

2021 NCAA Women's Volleyball Championship

Friday, December 17, 2021

Columbus, Ohio, USA

Nationwide Arena

Nebraska Cornhuskers

Coach John Cook

Lauren Stivrins

Kenzie Knuckles

Nicklin Hames

Press Conference



at the net for you guys?

LAUREN STIVRINS: Not so much trash talking, I don't think. I used to play, when we were younger, a lot -- the U.S.A. camps with Sydney. And so I kind of know her through that. But other than that I'm not really close to any of those girls on the team. But we see them quite a bit in season. So kind of get to know them through that.

Q. What do you remember about that 2000 match against Wisconsin?

COACH COOK: Well, actually my book I wrote about it because basically that team I had recruited to Wisconsin and then left and went to Nebraska. And then we were playing them for the national championship.

And for me personally, it was a no-win situation, because it was very stressful. We were undefeated at Nebraska. We were playing my former team with all those players I recruited. They wouldn't talk to me during the Final Four.

So it was just relief to get it over with. And it was a great match. It went five. You guys probably don't know, Lee might be the only guy that knows, we used to not have rally score. It was real volleyball, where you had to earn real points. And, but it got to the fifth game, which is rally score, and it was a great match.

And I was really proud of both teams, but just really glad to be a part of that match because it was an epic match.

Q. [Off microphone]

COACH COOK: We did. I just remember the first one was against UCLA. They were ranked number one. That's when we really thought we could be pretty good. We beat them at Notre Dame.

Q. Nicklin, those sweatshirts you guys had on before the match last night, what do those sweatshirts say, how did that come up? And did you agree with that message? The journey makes the story better, something like that.

Q. John, you always talk about wanting your team to peak at the end of the season. You've consistently been able to do that over the course of your career. What is your secret?

COACH COOK: Top secret. We have a plan, we stick with it and get the players to buy into it. I don't know, sometimes the blind squirrel finds the acorn.

Q. Lauren, in this match tomorrow night, but all through the season and through this tournament, you've been playing against people who I assume you have great respect for and have battled with to the highest degree. Can you talk about that, like some of the people you're going to play against tomorrow night and what you guys have gone through together?

LAUREN STIVRINS: You want me just to talk about --

Q. Like maybe, Dana, Sydney, Lauren, just for example -- there has to be some level of respect in competition?

LAUREN STIVRINS: For sure, anyone who makes it this far in the tournament we're going to have great respect for. And obviously Wisconsin has kind of had our number these past few years. And so we definitely respect them. And they are a great team. They've got a lot of great weapons. And they play a very similar game to us. And they play very clean volleyball. So it's going to be a great game. And definitely a lot of respect for them.

Q. Are you friends with any of them, friendly competitors? And is there ever any good trash talking

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NICKLIN HAMES: It encompasses all our tournament run. Like I said yesterday, a lot of people didn't believe in us, and we've been through this journey this entire season up and down and it wasn't always perfect. But here we are and we're excited.

And those are like our favorite sweatshirts we've ever gotten. They're really cool. We were excited to get those yesterday.

Q. Nicklin, Lauren said yesterday that you guys are a completely different team than the one Wisconsin saw in both matches in the regular season. From your perspective how is that the case? How are you different now than you were previously?

NICKLIN HAMES: It's, like, we're flowing as a unit a lot better. We just have this belief in each other that I don't think was there the entire season. And you can tell on the court just how much we enjoy playing with each other, how much we have each other's backs.

And, like, I feel like a lot of times we kind of gave up in those tight moments, and now we really lean on each other. And we have overcome a lot of tight games. I think that's what's been the most special part about this whole run.

Q. You're pretty far removed from being at Wisconsin, but does a little piece of you take some satisfaction in what that program has become?

COACH COOK: Most definitely. We just played there last month, and I look up and see the banners. And I know where that program -- they had one good year and then they had tragic things happen. And I got there. We had to have tryouts to get enough players to even have a team. And had some great memories but really built that team.

So, yeah, there is a piece of me there that -- I think I just know how hard it is to get to that point. And now Kelly has been able to maintain that and has done a great job. But it's great for Wisconsin. That's one of the reasons I went there. I was -- on the same day I was offered Arizona and Wisconsin. And I knew the rebuilding job. But I just felt that could be a great program that people would come and watch.

And, so, anyway, that's where it's at. And I just remember we played Penn State and -- I think it was in '95 -- and I told our administration, I said we're going to sell this thing out. And they looked at me like I was crazy. They had one ticket line open. There was lines all the way down.

Of course, I got ripped by people the next day because it was too long a line to even wait in. But that's when I think people really started thinking, man, this thing could be pretty special.

Q. What do you think it is about the communities of Lincoln and Madison that have created this, as probably as special an environment for volleyball as there is in the whole country -- not probably, it is. What is it about the communities that they have embraced this sport so much, other than the success, obviously?

COACH COOK: I think one, they're college towns. Two, I think they -- I just know Nebraska, and I don't know what the state championships are like now in Wisconsin, but they embrace high school sports, women's sports in high school, it's a big deal.

Third thing is we don't have any pro sports. Of course, the Packers are there but they're pretty far away from Madison. So I feel Madison really doesn't have a pro team to compete with. Now they have a hockey team, men's and women's hockey, which makes it a little more competitive.

And I think those towns have a lot of young families. And young girls can go and see these phenomenal role model, female student-athletes. And what mom wouldn't want their kids to identify with volleyball players?

But there's still also the older generation that started when nobody was going, because I still see the same people I saw when I was coaching there. And, of course, I still see the same people when I was an assistant at Nebraska still coming to our matches.

So you've got this great tradition of the older generation and now the younger generation in these college towns that are growing like crazy. And I'd look at how much Wisconsin has built up their campus. Nebraska right now is just exploding with building projects everywhere. So they're growing, happening places. And I think it's a combination of all those things.

Q. John, Sarah Pavan and Lexi Rodriguez, probably the most physically opposite there could be, but they're both national players of the year. In what ways are they similar?

COACH COOK: Good question. I don't see many similarities. I just think both of them experienced a lot of success before they got to Nebraska. They both have very high expectations on what they can do because of that success. And I think they embraced dreaming big.

Q. Kenzie, tomorrow, big day tomorrow not only for playing for a national championship but graduating. How much are you looking forward to tomorrow? How special will that be for you?

KENZIE KNUCKLES: Absolutely, the natty is more important to me than the graduation. But I think we're all really excited. I think we're all excited for the game tomorrow, and it's everything that we've been working for this whole season. So, we can't wait.

Q. You guys have a huge fan base supporting you. There's going to be a watch party at Pinnacle Bank Arena tomorrow night. How cool is it knowing that not only the whole city of Lincoln but the whole state of Nebraska will be watching, cheering you guys on. What does that feel like?

NICKLIN HAMES: It feels awesome. Our fans are the best in the country. They support us no matter where we go. And I'm sure we'll have a lot of fans here I know we've had a couple of late games and people have been staying up, hanging out, watching the game. We couldn't be here without all of their support. So we're grateful that we have all those fans and how much support they've given us.

Q. Your people showed last night the video after the game where you addressed your team and you said you get to play your buddies again. Curious, I didn't want to read too much into that, I'm sure you respect Wisconsin, but you see them so much that I can't imagine you like them. What is the relationship between the programs, do you think?

COACH COOK: There's a tremendous amount of respect between the programs. And so when I say "our buddies," in 2019 we played them three times. Last year it got canceled because of COVID. And this year we're playing them three times.

So we've played them a lot, and a lot of those matches have been for Big Ten championships or going to a Final Four, competing for a national championship. So we've just played them a lot. They know each other really well.

But right now Wisconsin set the bar in the Big Ten. They've won the championship the last three years and everybody's chasing them. And, so, but -- it will be an honor to play them. And we feel like, okay, we've gotten to a point now where we've got a chance to win this.

Q. Kenzie, the last loss you guys had was at Wisconsin and then obviously beat a very good Purdue team on the road. Was that Wisconsin game maybe a turning point in some way, or what do you

recall just learning about this group getting ready for the tournament from that game?

KENZIE KNUCKLES: Absolutely. I think we went into the Wisconsin match really confident in what we've been working on. And I think that showed the first set when we played them. Kind of going off what Nicklin said, I think we struggled a lot with finishing this entire season. And it really sucked for us when we played Wisconsin. And that's how it went and that's how it ended.

So I think that was a turning point for us. We kind of realized, like, we needed to get our stuff together in order to get far in the tournament.

Q. Lauren, for you, the last two games against really good teams in Texas and Pitt, what have you learned about this group or maybe solidified your belief in some things that this team has been doing really well that you believe makes you all a championship team?

LAUREN STIVRINS: I think the way our team competes defensively is second to none. I think that it's effort, energy and grit, and those are some of our consistent, I don't know, qualities that we have, especially in this tournament so far.

And I think that this team is on a mission. We have such a deep belief in each other and ourselves that we can do this and we're capable of winning no matter who we're up against. I think if we carry all those things into tomorrow, it will be a great match. And hopefully we'll come out on top.

Q. Years ago with this program, you might not lose very much during the nonconference, and you might not lose much during the Big 12 season. How have you had to adjust how you coach and see what it can be once you get to the tournament?

COACH COOK: Well, we scheduled tough because you better play, in nonconference, you better play some tough matches or you'll get blindsided when you get to the Big Ten. And of course the Big Ten is so tough.

So this is going to be part of the way going forward. It's going to be hard to go undefeated in the Big Ten. And what did Wisconsin have, three losses this year in this conference? And we had four. When was the last time that happened? So it's just part of it.

But the key is we've learned from those losses. We've gotten better and improved as the season's gone on. And we're playing three freshmen. They haven't been through this before. So we use it as learning experiences.

Q. Lauren, having played Wisconsin so much, is it maybe beneficial that you know what their strengths and weaknesses are?

LAUREN STIVRINS: Yes, I think it is beneficial to know where they're strongest at and where they might fall off a little bit. But I think that in all the times we've played Wisconsin it hasn't been that they were doing anything that was extraordinary or anything that was something that we hadn't seen before. It was just we were beating ourselves when it came down to, like, the last few points or whatever.

I think that this team has accepted that and we've grown from that. And we're just a much better, more gritty. And Kenzie touched on this earlier today, but this team has a lot of perseverance.

We're not going to go down easy. And we've fallen short a few times, but we know what we're capable of and we're not going to give up.

Q. John, in your study of Wisconsin, I know you've talked about how your team has improved as the season has gone on. Have you seen that out of Wisconsin? And the second part of the question would be, of your two losses, four of the seven sets were deuce games. What do you have to do differently to change the outcome?

COACH COOK: Gotta make plays and max it out when it matters most. That's what we're learning how to do. We've won some deuce games since that match. And, yes, Wisconsin has gotten better, too. You're not in this, down to two teams today unless you've gotten better.

It's a matter who can go out perform with everything on the line. And that's what it's going to come down to, just like in most big sporting events.

Q. Kenzie, getting to play alongside Lexi Rodriguez, how would you characterize her both as a person and as a player?

KENZIE KNUCKLES: As a person, she's an awesome person. I'm really close with her. I got really close with her at the beginning of the season. For me, it was almost like a responsibility to kind of take her under my wing and kind of talk to her on the mental side of volleyball.

And for her she demonstrated a lot to me of how to play volleyball as a pro. I think that was important for me to build that relationship with her. She's an awesome person and awesome to play with as well. She gives me confidence just playing with her because I can tell she has so much confidence in herself and others.

And she's really reliable. She's very consistent. And she's a stud. So it's really easy to play with her. Makes everyone better.

Q. Nicklin, where is your confidence at as a setter, and how has that evolved as the season progressed?

NICKLIN HAMES: I think at the beginning of the season it was kind of up and down with what lineups were going and just building that connection with freshmen. They're new, so just having an understanding of what set they needed from me and having that communication.

And I think as we built that relationship and that trust my confidence has just grown. And I have huge belief in all my hitters to get it done in big moments. And I'm excited to see them all out there tomorrow.

Q. You mentioned earlier that you played a lot of late matches this postseason. How do you spend those days and get ready for the big matches to make sure you're mentally peaking when you need to during the day?

NICKLIN HAMES: We keep pretty busy during the day so we're not just sitting around waiting. We drink our coffee obviously to stay up.

I think these past couple of weekends we've got used to playing those late games. So we're kind of in a routine now. I remember the first week it was challenging and we did, like, activation just to stay ready to go. But we've accepted it and we're just excited that we get to play.

Q. Coach, in what was do you think volleyball has changed other than rally scoring, in between the time between when you won your first national championship and now going for your sixth?

COACH COOK: The level of really good teams has really improved. There's more talent across way more teams. Even when we go recruiting now, you used to see five really elite players. Now there's 40, 50. And so everybody's got good players. I think the coaching has improved immensely. And I think a lot of schools have made commitments to volleyball. So they have performance teams and support staff and all those things, and it's going to continue to go that way.

So I just think that the quality and the level and the athletes have all improved at a higher level and across a wider range. I don't know if that's the right way to say. But there's more really good teams. Look at this year, too, two ACC teams in the Final Four. Who would have thought

that five years ago?

Q. Nicklin, this season has been quite a journey. How would you assess the job that Coach Cook has done coaching this team, what has he done well? If you have a criticism you want to share with us also, you could do that at this time.

NICKLIN HAMES: I think Coach has done a great job. One thing I really admire about him, and he's always open to learning I feel like he always has a huge growth mindset and it kind of relays to us as players. And we come into the gym and we just get really excited, and we want to learn and we want to get better. And I just don't think we've had a practice this year where we looked back where we went, wow, we didn't give it our all or didn't go hard. I think that's what's special about this team, we come in every day wanting to get better. And that's a reflection of our coaches. And he's prepared us and here we are about to play the national championship. If you look back on our season, told us we were going to be playing, I don't think you would have believed us. And Coach got us here. I don't think I have any criticism.

Q. Given the rise in talent in how good schools have been, does that make you appreciate even more being able to get to this stage?

COACH COOK: Yes, it's getting harder and harder. The Big Ten was so tough this year. So it's just the way it's going to be. That's why we work hard on having a team that's resilient, because you're going to have to bounce back.

Q. Have you heard from Kevin Warner or anybody from the conference's office to congratulate you in representing the league?

COACH COOK: He was here last night. He shook my hand.

Q. You talked all year about how hard to know that the final match comes down to two Big Ten teams. Does that instill a sense of pride, make the accomplishment better throughout the year?

COACH COOK: Heck, yeah. I've been saying all year how tough it is. But this proves it out. We had the highest-watched, most-watched volleyball game ever when we played Wisconsin or that one. So this is nothing but good for Big Ten TV, the sport, our conference, everything. This is a big deal. Just helping continue to grow it.

Q. John, what's it like for you as the coach that this program can be a major source of pride for the athletic

department and the state as a whole and getting Nebraska on the national stage?

COACH COOK: It means a ton. And I just see the reactions of people, so I don't want to throw any of you guys under the bus, but (indiscernible) just wrote, to give you an example, we sent it to three of our recruits' parents. And all the moms wrote back that they were crying reading it.

So it just shows you what he was able to capture in an article and what it means to people. And like I got asked about Lauren's legacy, the reaction that people gave to her when she came back or was just getting introduced. Those types of things are just what blow you away and make me appreciate Nebraska and how important it is.

My phone has blown up. I have no idea who these people are, how they get my number. But just how it inspires them and what it means to them. And they love this team. There's a love affair with Nebraska volleyball, and a love affair with this team.

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