebound, keeping Boston in the contest.

Neither side was prepared to give an inch. Boston worked hard to get the ball into their circle while Wanilla continued throwing up hands and applying pressure across the court. The scores were soon level.

Then came another big moment. A turnover in Wanilla's goal circle through Howe gave Boston a chance to take the lead, but GD Lily Perham had other ideas. A well-timed tip sent the ball flying back down court and Wanilla capitalised.

WD Kobi Keeley was causing plenty of headaches around the circle edge, creating another turnover, before patient passing from WA Fleur Rowett and Pedersen helped Wanilla move two goals clear.

Wanilla's pressure through the midcourt was becoming relentless. Boston's options were being blocked, their vision was being taken away and errors were creeping in. Wanilla stretched the lead to four through another Woolford goal before penalties in the circle handed them another opportunity.

Boston shuffled the magnets, briefly moving Karli Andersen into WA, Walsh into centre and Georgia Palm back into WA. Walsh wasted no time making an impact, firing a bullet pass into McDonald, who converted.

Chloe Newman then rolled into WD, bringing extra height to Boston's defensive end and trying to disrupt Wanilla's flow. But Wanilla were finding ways through, using the space intelligently and continuing to apply that frustrating hands-over pressure.

By the first break, Wanilla had established a seven-goal lead.

Boston came out for the second quarter knowing they needed to change the momentum. The positional shuffle continued, with Pickett moving to GS, McDonald into GA, Walsh into WA and Palm into C.

Boston came out swinging. Strong one-on-one defence forced a held ball and handed them an early opportunity, but a ball sprayed over the baseline returned it to Wanilla. Wanilla then handed it straight back with a replay ball from Perham. It was becoming that sort of game.

Wanilla's defence refused to give Boston's shooters anything easy. Relentless pressure forced another error, and Wanilla converted. A short pause in play gave everyone a chance to breathe before Pickett produced a strong hold to get Boston back into attack. Her shot missed, but Wanilla's clean rebound shifted the momentum once again, with Woolford making no mistake at the other end.

Through the middle, Cooper was proving instrumental, threading precise passes into the circle and repeatedly finding her shooters. Boston's defence were beginning to feel the pressure, with penalties giving Wanilla easy opportunities close to the post.

Another Boston centre-pass turnover was quickly punished through the dangerous Cooper and Woolford combination. Boston were still scoreless for the quarter and desperately needed something to change.

Eventually, an error from Wanilla gave them a chance. But Wanilla's defensive zone immediately closed the door, producing a crucial tip. Woolford missed the resulting shot, only to collect her own rebound and put it away. Sometimes you just have to do the job twice.

Boston finally broke through, with Walsh and Pickett combining beautifully to work the ball into the circle. Pickett converted and Boston had their first goal of the quarter.

A quick roll-on saw Matilda Packer move into centre, while McDonald worked hard out the front of the circle. A strong one-on-one contest between Nielsen and Pickett opened up space, allowing Walsh to deliver another precision pass for a Boston goal.

Suddenly, Boston were finding their rhythm.

A contact call in Wanilla's goal circle gave Boston another opportunity and back-to-back goals brought the margin back inside ten. A slick three-ball transition through the circle created another chance, and Boston converted again.

Wanilla could feel the momentum starting to turn and answered with a goal of their own, but Boston were no longer simply hanging on. The movement between Packer and McDonald was becoming increasingly fluent, while Howe was causing headaches at the other end with a brilliant intercept that led directly to another Boston goal.

Boston then converted from their centre pass, with Pickett and McDonald looking like they had been playing together for years.

Wanilla needed to steady themselves, and they did. Calm, intelligent passing around the circle created the space for Woolford to put through a much-needed goal and halt Boston's run.

The pressure was now being felt by both sides. Uncharacteristic errors crept into Wanilla's game, allowing Boston to continue their charge and bring the margin back to just five.

But this Wanilla side wasn't about to panic. Rowett continued to provide composure through the attack, delivering pinpoint passes into the circle and helping settle things down. A breaking call against Wanilla advanced the ball to the transverse line and put it straight into the hands of Walsh. Pickett missed the resulting shot, but another fierce rebound battle between McDonald and Nielsen saw McDonald pull the ball down and convert.

Wanilla responded with Emily Young moving into WD, and she immediately made her presence felt across the transverse line. Wanilla converted again before Keeley rolled into WA, bringing extra height and her trademark give-and-go movement.

A wild ball over the baseline from Wanilla gave Boston another opportunity. Rowett rolled back onto court at WD while Boston had the ball in the goal circle. McDonald missed, but Pickett was perfectly placed for the rebound and finished.

Boston had found another gear.

They had clawed their way back into the game, and while the margin had only shifted slightly, the feeling of the game had changed completely. Boston were heading into half-time with confidence, having shown Wanilla they were capable of matching them and putting them under serious pressure.

Following an entertaining half-time show from Gazza the Tiger, the game was back underway for the third quarter, with Boston needing to keep that momentum alive.

Wanilla returned unchanged, while Boston made one adjustment with Palm moving into WA. Wanilla's first attempt at goal went astray with a ball over the baseline, but an error on a pass to Newman handed them another opportunity.

This time, Wanilla moved the ball cleanly, making no mistakes and scoring a goal. At the other end, Pickett was putting on a show for the crowd, stretching to bring in high balls and calmly converting her opportunities, proving exactly why she was such a quality player.

Pedersen was putting in an impressive performance out the front, working hard to create space and open up opportunities in the circle. Her movement was making Boston work hard defensively, while her ability to read the play and set up opportunities was helping Wanilla keep the pressure on in attack.

Boston were not going anywhere. The battle between McDonald and Perham was also heating up, with Perham contesting hard and refusing to give McDonald an easy ball. Boston were benefiting from the penalties that followed, giving them opportunities to score. The teams traded goals, with Wanilla still holding a six-goal advantage.

Then came a crucial moment. Cooper produced a tip on the circle edge, creating a turnover and another Wanilla opportunity. Controlled passing followed, before a quick give-and-go between Cooper and Woolford helped push the margin out to eight. Wanilla then took advantage of their next centre pass and converted again.

Boston were beginning to feel the pressure. A sprayed centre pass handed Wanilla another opportunity, while Boston's attempts to disrupt the flow were hampered by late contact and penalties. Wanilla worked the ball steadily towards the circle and added another.

Boston made another defensive change, bringing Rhianne Carmody onto court for her A1 debut in WD.

Wanilla's defensive pressure was now ramping up again. Little tips and constant pressure were creating turnovers, while Walsh, who was now back in WA, attempted to spark Boston with a run-through intercept. A stepping call brought the effort undone and returned the ball to Wanilla.

With just a minute left in the quarter, Wanilla had possession in Boston's attacking third. Rather than rushing, they showed the experience of a side determined to finish the quarter on their terms, patiently working the ball around until the opportunity opened up.

Another goal followed.

Wanilla headed into the final break with a commanding 14-goal lead.

Boston, however, had already shown they weren't going to disappear quietly.

They made one final change for the last quarter, with Palm moving into WD, while Wanilla remained unchanged. Wanilla took the centre pass, looking to put the game beyond doubt.

The ball found Woolford after a beautiful baseline drive, but Howe applied huge pressure and forced the ball to fumble over the baseline.

Boston were off and running.

They moved the ball quickly down court and McDonald put away the first goal of the final quarter. From the following centre pass, Walsh's magic hands found Pickett, who converted again.

Boston had come out firing, making it very clear that their never-die attitude was still alive and well.

Down Wanilla's attacking end, Keeley showed some magic of her own, patiently waiting for Woolford to open up before delivering the ball for Wanilla's first goal of the quarter.

Wanilla then put together back-to-back goals, but Boston answered from their centre pass. Their defence was refusing to make things easy, forcing Wanilla to take the ball back off the circle and reset several times. The hard work eventually paid off, with Boston's shooters rewarding their defenders at the attacking end.

Boston responded immediately from the centre pass, and they weren't mucking around. Packer to Walsh, Walsh to Pickett, and bang, goal! Just two passes from the centre pass to the ring. Blink and you'd have missed the whole thing.

Wanilla still held a 13-goal lead, but Boston continued to chip away.

The game settled into a hard-fought goal-for-goal battle. Boston simply couldn't crack the Wanilla lead, despite throwing everything they had at it.

A tip from Nielsen in defence gave Wanilla another chance to transition. After a couple of misses from Woolford, Pedersen was perfectly placed for the rebound and put the goal away.

Wanilla controlled the next centre pass, only for the ball to bounce off the ring and out of court, giving Boston another opportunity. But Perham stepped in, regained possession for Wanilla and helped turn the opportunity back in their favour.

Boston responded immediately from their centre pass, with Packer finding Walsh, who delivered into Pickett for another goal.

Wanilla pushed the lead out to 16, with Young re-entering at WD. With their next centre pass, Tori Griggs entered the game for the first time at GA, giving Pedersen a well-earned rest.

Still, Boston refused to surrender.

Their never-die attitude was shining through, but Wanilla continued to apply defensive pressure right across the court. A held ball against Wanilla in their attacking end gave Boston another opportunity, only for Boston to then be caught holding the ball too long themselves. Wanilla regained control and converted.

As the clock wound down, tired bodies began to show, but neither side was willing to take their foot off the pedal. Both teams were leaving absolutely everything out on the court.

Palm produced a turnover in Wanilla's attacking end, giving Boston one more opportunity. Walsh launched a long bomb into the circle for Pickett, who got the ball through the net, but the whistle had already gone. No goal.

And that was almost the story of the Grand Final in one moment: Boston kept fighting, kept challenging and kept coming, but Wanilla always seemed to have an answer.

It was an impressive effort from both teams. Boston's never-say-die attitude ensured they fought right through to the final whistle, while Wanilla's defensive pressure, composure and patient ball movement proved the difference when it mattered most.

After four quarters of grit, pressure, momentum swings and plenty of hard-fought netball, Wanilla walked away with a 19-goal victory.