

# 2023 NCAA Women's Volleyball Championship

Friday, December 15, 2023

Tampa, Florida, USA

Amalie Arena

## Texas Longhorns

## Jerritt Elliott

## Madisen Skinner

## Asjia O'Neal

## Ella Swindle

### Championship Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We have head coach Jerritt Elliott, and our student-athletes are Madisen Skinner, Asjia O'Neal, and Ella Swindle.

Coach, when you're ready, we'll ask for your comments on today.

JERRITT ELLIOTT: We're happy to wake up and have an opportunity to stick together and go for the National Championship. It's been a whirlwind, obviously, and last night got done late and had the All-American banquet this morning.

Just a quick reflection this morning when I woke up, I'm just so happy with the process that this group went through, the leadership and the quality of women that we have. It's been so much fun to go through and to see this ride because nobody had us picked to get here.

It's a special moment to be able to have a Texas-Nebraska game on ABC on national television to really blow it out of the park.

**Q. Ella, a couple questions real quick. Do you know Bergen Reilly at all? Like have your paths crossed? If so, how? When you watch her play, how do you analyze her?**

ELLA SWINDLE: Bergen and I have played in a couple of USA tryouts together. We've gotten to know each other. We were actually roommates. I've gotten to know her. She's a nice girl, and I'm excited to play against her.

She's definitely a great competitor, great player. It will be



fun to have two freshmen setters going against each other. So, yeah, super excited.

**Q. I asked Coach Cooper when they were in the middle of their two Stanley Cup in a row run, I said, what does that mean? He said, you win one, you're good. You win two in a row, you're special. Would you agree with that?**

JERRITT ELLIOTT: I think it says a lot about the program, a lot more than the team because it's a different team. This team is completely different than last year's team, and they have had to go through different struggles and build different unities and develop in different ways to get to this point.

Look, I think we bring our alumni back a lot. We bring -- we're getting text messages -- I shared one the other day with our team. There's just a community we have at Texas. There's so many people besides the 18 players we have that are cheering each other on. There's a unique group of women that are just always supporting you, and it's a lifelong -- you're forever a lifelong Longhorn.

**Q. Madisen, I know, when you get into college, you're not thinking I'm going to make history, but you were part of the first SEC team to win. Now you're with Texas trying to win back-to-back titles. Can you kind of put that journey into perspective for us right now, what you've accomplished and maybe can accomplish even further on Sunday?**

MADISEN SKINNER: Yeah, it's stuff that you dream of as a little girl. Just starting out, you see all the amazing people that come before you and you want to be just like them. Just to make history in different places has been awesome.

It just goes back to the people I've been surrounded by. They've pushed me and challenged me. So many people have impacted my life and made me into the person and player I am today. It's just great to be with this team and be able to make history and hopefully go back-to-back as well.

**ASAP** . . . when all is said, we're done.®  
sports

**Q. I want to ask Ella and then you two also. Ella, if you could point at one thing you've improved the most during the course of this season, what would that be? I'll have you guys as her hitters also answer, and then I'll have a follow-up for Coach after that answer.**

ELLA SWINDLE: I think over the course of the season I've just become a more consistent player. There's going to be a lot of ups and downs, and things have definitely been rocky throughout the season.

Asjia and Madi and all the coaches on staff just help me be at peace on the court. I give it my best. Whatever happens is going to happen, and everyone has my back.

That gives me a lot of freedom to just go out and play and play the sport that I love, and that's how I've become a more consistent player throughout the year.

ASJIA O'NEAL: I would say that me and Ella have done a really good job with our connection. At the beginning of the year, we were trying to make sure everything was perfect. Obviously, as you know, volleyball is not perfect.

We've really worked on trusting one other, like even if the set is not in the perfect location, I think that I'm able to put a good swing on it. And the other way around, Ella has a lot of trust in me. Our overall confidence in one another and dialogue has improved since August and September.

MADISEN SKINNER: I would just say individually my confidence, my path to where I am today has been very interesting. I started as a right side, played right side in my first National Championship, then I was a three rotation outside, and now I'm a six rotation outside. I'm constantly just kind of adding to my toolkit and my toolbox of different areas of the game I need to keep working on.

I would just say my confidence overall and knowing that I'm capable of accomplishing great things and surrounded by amazing people throughout the process and making so many new connections has been so special.

**Q. We've seen -- talking to two freshmen setters playing Sunday, are you seeing setters come out of high school more ready for the college game, or are these two kind of exceptions to the rule?**

JERRITT ELLIOTT: I think the growth of the sport is tremendous. There's better club coaches. The type of athletes that we're getting, the sooner they're getting into the USA model and training with USA in the gym. There's a lot of things where athletes are coming out a little bit more proficient.

I still remember the conversations Ella and I had early on, there's a lot of pressure coming in as a quarterback to set a team that just won a National Championship. You feel all the responsibility. For me, I was trying to tone that down with Ella and tell her she was going to fail a lot and we were going to catch her, and she wasn't going to be perfect every night. So setting the expectations where she could just grow.

And then we had to be able to put building blocks in place where she could not know what we're doing, but kind of building her confidence in terms of what we're doing in the gym -- short string setting, long string setting, connections through certain planes, and then systematically how we were running an offense and how we were going to scheme and do all that. You can't throw that on a freshman the first two, three weeks of the season.

David, who has been running our offense, does a tremendous job with her in terms of building those blocks, and you could see him talking to her a lot about some of that stuff, and we're able to talk through it.

I think where Ella has developed, I think it was the second game or fourth game, there was a ball, and she's running forward and she sets this long back slide to Asjia. That takes a lot of obviously skill, but it also takes a lot of guts in critical situations. So that tells me where she is confidence-wise in terms of running our offense.

**Q. Coach Elliott, I think, if you look throughout college sports, there's only a limited amount of programs who are good every year in every sport. You guys at Nebraska are like that in volleyball. Can you talk about all the elements that go into that? Obviously you and John have been coaches for a long time, but administrative support, all those things that have created that.**

JERRITT ELLIOTT: The wonderful woman sitting back there, Chris Plonsky, was the one that hired me when I was wet behind the ears at 32 years old and trying to turn a program around when it was 10-18. Thank goodness she believed in me.

The stress and the amount of work to sustain something at this level is tremendous, and I don't think people understand that. The more success you have, the more -- I don't know, the more as a coach, it just makes you feel uncomfortable because the success rate, it's either this or nothing, and it's not successful.

But what we've tried to do is have fun and create the right kind of players. Our administration has given us all the resources. I've become a lot more of a CEO of the

business management of creating a brand and making sure relationships with coaches and what we're doing marketing-wise and building the arenas and doing all the things, from what kind of music we're using and every little aspect of that, looking at how do we sustain this, how do we grow it, how do we keep up and sustain with Nebraska? They're a benchmark as well.

So how do you keep up with the sport? And now where social media is, and now you've got this NIL piece. All these pieces come into play, and then you're trying to take care of these incredible young women to give them a platform where they can emotionally grow as young women and have confidence in what they're doing.

You've got to be able to hire a great staff, and my administration's allowed me to hire a really great staff that care about young women and are great communicators. I feel like we have the total package right now in what we're doing.

You always know by the way your teams perform, and this growth is just super special, and this team is super confident. You can just see how they're walking around right now, which was not there early in the season. So super proud of it.

But to build the program, to sustain it is something I lose a lot of sleep over. I don't sleep a lot. My wife knows. But it's something that I take a lot of pride in, and I want to represent well, and I would love nothing but to put the cherry on top on Sunday afternoon.

**Q. Madisen and Asjia, Coach used the expression a few moments ago when he was talking about Ella, when he said the phrase was could just grow. In regards to Emma Halter, from a player perspective, can each of you address how she has grown?**

ASJIA O'NEAL: Emma's always been a really fiery player. Even last year she played outstanding, especially in the tournament. I feel like having a libero like Zoe, Emma often didn't get the recognition that she deserved. Honestly, seeing her play yesterday, I told her, what did you do before the game? You played lights out.

She's just always very consistent, very gritty. I feel like as libero sometimes you don't really get the recognition and the shine, where it's something we've seen her grow every single day and we knew what she was capable of.

But seeing her finally get some recognition last night and hopefully on Sunday as well has been really exciting and I'm very proud of her because all of her work definitely doesn't go unnoticed by us.

MADISEN SKINNER: Em's always had energy. She's so fiery, and I call her my little bean. She's so excited to come to practice every single day and get better. She's just grown so much. She's the first one in, last one out every single day. She's constantly trying to find ways to grow and learn.

She's communicating with us as blockers, hey, that's looks good. Hey, that's me, like in a great setup. She's grown as a vocal leader as well, and that's due to confidence and her playing lights out, as Asjia said.

Yeah, I would just say vocal leader and just always grinding. She's always in the gym and always trying to push us to be our best version.

**Q. Coach, I know you haven't had a lot of time to work on Nebraska, but this season, what you have seen of Nebraska, what gets the most of your attention on Nebraska this year?**

JERRITT ELLIOTT: I think they've got every facet of the game. They play at a really high level, and they're very efficient. They've got a great backcourt defense with the Smalls. They've got really good blocking. They've got a lot of good arms. Bergen is setting the ball really well, and they block well.

So they can put a lot of pressure on you from the service line. They pass really well. There's a reason that they're whatever and 1.

We're excited. It should be a really good matchup for us and excited to play it.

**Q. Coach, you alluded to this earlier, the special nature of this weekend. ABC, got a dynamic matchup, a chance to draw more exposure to the sport maybe than ever before. You look at other sports, when Bird played Magic, everybody was excited about it, but nobody really knew what it was going to lead to until later. Sometimes you don't know these things in realtime, but we kind of see what we've got here, but is this college volleyball's moment we're going to have tomorrow?**

JERRITT ELLIOTT: This is probably the biggest moment we've ever had. It's a moment that -- for ABC to see where the sport is growing to pick it up on football Sunday is pretty special. Hopefully there's some marketing behind that to be able to make that happen.

I think people are going to be surfing through the channels, and when they see Texas-Nebraska on with 21,000 people

in the crowd, it's going to be super exciting. It's one of the building blocks to get this sport to the next level. It's exciting because women's sports in general are growing left and right. I'm a proponent not just for volleyball but for women's basketball and really getting people comfortable with seeing these incredible athletes.

My friends are on a text chain. I've got about 30 of them in California that are just talking about, not just how well we played, the type of athletes we have and how -- I mean, one of them was comparing Madi to Flo Hyman. Is she better than Flo Hyman? That's the best volleyball player we've ever had in the world.

It's pretty special to see them talk about how Asjia hits the ball and just the way that they see athletes come out. It's breathtaking for them. So it's pretty cool to see.

**Q. Asjia, forgive me for asking something that's a little apart from the Final Four, but with the pro league coming up, Jerritt is talking about the growth of the sport, that's another element of that. I just wonder about your thoughts and about your place in that part of the sport to continue on even past Texas.**

ASJIA O'NEAL: I think it's honestly so exciting that we have these opportunities to play here in America. I think this is the perfect time for it as we've discussed the sport's blowing up.

This past summer playing with the national team, I was able to see how other countries love volleyball and how they go all out for it. So I really hope that's a level we can get to here. With this game on ABC, hopefully it brings a lot of viewers and a lot of eyes on the sport. Hopefully people will want to tune in to the pro volleyball here in the states as well. It's an exciting time, and I'm proud to be a part of that.

**Q. This is for all four of you. In 2003 -- and Ella, you may not have been born yet. Bear with me on this. I asked Warren Sapp before the Super Bowl describe in one word what winning that Super Bowl would be. What's your one word that would describe winning that National Championship?**

JERRITT ELLIOTT: Special.

MADISEN SKINNER: Oh, gosh, that's a great question. Come back to me. I want to make it a good one hopefully.

**Q. You want to call a friend?**

MADISEN SKINNER: Yes, Asjia. That's hard. Great question.

ASJIA O'NEAL: I'm going to call a friend too.

ELLA SWINDLE: Oh, gosh. I guess I can't call a friend.

**Q. I'll tell you what Warren said: Immortality.**

ELLA SWINDLE: That's a good one. The first word that comes to mind is everything. It's not everything because I have my foundation outside of volleyball, but it just is everything because this is what you worked for and dream of as a kid. So to me it's everything in volleyball.

ASJIA O'NEAL: My word is legendary. I think going back-to-back and being a longtime rival and on ABC during primetime and in my last year would just be so fun.

MADISEN SKINNER: I mean, I have to say incredible, but I also think of just the word resilient. I feel like that's what this team has been all season. Obviously didn't start as strong as we would have hoped, but I'll say it again, but we're peaking right now, and that's all we can ask for. Just say resilient and awesome.

**Q. Ella, if I could ask you a big picture question too, please. Obviously Texas is going to the SEC next year. Growing up in Columbia, you've been pretty familiar with the SEC the last several years. What are your thoughts, being a freshman, about going into that new league? Jerritt has talked about how much growth there's been in the SEC. Obviously Madisen was a big part of that. But your thoughts after this year of switching and playing in that league?**

ELLA SWINDLE: I'm super excited to go play in the SEC. Obviously playing at Mizzou is going to be super fun. My friends and family will see that. Just playing in my hometown is something super special that I didn't think would happen.

It's also great for the game. We played teams like Tennessee, who were so great, and a lot of new competition that will expose us to new levels of volleyball. Kentucky and Florida and all these new teams that I think will be super fun to face.

JERRITT ELLIOTT: I'll add to that, just going there is going to be super fun and enjoyable for me because obviously having played in a lot of those cities. But I'm always trying to think business-wise and how to grow the game, to me, in college sports we always stick to a certain model and we do it because we do it. I don't know if that's the trend.

I don't know if we need to play 16 to 18 games in all the big

conferences. I'm trying to push 10 to 12, conference tournament at the end, but more big games at the end of the season. Texas-Nebraska, Stanford-Nebraska, Stanford-Florida, whatever it may be, but for TV to cover that and really grow the game in big time venues and how we can make that happen.

So we need to look at it in terms of how we can get the best ratings, how we can get the best opportunities to see the tournament the right way, and how can we grow the game from a fan base. We've always got to be looking at that from a coach's perspective and a sport perspective to be able to grow the game at a high level.

**Q. Does that change the way you schedule nonconference at all going into the SEC? Have you had a chance to think very much about that, or does it not change?**

JERRITT ELLIOTT: We study it. We put a lot of time and effort into how we're doing our preseason because it's so critical to be a top four seed. Like for even the start that we had, if we wouldn't have had the hiccup against Kansas State, we probably would have been a top four seed. That tells you, going 5-3, our preseason schedule was good enough because of who we scheduled and the number of wins we were getting.

**Q. Asjia, you've played Nebraska twice, both regional finals. You beat Nebraska in 2020. Nebraska beat Texas in 2021. Is Nebraska a unique rival to you in Texas, or would your feelings towards this match, your approach be just the same if it were Pittsburgh on Sunday?**

ASJIA O'NEAL: I would say it would be the same because obviously it's for a National Championship, but I do know that there's that long-term rivalry there. And even if you don't grow up in the state of Texas and you don't really know much about it, you're going to figure it out really quickly once you get here.

I know our fans don't necessarily like each other either, so they're definitely going to be really riled up during the game.

But a game's a game for me. Regardless of who's on the other side, I'm going to come out and be fiery and aggressive and be the player that I am. It's just kind of a little cherry on top that it is a rival, but it should be a really fun game.

**Q. Coach, I know you like Gregory Gym, but as CEO, how much consideration have you given to having matches played in what you call big time venues?**

JERRITT ELLIOTT: We are in those discussions now, really kind of looking at the marketing aspect, how to be able to do this. Gregory is a special place, but as the game evolves, as the dynamics for financial issues are becoming more and more difficult in the college sports, it's something we need to consider.

My goal has always been could we get into being a positive grossing sport, and we're not there. Most programs aren't there. But I think we have that opportunity if we look at the right kind of business model. We are in those discussions and trying to see how we can make that happen.

**Q. Coach, you mentioned a few minutes ago Nebraska's back row defense, and we talked about how your offense can attack front row defenses as front row blockers. Generally speaking, can you attack back row defenses in different ways, and if so, how?**

JERRITT ELLIOTT: Each defense that there is, there's tendencies from a player. There's heat maps that Nebraska will all have and we'll have on them. At the end of the day, it's being able to see the floor. The way that Madi swung out of system against Stanford, they really didn't have an answer. She just kind of painted the floor in terms of where she was hitting -- hard angle, deep corner.

Same thing with Asjia. We have attackers, we're talking to them in-game adjustments of what they need to be doing, of what's available, but so much of it is controlling the ball. Can we put up good balls every time for them to be able to take good quality swings?

**Q. Coach, with the NIL and the portal recruiting, it's 24/7, 365. How important is it to have that strong woman at home at your house so you can take care of your volleyball family?**

JERRITT ELLIOTT: There's no one better than my wife. She's the team mom. I think she sees -- she's around them all the time. She stops by practices. She's on a lot of road trips.

I think it's part of the family atmosphere that we try to create, and if I wasn't able to have her around, I wasn't able to have her support, this job is hard enough as it is. But what's been fun is that the players lean on her a little bit as well. It's truly a family-type atmosphere. I'm lucky to have her. That's why I'm still coaching.

**Q. Asjia, there's no way in one question we can ask you about your health journey, everything you've gone through. Do you still have moments where you say I really have survived a lot to get to this moment?**

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

ASJIA O'NEAL: I honestly try not to think about it too much because I feel like, as athletes, you don't like to focus on weak moments or things like that. Really just throughout the long season, when you go through your dog days or days you don't want to wake up and go to practice or lift, those are times when I reflect on when I didn't really have the possibility or capability to go through the workouts or the practices I had.

Whenever I kind of have those negative thoughts creep in, I think that's really when I try to reflect on all that I've overcome to get to this point and just be grateful and blessed that I have this opportunity now.

**Q. Could you talk about how much faster does the college game move than even club? Not really high school, but club is probably the best comparison. How much faster is it, and is that the thing that's maybe the most complicated to get used to as a freshman setter?**

ELLA SWINDLE: I definitely think the game is a lot faster. That wasn't the biggest adjustment. I think the biggest adjustment is just learning how to play with new girls that have played in National Championships, won National Championships, and just have high expectations, like you, but you just want to be the best that you can be for them.

The biggest adjustment for me was just learning how to take it day by day and learning how to fail and get back up again and trust myself as an athlete because that's what got me here and that's what's going to take us to the National Championship tomorrow -- or on Sunday, I guess.

**Q. After all the matches you've seen Asjia play, is there still matches where you just shake your head in disbelief, so impressed by what she's able to do on a volleyball court?**

JERRITT ELLIOTT: Yeah, I think -- and she's not even done with her growth opportunities of where she can go in this sport. You asked a question earlier about Emma. Emma is a player that -- you have players that make constant decisions whether to work hard or not or to go for balls. Emma has never had a day off like that. Every ball that she sees, she goes for.

I actually sent her a funny little video this morning with a little dog thing where they put the ball in the thing and it shoots out and the dog goes and gets it. That's Emma to a tee. That's her.

In terms of Asjia, the same thing applies. Asjia has always come to work and has always been this tremendous

athlete. Where she's really evolved is her confidence, her belief in herself, the leadership qualities that she's had. Her range now is so phenomenal that it's so fun to watch her play.

To see what she did this summer with USA didn't surprise me at all. I think it surprised USA volleyball, but she's one of the best in the game.

She does it the right way. She's a great teammate. She's a great leader. She makes everybody around her better.

**Q. Coach, one or two keys, as you look at one more match this season, one or two keys that you hope to see your team come out and execute really well on Sunday?**

JERRITT ELLIOTT: I think one that every coach will say is the serve and pass game has to be on point. I really believe that these games come to out of system play. You've got to find ways to be able to score.

There's enough good players -- schematically, there's a lot of teams that scheme and try to do things. Typically as a program, we do not do that. Even when we should be doing that in the regular season because we know that, when we get to this point, you can't scheme because they've got five good attackers and they're coming everywhere.

So we've got to be great at reading in what we do. We're confident in what we're doing in that system, and then we train a ton out of system in our practice gym. So non-setters setting, great swings, attack selection is going to be a key.

First ball side out and the transition game is going to be everything that determines this match tomorrow.

**Q. Both head coaches grew up in California. Coincidence, you think?**

JERRITT ELLIOTT: My whole staff is from California. Our beach staff is from California. It's where the game started. I think in my generation, yes, but now there's so many great coaches in the state of Texas and around the country. We were the ones that got it started when there was no money in the game and you just fell in love with it.

I was originally a teacher before I got into coaching. So I just couldn't get enough of it. I think John is the same way. I think he was a football coach. I don't even know if John ever played.

Yeah, the game's evolved, and it's super fun, and it's super

passionate.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

