

2023 NCAA Women's Volleyball Championship

Thursday, December 14, 2023

Tampa, Florida, USA

Amalie Arena

Texas Longhorns

Coach Jerritt Elliott

Asjia O'Neal

Emma Halter

Madisen Skinner

Semifinal Press Conference



something you were trying to attack, or did you guys just get in a groove?

MADISEN SKINNER: We had scouted pretty well, and we knew their weaknesses and individual players and who we wanted to serve. Just working at depths and putting up the pace on the ball and trusting myself and trusting my serve, and Jerritt called for me, and that was that. Yeah, I kept trusting myself and went with it, and it was great.

Q. Asjia, along with the serving, what do you think really -- it seemed like that match turned in the third set. What do you sort of attribute that to, that you guys were doing along with serving so well?

ASJIA O'NEAL: I think it just comes down to energy, and we stuck with one another. Like obviously we lost the second set, but we knew that was going to happen. They're a good team. They're not going to roll over and not just come in and let us sweep them.

We did a good job sticking with one another, had a really good next play mentality, and we kept it on them. We wanted to be the team that is most together throughout the whole entire match, and I think we were able to do that tonight.

Q. Emma, would you described today as being in what athletes call the zone? If you were, could you call back any other matches in your life where you've kind of been in that area?

EMMA HALTER: I would definitely say it was one of those moments for me and for this team. We train so hard for these moments. Like this is the time to trust your training. So we go out there and trust each other. Yes, I do think I was in the zone today.

Q. Coach, it looked like starting in the third set you started to set more in the middle and away from the net to give your hitters a lot more space. Was that your call, or was I reading that wrong?

JERRITT ELLIOTT: Pretty good reporter there. Pretty impressed. David is our offensive coordinator, so he works

Texas 3, Wisconsin 1

JERRITT ELLIOTT: First of all, congratulations to Wisconsin. They are a tremendous team and have so much size and present so many problems to what you do offensively. It was a battle out there. I'm just so proud of the way that our team has been sticking together and finding ways to pull this out and executing at a really high level right now.

You can see the confidence that they have with one another and the way they're playing for each other. It's been such a fun transformation to see from where we started to where we are right now. A lot of confidence with these young women amongst themselves.

Q. Asjia, you had a big matchup at the net with their big lineup. Any extra juice in this matchup knowing you're facing a team that tall and that good?

ASJIA O'NEAL: Obviously they're big and they're going to put up a good block, but we knew we just needed to trust ourselves. We're also I think are a pretty big team, pretty dynamic, so didn't want to let their size on the other side affect what we were doing. We just stuck with what's worked so far.

Ella did a good job moving us around, so we had a lot of a good one-on-one opportunities where there was a lot of seams. So credit to Ella for getting us good positions.

Q. Madisen, in the third and fourth sets, all of a sudden your servers are really looking like sharpshooters, and mostly it was you. Did you see

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really well with Ella. You have to try to isolate them one-on-one, so we were trying to go short string, short sets. Making sure you were trying to eliminate their ability to get in front of you, so short sets is hard to get in front of. Ella did a really good job of kind of balancing that.

We needed to run the middle. We weren't very successful early on in games one and two. And Bella, I took her out to try to get some rest. She came back and scored right off the bat, her and Asjia, so it was big.

Q. Madisen, you guys have been here -- I mean, having been here before and you with Kentucky and before you got to Texas, how much does that help you in a match like this?

MADISEN SKINNER: I mean, it's great to be familiar with playing in big arenas and the crowd and all the energy that surrounds it. Yeah, just the experience is nice, and it helps me.

I'm nervous obviously, but it's a calm nervous, and it's more just excitement and being fueled up and excited to go. But it's great to have been here and be comfortable here. Most of our girls have played in arenas like this. It's great.

Q. Emma, could you elaborate a little further on how you played tonight. You talked about being in the zone, but there's got to be a little more to it than that.

EMMA HALTER: Erik really prepares us for what we're up against in defense. I mean, I think that comes to doing your studying as well. I knew they were going to hit that sharp shot. I knew they were going to hit the deep corner off of the block. Just being on my toes and ready for those.

As far as service, just confidence. Service is all mental in my opinion, so really just relying on my teammates to have my back.

Q. Coach, I know you've been in a lot of these championship matches. What have you sort of learned over the years in terms of the preparation and does anything change because you have that extra day?

JERRITT ELLIOTT: I don't think anything really changes for us. One of the things we try to be a staple in our program is behave the same way through the season and all the way through. We don't do anything differently with our scouting reports. We don't do extra scouting reports. We trust our process and what we do.

This will give us obviously some time to go back and watch what Nebraska does. But I told my team to enjoy it tonight

because there's an extra day. It's going to be a long weekend. Yeah, it's a lot about emotions. It's about managing that. Lucky we have a lot of experience in doing that.

So I think Asjia came back for a purpose. I think they're playing at a really high level right now.

Q. Asjia, I'm going to follow up on Coach Elliott's statement there. Unfinished business. How long do you allow yourself to celebrate this victory before you start thinking about the Cornhuskers?

ASJIA O'NEAL: Really just thinking about what Jerritt said. You want to enjoy the moments. This is something we're all excited for and be happy and celebrate one another. But tomorrow we're back at it and locked in on what's ahead.

So you want to be able to enjoy it, but not for too long.

Q. I was just wondering if Madisen and Asjia, if you guys could both talk about this. You guys were saying yesterday about it was maybe a little rough start just getting used to a freshman setter and everything. Does it feel like this team is just peaking at exactly the right time for you guys? Do you sense that?

MADISEN SKINNER: Absolutely. I think we expected it. We've put in so much work and we've trained so hard. It hasn't come easy and there's been challenges and up and downs. Like Jerritt said, we just trust the process and trust in one another and just stayed committed to what we needed to do to make it to this moment.

Obviously we're here and it's great, but yeah.

Q. Coach, I know there's ups and downs in every season, and sometimes they turn out the way you think and sometimes not. You guys started slow. You almost got knocked out in the region semifinals, and here you are playing for a National Championship. Can you put your finger on what quality this team has that's allowed you to get to this point?

JERRITT ELLIOTT: It was a really rough start. Just a lot of things weren't working, a lot of pieces weren't together. A lot of pieces we weren't able to train with and get together. We had some illness. We had some injuries. So it was hard to get any kind of rhythm.

We just -- we started playing a little bit better midseason. We played a really good one game or two games, but then we'd have kind of a hiccup in the set and we'd just stick with it. I told our team yesterday one of our super powers

is our toughness, the way they play for each other, the way they want to extend the season.

Watching Asjia, who's 24 years old, skipping through practice and having fun, it wears off. It makes it a lot of fun to be a part of. When you have leadership that's enjoying it and here for a purpose, it's great lessons for the younger players, but for me, it's just been such a joyful run right now.

Q. Emma, you've beaten a one seed. You're going to play a one seed. Nobody's going to accuse you of backing into a National Championship, are they?

EMMA HALTER: No, I don't think so. I mean, I don't even know. We're such underdogs this year, and I kind of think we like that mentality. We want to come up from behind. We want to try to take care of business every chance that we get.

Q. We'll ask you more about Nebraska tomorrow, but just some initial thoughts on them. You played them in a National Championship match before, I believe back in 2015, but just some thoughts about having you guys and Nebraska in the National Championship.

JERRITT ELLIOTT: It's an iconic matchup. I think it's what -- it's really fun that it gets to be Texas and Nebraska on ABC, the first time that we've been able to do that. So it's great for the sport. I think it's great that both social media and fan bases will be pumping this up. Hopefully we'll be setting a record for viewed match in our ratings.

We've got a lot of respect for what John Cook does. They've got a really good team. They've got talented young players. They play a lot of good defense. It will be a really good battle.

Q. I know since you guys were in different conferences over the years, maybe some things have changed. But is the feeling between the schools, can you put a finger on it? Has it remained the same even though maybe you don't play as often as you used to?

JERRITT ELLIOTT: Yeah, I mean, it's natural. When you have so many times that you've played a team in the championship for the Final Four, that even existed way before I was, and I've been here for 23 years. I think there's just such a rich tradition of alumni, All-Americans, people that have won National Championships on both sides.

It's Lakers-Celtics. Regardless of how long they've been, they're going to be fired up to play each other.

Q. Coach, your defense held Wisconsin to almost 100 points lower than their season average. It was their second lowest of the season. As you look back at the match, what were some of the defensive keys that stand out that led to just your successful defense against that offense? It never -- it seemed like that offense never really got clicking.

JERRITT ELLIOTT: We tried to put a lot of pressure on Franklin tonight. I think you saw that with the service and just kind of wear her down because she's just kind of a special player.

We were able to get them off the net. We're also a very good blocking team. We got a lot of positive touches.

What stood out to me is our left front, left back defense. Emma digging a ton of balls, and even our left fronts took some great shots. We had a couple balls that we overpass, and Ella dug a ball, I think Asjia dug a ball. We were committed to the defensive side of it. The serving put a lot of pressure on them over the night.

Q. Coach, for a lot of old school fans, this is big eight. You're back with these guys. What do you tell those fans that this is something that goes back more than a decade, probably a couple?

JERRITT ELLIOTT: As I said, I've been here for 23 years, and I wasn't even part of the big eight. Those fans are older than me, which makes me happy.

Again, when I took this program over, we were 10-18, and I got my lunch handed to me a lot of times. But I just remember our first victory that we got, and then we got a second victory, and then to Final Four and the National Championship. It's been a process to get this program because they were the one in the lead. They were the one that everyone was trying to model off of.

I'm super proud of where we've come. I'm glad they're still a premier team because we need that. This should be a lot of fun for all the fans involved across the country. People will be tuning in, I can guarantee that.

Q. Regardless of who is playing in this, it was going to be history because of ABC and a special season, the culmination of it. The fact that you're in it, I know you're preparing for a match, but in the big picture, is it a thrill that you're going to be out there and be part of something maybe people will talk about for a while?

JERRITT ELLIOTT: I'm trying to -- as I age and I go through this, I'm trying to enjoy the process so much because there's just so much pressure on you as a coach

and as a program to get back and do the thing you want to do. To sustain it is really hard. I just walked in that arena today and said, I'm going to have a lot of fun with my team.

JERRITT ELLIOTT: Thank you. Let's set a record.

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To be able to get to this point -- and for the coaches that came before us, Andy Banachowski, Russ Rose, Terry Liskevych, all of the folks that started the ABCA and started the process, I'm happy for them. I'm happy for the sport. I was a young buck at 22, 23, when they were the legends and trying to be who they were. Now we're at this point.

I'm still pushing, and I know Kelly is pushing for it and I know John is pushing for it because more and more people are loving this game. We're just hitting the tip of the iceberg. There's so much more to come.

Q. Just asked about your defense, and now I'll ask about your offense. It was one of the strongest offensive performances against Wisconsin this season. What do you feel like as you look, Coach, at the match helped your offense click against them?

JERRITT ELLIOTT: I think we passed extremely well. We were able to run our offense. Again, I think we were able to isolate in the middle when we wanted to, and we were able to get some short distance setting.

What really changed -- we were struggling in game two. I think the block kind of not only was a little intimidating for the hitters, but our setting. Our setting was pretty far off the net. So we talked to our team about staying consistent, about making sure we keep the ball inside and attack the block.

So when we got the ball a bit closer to the net, Maddie -- Maddie had seven kills, seven errors through game two and then she ended the game with 11 kills and 1 error. It opened up her game. That has to do with her setting. She's such a phenomenal attacker and has great range, but you've got to let her have some speed into the ball.

Q. Asjia, being that Coach pointed you out as being the old lady in the locker room, do the girls look to you for advice and for being that rock in there that been there so long?

ASJIA O'NEAL: I think they definitely do. I'm also not super talkative and rah-rah all the time, but I do try to be that person that gives energy on the court. I go crazy. I do scream and give a little stare down because that's what gets my team going because I can be that fuel for everybody. I view myself as the rock for the team and the emotional grandma of the team.

