

# 2023 NCAA Women's Volleyball Championship

Thursday, December 14, 2023

Tampa, Florida, USA

Amalie Arena

## Wisconsin Badgers

## Coach Kelly Sheffield

## Sarah Franklin

## M.J. Hammill

## Izzy Ashburn

### Semifinal Press Conference



Texas 3, Wisconsin 1

KELLY SHEFFIELD: Just thought it was -- Texas played a great match. Congratulations to them. I thought they came out in the first set, probably a little bit steadier than what we were. We made probably a few more errors than what we typically do in the first set.

I thought we started settling down a little bit toward the end of that. The second set, we started playing a little bit more Wisconsin volleyball.

When they came out of the locker room, I thought their serving kind of turned the tide. I thought they were very courageous behind the service line and really putting a lot, a lot of pressure on our patterns, service patterns.

Skinner, I mean, her serving -- I don't know how many service aces she ended up having, but our passers were having to battle. They were having to battle hard for some of those.

Start of the first set, I thought Wenaas played really well and gave them a big lift in the first set. Then third and fourth set, it was O'Neal and Skinner attacking. Their young kids played well. Very good effort out of Swindle.

We gave it our best shot, but I told these guys all year, somebody's going to knock us out. It's going to take a great effort. And Texas certainly gave us that tonight.

**Q. Coach, you take a challenge at 6-3, and they run nine straight points. It's like you could never get momentum back after that. Was that the case?**

KELLY SHEFFIELD: We got momentum back in the second set. Oh, the third set? Yeah, I don't know. I don't know if it had anything to do with that. I thought -- Skinner's serve, we knew, was really, really good.

Some players, when they start getting two and three serves, their serves get better, and that was -- a player like that, you want to try to get off the line quick because, once she starts getting her mojo and confidence back there and a little bit of rhythm, it just makes it tough for everybody, and she was able to do that.

**Q. Sarah, both rolls that they got on, a week ago, it was you that got on the rolls against the other team. What's the feeling out there, the sense of them coming at you and pounding you at that point? How did you try and deal with that?**

SARAH FRANKLIN: We knew Texas was a good team. We knew they were going to get their points. We tried to have the next-ball mentality. Sometimes with how tough the serve is, it kind of gets away a little bit.

We knew they were going to be a strong team, so we tried to really focus on trying to get that next point and just siding out quicker.

**Q. M.J. or Izzy, can you just speak to trying to come back and bounce back from in that fourth set? After you lose the third set the way you did, how much of a challenge was it? How did it feel out there with the team?**

M.J. HAMMILL: I think that's a great part about volleyball is you get to really start over, a true 0-0 at the beginning of each set. So we just went back to trying to play Badger volleyball.

They ended up serving great. They were playing really well. But truly it was being able to kind of fully start over and reset a little bit. We just couldn't really get in our groove.

IZZY ASHBURN: They're a good team, good serving.

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They got us out of rhythm a little bit. We're a team that never backs down, though. We played with a lot of heart.

We're a program that's going to fight to the end, and that's what we did.

**Q. Kelly, you've gotten this program now where the standards are super high. When you look back at the season, how do you characterize it? How do you rate it?**

KELLY SHEFFIELD: Well, I think it's unfair. I don't want to be somebody that says you've got to win a championship or it's a lost season. I don't want to be in this profession if that's what we -- if that's what it is and that's what our players are feeling.

We don't talk about that. We talk about trying to play our best, trying to get better, be the best we can be, max out, all those types of things.

Hopefully along the way you're with people that you enjoy being around. There's a lot to celebrate. There's a lot to be proud of. I know these guys are. It's a bittersweet moment because I know they thoroughly enjoyed playing with each other and for each other and the fan base and the university.

You know, that's sports. They have nothing to hang their heads about. It was a great year. It was a great year, and we wish we had a few more days with them, but that's the way it goes.

**Q. Sort of along the same lines, M.J., Izzy, this is your last match. How do you balance that? How do you balance all that's happened through four and five years with tonight?**

M.J. HAMMILL: For me, it's just so much gratitude. I look back, and there really is no regrets, which is the way that I want to be leaving this sport.

I feel like the luckiest girl that I've gotten to surround myself with these people for the last four years. Not the way we wanted to end it, but we gave it everything that we had.

IZZY ASHBURN: I'm just so grateful that I got the opportunity to play my fifth year and to experience it with this exact group. In all the years I've been here, just completely different groups and different dynamics on the team and different experiences together.

I was just hoping to play college volleyball anywhere in middle school and the beginning of high school and to come here and accomplish so many different things with

the people I want to be around and the people I want to play for, I'm nothing but grateful.

**Q. One question about tonight's match. You had five blocks in the second set, and then the blocks slowed down, the Wisconsin blocks slowed down sets three and four. Any specific adjustments you saw Texas make that led to less blocks?**

KELLY SHEFFIELD: Their attackers were better than our block. I don't know. It's a good question. I'm not trying to blow it off. I don't know.

Those were really talented attackers. They've got some really, really special attackers. I thought the setter, Swindle, put them in good positions. They got up there.

When you're playing against a really good block, and both teams blocks are really good, you've got to take that ball high. You've got to hit high. You've got to hit edges. You've got to be patient. All those things. And I thought they did a really good job of doing that.

**Q. Kelly, now that you've obviously seen and played against both teams, could you assess what the championship match will be like?**

KELLY SHEFFIELD: I think it's going to be an all time great match. I don't think -- I think, whether you're a volleyball fan or not, if you're just a sport fan, you'd be nuts not to watch it.

Both teams are just complete teams. Both teams have gotten better as the season's gone on. If you were to ask me who do I think is going to win, I couldn't even tell you.

Here's what I know: Both teams are playing their best volleyball right now. Both of them. Nebraska has been rolling through the tournament. They've been rolling through the season.

Texas is -- I mean, with their backs against the wall, they haven't flinched. I remember seeing them earlier this year; they're a totally different team. They've really, really grown well together.

Should be a great match.

**Q. Sarah, you're the one up there that's coming back. Sometimes losses like this can serve as fuel going into off-season. Do you sense that will probably happen?**

SARAH FRANKLIN: For sure. We are a team that doesn't back down, doesn't give up, and this is definitely fuel coming into spring, coming into summer, coming into

preseason next year.

It's a great opportunity to come back with this group of girls. I think we should watch out for next year.

**Q. On that topic, Coach, conveniently, coincidentally, whenever the news broke that you are going to rematch with Texas on Labor Day. I want to know a little bit about the creation of that tournament with Stanford and a packed field like that and what that can kind of mean for the sport as well.**

KELLY SHEFFIELD: It's awesome. To be on that big of a stage and in that arena and that type of competition, it will -- I mean, it's how -- at some point, I will be very excited about that. Not right now, but it's great for our sport. It's awesome for our sport.

That's one of the things is that you know we've all seen. Top teams in this sport don't shy away from playing each other. It's just more fun that way, right? We played in front of 20,000 people tonight, and just a great environment. To be able to kick off the season in a very similar environment and hopefully be able -- you know, as a sport, bookend the season. It's pretty cool.

**Q. Coach, for you first and then all the players. All your teams are different. What's the one positive memory you're going to take away from this year?**

KELLY SHEFFIELD: Their joy for being in the gym, no doubt. Their joy being around each other. It was a team that grew together. You could tell they thoroughly enjoyed being around each other. You could tell they thoroughly enjoyed being in the gym, a bunch of gym rats, especially these three up here. And their feistiness.

M.J. HAMMILL: I don't know if I have one. I think it's the little moments. For me, it's like when I'm in practice and I get to kind of see I'm actually in a Wisconsin shirt, playing volleyball at 21 years old, still with my best friends.

IZZY ASHBURN: I think even in the toughest moments this team has looked around, and we know we're exactly right where we want to be. It's something we talk about a lot. We talk about the hardest practices we've been through, the hardest lifts and conditions we've been through, and we've always just looked around with so much joy and been exactly where we want to be.

Whether we're sweating, crying, hitting the floor and bleeding, this group wants to work, and we want to work together. It's hard to get us away from each other.

SARAH FRANKLIN: I think the biggest takeaway I have

from this year is how much growth I've seen in every single person. At the beginning of the season we were a little bit of a different team, and I think everyone's kind of stepped up a lot into their roles, each and every one. I think it's really cool to see that growth across the board.

**Q. M.J., it looked like, I guess it was in the second set, it looked like you winced at one point, like there was something not right. What happened, and what kind of impact did that have on how you were able to play tonight?**

M.J. HAMMILL: So I actually -- I think I stepped on maybe GG and just kind of tweaked my ankle a little bit. Not really the first time I've done that. I tend to step on people when I'm covering. It's kind of odd.

So much adrenaline. I didn't really feel it after a couple of points. I don't think it had any impact on how invested or how hard I was working in the game.

**Q. For the Coach, for Kelly, you said at the outset that the team had some errors that were sort of uncharacteristic at the outset of the match. It seems like there were errors in other parts of the match as well that seemed uncharacteristic of the team. To what extent do you attribute that to you guys as opposed to how Texas was playing?**

KELLY SHEFFIELD: I think most of it was Texas. They kept the pressure on us. We didn't play our best volleyball. I don't think there was -- that's not a secret. But I would say most of it had to do with how they were playing.

I thought we were prepared to play. It was their night.

**Q. Coach, are you going to watch the game Sunday, or are you kind of going to step back and decompress a little bit? What do you think of the game being on ABC and kind of college volleyball taking that next step?**

KELLY SHEFFIELD: It's awesome that it's on ABC. It's great. We've had three matches now on -- whether it's Fox or ABC, and ESPN has picked up their coverage in a big, big way. It's been an incredible year for the sport of volleyball.

It's the best year. It has flat out been the best year that we've ever had. I thought the NCAA committee has done a great job. Tampa has done a fantastic job. It's been a great tournament.

There's so much to be excited about in our sport. We're headed in the right direction. It's never fast enough, right? It's never fast enough. But we're excited. We're excited

about the final. I'm sure those will have massive, massive numbers, as it should.

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