

2023 NCAA Women's Volleyball Championship

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Tampa, Florida, USA

Amalie Arena

Wisconsin Badgers

Coach Kelly Sheffield

Sarah Franklin

Izzy Ashburn

MJ Hammill

Press Conference



your best friends every day. And then just going one game at a time.

Q. Sarah, congratulations on First-Team All-American. Wanted to get your thoughts on that. Is there a challenge to after you achieve such a big accomplishment of resetting and kind of returning your focus to tomorrow night?

SARAH FRANKLIN: I think those things are fantastic. I'm very thankful that I can be put in that position. I think it's a team effort. I wouldn't be able to get that without the team.

I think getting on to the next game is where my head's always at. There's still a lot of work to do. That's great, but there's still a lot of work to do. We have two big games ahead.

Q. Sarah, I assume there were other reasons as well, but one of the reasons you transferred was to be in exactly this situation. Izzy, would you recall what you thought after she did in fact transfer to Wisconsin?

SARAH FRANKLIN: Was the question why I transferred to Wisconsin? Yes, this is exactly why I'm here. The standard is so high here. And I know I had a lot in me to be able to push myself even more from where I was at.

And every aspect of Wisconsin has been able to put that forward. It's exciting to see how much more we can achieve here.

IZZY ASHBURN: Obviously the transfer portal has done great things for our team. I'm super grateful for that, especially people in conference playing against people like her, Temi, Carter, at different schools and having to scout those people first.

It just shows you how incredible they are of players. You can have a game plan for certain people but they'll just switch it up do something completely different. It's so hard to defend. We know that from the other side of the net.

Getting to play with them against them every day at practice, it's a high level of play. They bring different

COACH SHEFFIELD: Very thankful for the city of Tampa for hosting this. We're really excited to get this week started, and the hospitality right when we got off the plane was fantastic. We're appreciative of the weather as well. But we're just excited to roll. This is a great time of the season.

Q. It's a business trip. Still two games to play. How do you balance the fact that, once-in-a-lifetime trip maybe with, hey, we've got to win two games yet?

IZZY ASHBURN: I think our team handles this really well, actually. We acknowledge that we want to take everything in and enjoy the experience and understand how grateful we are for getting to make this trip here and experience a Final Four with this specific group.

And we don't shy away from talking about that and taking it all in and looking up at the crowd but at the same time we do understand it's a business trip and we're ready to play our best ball yet.

SARAH FRANKLIN: I completely agree with Izzy. We train for this all season with our mental toughness. We try and get games in the season where we're playing in front of this type of crowd, which I think also helps. So just kind of acknowledging it but still being able to stay on track with focusing on the next two games.

MJ HAMMILL: To echo what they said, all year in our gym we always talk about appreciating the moment, being in the moment, practicing mindfulness. And I think even our atmosphere at home in Madison is really cool. And there's the balance appreciating how rare it is to compete with

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experiences and perspectives.

I've played at Wisconsin for five years, I know nothing else. They bring in different perspectives from different programs and experiences. It's been super fun to play with.

Q. You're 30-3. Your last loss was, like, Penn State and Purdue back to back on the road. Since then you haven't been pushed to a fifth game. Are you peaking right now?

COACH SHEFFIELD: We are, but I would say all four teams are. You better be when you get to this time of the year. It's what makes the Final Four really exciting, is you usually have people playing their absolute best at the end of the season.

We're certainly one of those teams where we're healthy, we're growing. That's the goal. That's why we try not to panic when things happen during the season. What is really critical is how you respond.

And that was what we talked about after those matches, is -- we've got a bunch of competitors on this team. These three are ultra competitive. They never want to lose. But the critical thing isn't how, whether you lose or not, it's how you respond coming back from that. And I think we've done a really good job responding throughout the season.

Q. Conference realignment is one of the things that's been affecting all programs. I'm curious, how do you think the shaping of the evolving Big Ten is going to affect you guys -- good, bad or ugly -- and your ability to continue competing at this level?

COACH SHEFFIELD: You could have a team ranked that finishes, Big Ten, 11th in the conference with a losing record and still be a Top 25 team. It's going to be tough. It's going to be a challenge. It's going to be awesome. You better be a competitive junkie if you get in here. I'm glad I don't have to worry about that right now.

Q. Kelly, give me your best comparison for Asjia O'Neal whether it be in the last five years, 10 years. And follow up for that, as the match goes on, do you kind of see a matching up with her and Anna, or is that just something you let go as the match goes on?

COACH SHEFFIELD: It would be unfair to her for me to come up with a comparison, because on the spot I would be wrong. She is really good, really talented. As much experience as about any college player has ever had, collegiately and internationally.

Her talent, her competitiveness, she doesn't shy away from big moments. She can hit off one foot, two feet, and she's one of the best blockers in the world. I don't know what else to say about her. Oh, she's a pretty good server as well.

Are match-ups a part of it? Not to be coy, I don't know. I think what you're going to see is you're going to see four teams who know who they are and they're going to go play the way that that they want to play. They're going to attempt to do that.

But then also you get into a match, and if you see something, how it's playing out that you're better spinning the dial, I could see all four teams doing that. We haven't done a ton of that. We've done a little bit of that, but we practice like that. And it's something, if we spin the dial or flip players, we're totally comfortable doing that. It could play itself out that way.

Q. Coach, when you look at how the sport has grown in other leagues and yet you still have two Big Ten teams here, just what does that say about the continued success of this conference? With Izzy, those two matches you lost late that he referenced earlier, was there anything you learned from those matches -- I know they were both on the road -- that kind of helped propel you guys where you are now?

COACH SHEFFIELD: I think everybody that watches our sport and follows our sport knows how good Big Ten is and how elite it is year in, year out, how many teams that have been on this stage in the past, how elite Nebraska is, how elite their program is, everything about their program. And Texas has been doing this for 30 years, 40 years at a really, really elite level.

And in Pittsburgh, man, I'm not sure anybody is playing as well as them right now, just what they've been able to do since Dan got there.

This is a heavyweight foursome here. These are elite teams, elite programs, players that are a variety of ages, but the young people don't play young and they don't play scared and they're not going to be scared on this stage. And that's one of the cool things, even the young players have played on big stages in front of big television crowds, in front of big arenas or football fields -- international. It's a lot of people that are going to be flexing out there. This is going to be a really fun tournament.

IZZY ASHBURN: I really like when people say they learn from losses more than any other game because we're not a team that does that. We go back to watch the film after a win, after a loss, anything. We pick apart our

vulnerabilities, we get in the gym and we work on those things.

We learn from those losses but we've also learned from every single win this year. We don't really approach that much differently other than they found some vulnerabilities. It's great to see somebody do that to us earlier on in the season rather than to end our season, and we're ready to get back in the gym and attack those things and keep growing from that.

It's something this group is really great at. We're still growing even at this point in the season when there's four teams left. We're ready to get into the gym today, too, and keep growing just like we've done throughout the entire season.

Q. Izzy, you spoke about defending in practice against your own teammates. I'm wondering sort of what that's like. The height your team has, it's exceptional and really different from anybody else. I'm wondering what that's like for you guys training against that.

IZZY ASHBURN: It's great to train against. It's a great experience. It's fun to see what another team sees from that perspective. Not only is our front court tall and great blockers with a lot of speed, but our back court also does a lot of work back there that doesn't get as much recognition but I think deserves it.

So working those two things together, we're a great defensive team. It's hard to set against. It's hard to hit against. It's hard to serve against. Yeah, it's something we're still working at, though, but I'm excited get back into the gym today, like I said.

Q. Coach, you mentioned at the start the welcoming and the hospitality. What was it like last night, the welcome you received? And what do these things mean to the student-athletes in terms of obviously you're here to win matches, but the overall experience that you're going to get here and how they're treated and how they're made to feel special with everything that's been going on here?

COACH SHEFFIELD: To be in the presence of pirates is pretty cool. The club kids, I mean, that was awesome. I think anytime that you can get people to dream big things is -- to walk off the plane and see a bunch of younger players that were there -- and I'm sure these guys were thinking about being their age and what that could be like sitting outside of a plane and watching people you look up to that are playing the game at the highest level coming down and having that moment. It was cool.

Q. Beyond that, the way they're treated here, even beyond matches, what does this experience feel like to your players?

COACH SHEFFIELD: It's a big-time event. It should. It's been fun to watch the evolution and the growth of that, where it's more than just a match. It's a celebration. In combination with the ABC Convention and the Fan Fest and everything else, if you're a fan of volleyball or of sport is there a better place to be than Tampa this week?

Q. MJ and Izzy, you guys have been here a long time, but you were still probably in middle school when Wisconsin and Texas played a decade ago. That match set a tenor for a program that you've become aware of as you were part of this for a long time -- how many times have you seen highlights of that? And how does that carry on a decade later with you guys, how aware are you?

MJ HAMMILL: I think, let's say, 10-year anniversary of that. So I was 11 at the time. So can't really remember exactly where I was, probably watching that.

COACH SHEFFIELD: I thought that was the year you committed.

MJ HAMMILL: You're right. But Annamarie Hickey, who was the libero on that team and is still part of this program, and it's the exact same stuff. Kelly, you've been here that whole time now. That was your first year.

And so I think that just has really just set a standard of how we're going to operate from then on. We're going to have really high goals. We're going to go about things a certain way. And even just having the experience of Ann as a player just on the court, her being in those moments, it helps a lot.

IZZY ASHBURN: We got to celebrate that this year in our own gym and bring a lot of them back. We got to talk to them about their experiences and with them and the funny things and also the hard things and what they went through in their time and how they felt getting to the Final Four and actually the final when they were so underrated throughout the entire season.

And just to see their story and their work ethic is something we look up to a lot. It's something we fall back on a lot when you don't really know what way to go to bring back their experience is something that we talk about a lot and we talk to them about a lot. And we're grateful that a lot will be here and they still support our program and watch us and communicate with us throughout that.

Q. Assuming you agree with me that it's broken, how would you fix or change the challenge/replay delay problem?

COACH SHEFFIELD: Well, I don't think -- we've got a perfect example of how they're doing it internationally. We've got to get to that point. It's a question of finances, but we've got to find a way to get to that where the game has to take center stage.

There's too long a period of time where the game is not taken center stage. I think every official out there would agree they would rather be invisible. And we've got to continue to make decisions and investments and all those things to help them become more invisible during a match.

Q. Izzy and MJ, aside from Sarah, Skinner and Wenaas kind of lead the rest of the field in (indiscernible) balls. From a defensive perspective, how does that change your perspective that this is a team that's going to take a rip 80 percent of the time, 75 percent, regardless if it's out of system or not?

MJ HAMMILL: I would say you recognize how great of players they are. Like Kelly mentioned before, their roster from top to bottom are a bunch of competitors. And so what that means for us is just there's no point in time when you can let up. No matter where the ball's being set from, no matter how out of system, no matter who passes, you have to be on and you have to be using every opportunity.

IZZY ASHBURN: I agree. Also think that we're a team that moves on quickly just understanding that every team that's left right now is going to take some big rips. Texas is going to take some big rips. They're going to get their points. But if we move on quickly and together, we'll be in the right mental space for that.

Q. Sarah, your path here was not smooth from a health standpoint. Considering all of that, how meaningful is it for you to be able to have a moment like this? And also how meaningful is it for you to be back in your home state?

SARAH FRANKLIN: I mean, it means everything. Looking back at the summer, I can't fathom how that was all able to play out up until now. That just goes show how much hard work every single one of these girls has put in to keep pushing me to be the best and to come back even better than I was before.

It's really, really exciting to see that, especially being able to come back to my hometown. I have so many people coming to this match. It's very exciting that that worked out so well. And it definitely pushed me to become a better

volleyball player, a better person, just all around.

Q. When someone plays Wisconsin and they're hitting against them where the setters are setting their hitters, they've got to contend with Anna and Carter who are so good at what they do, you're playing against Asjia O'Neal who maybe is the best at blocking in the whole country. How does that affect what you guys do? I assume you've watched some video at this point.

IZZY ASHBURN: You mentioned two of them but we've also got CC and Devyn and Temi and Hank (phonetic) out there that people don't look at as much for the blocking, but we've got a wall all around.

From the setting perspective, we haven't looked too far into our game plan yet. We're taking it day by day with that and going through hitters, going through rotations, doing our normal prep work. I think it's something that we work on throughout games as well, though. We kind of evolve as games go on to see what teams have to do to defend us.

We know it's really hard to set against our team. It's really hard to set against every team that's left right now because the blocking is so high level and the defense is so high level. Just communicating with each other and with the coaches and evolving a game plan.

MJ HAMMILL: I think she said that perfectly.

Q. I'm fascinated with how fast offenses have been getting, and the commentators during your Oregon game were talking about how fast Oregon's offense was, because I've watched Texas the past couple of years; they've been as fast as anybody. How do you prepare for fast offenses? How do you adjust once you get into it? It's first set, now you're seeing this offense, this fast offense for the first time. How are those adjustments made and how are the preparations made?

COACH SHEFFIELD: Oregon was grease lightning. I don't think I've seen anything that speed. I don't think I've seen a setter like Pukis be able to -- the courage that she displayed was really impressive and stretched us out in a lot of different ways.

That's one of the fun things about the NCAA Tournament as you go, is that every team has the ability to stress you out and the stress is different from match to match and where it comes from, whether it's behind the service line or tempo or their size or the plays that they're running.

And certainly Texas stresses you out in a very, very different way, but the stress is very real because what they



do why they're doing it how they're doing it is at an elite level.

Q. You're going to walk out there tomorrow with 20,000-plus. There's not going to be an empty seat. Most of them are Sarah's family -- it could be a home game -- what's going to be going through your mind when you walk out, because that sound is going to be deafening?

SARAH FRANKLIN: I think for me it's just going to be like a whole lot of joy. This is something you dream about especially like maybe since I was 11 years old, committed. But really it's like this is the dream. You're a young girl playing club and this is the stage you want to get to. So it's not backing down from the moment just really appreciating it, taking it all in not trying to block anything out. I think we've had a lot of examples of that this year playing in the Pfizer center, playing at home, playing on the road with sold-out crowds, just a lot of that.

SARAH FRANKLIN: I completely agree, I think mentally we prepare for these moments throughout the whole season. We do a fantastic job of just being able to take it in and enjoy it because you have to just stop for a little bit because it's such an amazing opportunity, but being able to just get right back to it and knowing that you're just playing a volleyball game at the end of the day.

IZZY ASHBURN: I agree with them. I think we've prepped for this moment all season. We've had a lot of matches in big arenas that are sold out, whether it's our crowd or other crowds. We're ready for that moment. But at the end of the day it's volleyball, and I can speak for myself at least that even in loud crowds I feel like I can look around and I just see my team and I don't really hear all that extra noise.

Q. What stresses you most about Skinner and the challenges that she presents you?

COACH SHEFFIELD: She's as dynamic an attacker from the front row and back row as there is in the country. Her hitting percentage is higher on one option balls than three option balls. That is crazy. I don't know if -- I don't know if I've seen that. They're almost better passing it poorly then getting it to her than staying in the system and getting it to her.

They get her the ball a lot in the back row. That's been increasing as the season has gone on. She's a dynamic blocker. But she can get on a ball and get on it fast, quick off the floor. Smooth athlete.

I mean, she's as good as there have been, and already won two national championships. Two different schools.

It's impressive what she's done so far in her career.

Q. You win this and you walk into a recruit's house and you flash that national championship ring, how much does that help recruiting?

COACH SHEFFIELD: I don't know. It seems like people are committing before the home visits even happen anymore. I think elite players want to be a part of and do epic things and that's something that I think all four programs probably sell and we want to be recruiting. We want to be having conversations with people that want to be on this stage, like MJ said, dreamed of being on this stage, and people that are willing to work to put the work in to live that dream.

Does that help to be able to say, hey, we've been there, we've done that? Certainly, I would think so. I can't see how it hurts.

Q. If you had to guess, who do you think Nebraska fans are going to root for?

COACH SHEFFIELD: Are you kidding me? (Laughter)

The better question is, is there a difference between the ages of Nebraska fans or the people that were back when they shared the same conference, do they have a different vote than the people that have only known Nebraska as a Big Ten? I have so much respect for that fan base and there's no way in the world I'm going to get up here and tick off any of them with the answer I've got to say.

Q. Sarah, for what you guys do in blocking, sort of how it creates momentum in the course of a match and you guys get on rolls and you're running points together, what is that like for you guys on the court and does it create an intimidation factor that you guys are trying to create or what does that sense or what do you see from another team as you guys get going and you're blocking shot after shot?

SARAH FRANKLIN: I think it's awesome. I think the big block -- I've hit against that every day in practice. It is a little demoralizing to get absolutely roofed by Anna or Carter. It's really exciting to see that in a game and know that they're on your team.

Building off of blocking, we have so many other aspects of the game that put pressure on the other team and then to just have another block on top of that is a lot to deal with. But I just think it's great momentum, and that just adds another aspect to our game as a whole.

Q. We've talked a lot about Texas players and some

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match-ups, but, Coach, if you could just emphasize one or two keys that you want to see from your team tomorrow night?

COACH SHEFFIELD: I think when you get to this, I think number one you've got to be able to manage the moment and the emotions and so part of it is not just necessarily game plan or executing, are you at a place where you can get better as the match goes on? And if you're coming out and it has to be perfect from point one and putting pressure on you not reading the game not learning as you go then you'll have really big problems.

It will be really interesting to see how these matches are played out. You're talking about four -- teams that are elite defensively. You've got the top three blocking teams in the country and the team that isn't in the top three, I think they lead the country in team defense. Think about that. So defensively. But then you have people that can terminate multiple people that can terminate from all four teams. There's four teams that can win in more than just one way. I've been here with teams that needed to go a certain way for us to win or we played teams that that was their only path to winning. All four teams have multiple ways that they can win or multiple ways that they can play the game really well. These are really full balanced talented teams that the complexity of what they're able to do is -- I don't remember too many times where we could say that about a Final Four.

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