

2023 NCAA Women's Volleyball Championship

Wednesday, December 13, 2023

Tampa, Florida, USA

Amalie Arena

Pitt Panthers

Coach Dan Fisher

Chiamaka Nwokolo

Rachel Fairbanks

Press Conference



experience again?

RACHEL FAIRBANKS: It's just a matter of priorities. We're very grateful and we appreciate all this media and these interviews like this. But like you said, it's a business trip. We came here to play volleyball. And first up is Nebraska and then our goal is the national championship. But, like you said, it's a business trip.

CHIAMAKA NWOKOLO: I have the exact answer. All the stuff has been super nice, but the goal is to win a national championship. I feel like that's where our whole team's minds are at right now.

COACH FISHER: Excited to be back in the Final Four again. Excited to be in Tampa, and had good training today. And a couple more things we want to do to prepare to play a very good Nebraska team.

Q. Chia, when you decided to come back for your extra year of eligibility, is this what you had hoped for way back then? And walk me through what it's been like to come back for a third time?

CHIAMAKA NWOKOLO: I mean, yeah, coming back, me and Fish had a lot of conversations about what this year would look like. And, of course, winning a national championship was a big goal of ours.

Just seeing how, every year seeing how our team unravels has just been super interesting to me. I'm just so proud of this team.

Q. Olivia Babcock was named National Freshmen of the Year. What does it mean to you but also her growth over this whole season?

COACH FISHER: I think it was deserved. And I also think it's just really impressive because there's so many good freshmen this year in college. This isn't just a normal -- at least it doesn't feel that way to me.

It feels like there's so many freshmen playing big roles on some of the top teams. And it's good exposure for our program, and it's good work by her. But she's been incredibly consistent all year and carried a big load for us.

Q. Rachel, it's a business trip. How do you balance the fact that you've got to win two more games but still enjoy the moment, something that you may never

Q. What do you think has made Pitt make three straight Final Fours?

COACH FISHER: Each year has been a little different story. But I'll just say we have very good players that care a lot about their teammates and their team culture. We don't have selfish players at Pitt that are in it for the wrong reasons. And we train hard.

RACHEL FAIRBANKS: He's not giving himself enough credit.

Q. You had said a year ago on the podium at this time that you were doing a couple things better to prepare for that Final Four than what you were doing the year before. So now you're on your third straight. Are you doing anything different? Do you remember what worked, what didn't work last year?

COACH FISHER: I think every year we get a little better at it. But also each year and each city seems to throw more things at us. Every year feels like it's becoming a bigger deal.

But I think probably more than us as coaches knowing how to prepare for it, probably what separates this year is we just have a lot of girls like Chia, Elite Eight, Final Four, Final Four. So there's a lot of girls on the team that know what to do.

Q. Chia, knowing where the program was when you

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started and where you are now here, what are you hoping people remember about your career here, knowing that it could be over who knows when, at some point this weekend? To Rachel and Dan, can you speak to the impact Chia has on this program.

CHIAMAKA NWOKOLO: I don't know. I just think that, like, it's been like a historical time, all these years, just to know that our team genuinely loves each other. Our coaches, we all love them. They love us. It's really genuinely a good time.

And making history with each other is just a memory I'll never forget. I don't know what else to say, but the love is real and the culture is real and it's just an amazing thing. And I'm not surprised we're back-to-back-to-back Final Fours because of the stuff we do every day because of the stuff we really believe in.

RACHEL FAIRBANKS: Like she said, the love is real and that stems from the coaching staff and Chia. And we all pride ourselves on holding each other to very high standards.

And once again Chia is our leader in that. And we just love playing volleyball, and Chia makes it easy to follow a leader that also loves playing volleyball.

COACH FISHER: Not every year do you have a natural, like, one leader on a team, and this year we do. And it's clearly Chia. We would not be the same team without her.

Q. You said a minute ago that every year you've been here seems to be a bigger deal getting to the Final Four. How so? How do you see that?

COACH FISHER: It seems this year, the size of the arena is bigger. It feels like there's more media and more photo shoots. There's greetings off the plane to the hotel. There's always something that they're shuffling us around to. It's all great stuff. But we came here to play volleyball.

Q. Two years ago the same situation, it was me and three people talking to you. Rachel, the answer might be no, but maybe not. When you guys went to Louisville, was that any kind of turning point, wake-up call, cause to regroup, any of the above?

RACHEL FAIRBANKS: Yeah, I think that every team has to go through a hard moment and grow from it. I think that was definitely a pivotal point for us, as well as Florida State, just, like, grinding out the hard times. You have to go through the hard times to excel after.

Q. Rachel, seems like even in a year when volleyball

has really grown, even the fringe sports fan is aware of Nebraska volleyball because of the stadium, national, they have a name for themselves, and obviously their accomplishments are great. Now you get a chance to go up against them. How much do you guys relish this particular match, taking on an opponent like that on a stage like this and hoping to bring out the best that you guys have got?

RACHEL FAIRBANKS: Yeah, I think that we try to treat every opponent the same. Like obviously every opponent is different. But we just focus preparing really well and not letting all the outward noise get to us, just focusing on who we are as a team and playing our best volleyball.

Q. Chia and Rachel, was there one rally, one block, one point against Louisville you felt was a momentum shift? Or was there one conversation that's the same or different, you know what I'm talking about, that really swung things?

CHIAMAKA NWOKOLO: The moment I felt a shift is when Rachel blocked Anna DeBeer on the outside. It was something we've been working on in practice and throughout the game. And she got a big block on her and I was just, like, okay. That was a big momentum shift. That was one for me.

RACHEL FAIRBANKS: I can't really remember a single rally but I think in between the second and third we were down by two. We all just had a group consensus that we needed to flip the switch. But honestly it wasn't until like halfway through the third that we really flipped it, but --

Q. Who led that conversation?

RACHEL FAIRBANKS: Mostly Lexis. She's our fifth year setter. She was firing us up.

Q. Obviously the fans have been phenomenal back in Oakland and traveling and stuff. And from what I've seen, it seems like you guys will have a strong showing from the fan base. What does that mean to you guys? What will that mean if you see that strong showing in the stands come tomorrow night?

COACH FISHER: The growth of our fan base in Pittsburgh has been phenomenal this year. I don't know how well we'll travel. But I think to a game, you know, like Wisconsin last year where the fans we had were absolutely giving us a lot of energy and were right by our bench. And we know our band will be great. We know we'll feel some love, let's put it that way.

Q. You guys have the freshman of the year. Nebraska,



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obviously a lot of freshmen. I asked Coach Cook, are freshmen maybe better prepared now than ever to be able to step in to the big role? And I'm wondering if you think that and if so why?

COACH FISHER: I think so. And I think our national team development system has gotten better. And I think truthfully club volleyball has gotten better too.

I think between those two things -- there's also our girls didn't do this, but there's a lot of -- seems to be more common to come halfway through your senior year.

But yeah, I think you're seeing across the board this year there's a lot of freshmen that aren't really playing like freshmen.

Q. You talked about the fans a few moments ago, and I'm wondering, since you have a roster of players outside Pennsylvania, in addition to academics and the program, how much do you sell to them about the city of Pittsburgh? If you could address that. If each of the players could address on what you have learned about being in Pittsburgh since you've been on campus?

COACH FISHER: I think it's a huge selling point. Our team, they love what the city has to offer. I think they know more restaurants than I do. The thrift shopping, or whatever, Pittsburgh is a great-sized city because it has all the things that big cities do but it's not overwhelming. I think our team takes advantage of it.

CHIAMAKA NWOKOLO: I'm from Columbus, Ohio. It's just a quick three-hour drive. So I just love our campus isn't very traditional. I love that. You can be in a different neighborhood in 10 minutes.

I think it's just, like, you don't see like the same Pittsburgh every day. You can be in Shadyside, South Side and all these different areas. I love the different neighborhoods that Pittsburgh has.

RACHEL FAIRBANKS: My answer would be similar to that. There's just so many different -- the campus of University of Pittsburgh, it's like integrated with the city. And then there's also greenery. There's parks.

But then the city of Pittsburgh, there's just so many different aspects to it, like Chia was saying. But just the culture of Pittsburgh is cool.

Q. Whenever Coach was talking about the Pitt fans and the Pitt band, you started getting real happy about that. What does the Pitt band mean to you guys?

CHIAMAKA NWOKOLO: We love our band. We love them so much. I mean, I think it also helps that they love watching us, too. They actually get very into the games also.

Like some of us have a few friends on the band team and they help us dance after each win. We just love them a lot.

RACHEL FAIRBANKS: We love them.

CHIAMAKA NWOKOLO: A lot.

Q. What do you guys remember from your first Final Four experience? And how does it compare to what you've experienced so far here?

RACHEL FAIRBANKS: I would say I think that right when we got here -- it was my freshman year, the first Final Four -- it was like, wow, we made it. But this year it's like we deserve to be here; we are not done yet.

CHIAMAKA NWOKOLO: I was going to say when we first made it, it was like, wow, we're in the Final Four. Now it's like, okay, we have two games left.

Q. Dan and Rachel, you have experience with Merritt Beason. You coached her, played with her at Pan Am. Last year at Florida you coached and played against her. What makes her such a great player, and how have you seen her grow in her time with Nebraska this season?

COACH FISHER: I've coached her and Rachel has been teammates with her. I think she's hitting more (indiscernible) than she did in the past. I think she's gotten more consistent.

But I also think it's an interesting match-up because she obviously carries a big load for them and similar to how Olivia does for us. It will be interesting to see who performs better.

Q. Your last loss was early November. You're on a nine-game winning streak. Are you peaking in the right time in the fact that you had to go five games to get here? Does that make you battle-tested?

COACH FISHER: That's the goal to be peaking at the right time. And I think we are.

When I saw the bracket, I saw we had to play SC second round. I knew we had a tough draw. But the message to the team was, yeah, but if we get there, we're going to be battle tested and ready. So, yeah, definitely.

Q. Earlier you mentioned that Chia was just a natural leader and that doesn't happen in every team. Can you give an example of maybe we haven't seen of her leadership for your team this year?

COACH FISHER: I don't know that I would say "natural". I would say that she's the natural leader of this team. But she's worked hard to be a leader by example and a voice in the locker room.

And I just really think -- I had a feeling this would happen the girls respect her. And she was one of the captains last year. But I really saw her coming back and being a great mentor for our young players.

And just hearing how they talk about her is with great love and reverence. So this has been a very, very low drama year -- almost no drama, and it's largely due to her.

Q. Seems like you and Nebraska are somewhat similar teams in terms of obviously statistically, hitting percentage and holding opponents to a low hitting percentage. Coach Cook said the same thing. How would you see the two teams facing off against each other? And what make this such an enticing match-up?

COACH FISHER: I agree. I want to say our offensive numbers are a little bit better, but we're both very close in opponent hitting percentage. Maybe the only, the biggest difference is that we're a little bit more aggressive on ad-assisted balls.

Q. Tampa has hosted an NCAA football final, two Frozen Fours and a women's basketball championship. Trust me, there won't be an empty seat tomorrow when you play. What's it going to be like when you walk out and you hear that deafening sound?

COACH FISHER: It's going to be awesome. And it's going to be a memory that these girls are going to hold on to. But with that, the way that this year has gone, I mean -- this isn't like back when I started in the ACC and crowds were a couple hundred. This team is used to being on big stages.

And I think all the teams here are the same way. So I don't foresee the crowd being the final factor for any of these teams.

CHIAMAKA NWOKOLO: I was going to say our team tends to play better the bigger the stage. So we're very excited.

RACHEL FAIRBANKS: That's what I was going to say. The bigger the stage, the better we perform.

Q. Chia, Dan mentioned you took on mentoring the freshmen. Obviously that's a role for the captain in general, but why was that important to you to kind of help them, especially when you guys are on such a big stage?

CHIAMAKA NWOKOLO: I think that our whole team has a lot of experience. I think I said earlier to somebody that our team just has like a perfect balance of newcomers and veterans; that the newcomers bring this vibrant liveliness and newness.

And the veterans, like people who have been here -- Rachel, Emmy, Valeria and all of us -- bring this mature poise, like I've been here before. And it's just a perfect mixture. I don't know if that answers your question, but we feed off of each other very well. I learn from them; they learn from us. It's a very good balanced relationship.

Q. What are you telling the freshmen to be ready for this big stage since you have some experience in it?

CHIAMAKA NWOKOLO: I guess it's just more in the moment type of thing. They already have that dog in them. They have the personality. They don't play like they're freshmen. It's just like kind of, like, if we're in a tight moment and we see them being -- a lot of times we'll say what we need to say to them in those moments. But nothing, like, beforehand. They know what to do. We've been in a lot of big moments this year.

RACHEL FAIRBANKS: If anything, just reminding them to trust themselves, trust their preparation.

Q. You faced against Lexi Rodriguez two years ago. What makes her such a great libero, and what makes her so hard to plan for, especially in terms of serving?

COACH FISHER: She is certainly one of the best in college. She's a very good defender, but for me what sets her apart is serve/receive. She's very calm on the ball. And you can get her once, but it's hard to get multiple in a row off of her, serve/receive.

Q. What do they have to do to beat you tomorrow?

COACH FISHER: I think they're going to have to be -- I think mostly they're going to have to play great defense.

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