

Big Ten Volleyball Media Days

Monday, August 5, 2024

Chicago, Illinois, USA

Northwestern Wildcats

Coach Tim Nollan

Kennedy Hill

Alexa Rousseau

Press Conference

TIM NOLLAN: Welcome, everyone. Thank you for having us. We're really excited to be part of Big Ten Media Day today and kick off the 2024 season.

I know we're really, really excited about the upcoming season and all the mysteries that get done a couple days before you start practice.

We have a group of incredible student-athletes looking to return to campus the next couple days, full of big dreams and aspirations, and we can't wait to compete at the highest level.

Q. Alexa, a lot of changes in the program with the coaching staff. What's the transition been like so far, you helping lead the team?

ALEXA ROUSSEAU: Yeah, for sure. The winter and spring were definitely different. You have a group of girls who don't have a coach for a little bit, so authentically and transparently trying to figure things out.

But making sure all the girls stay motivated, knowing when we do get that coach he's going to be an amazing man like Tim.

And then when Tim came along, obviously was very respectful about the values we had as a group of girls in our program, and honored our authenticity but also made sure he seamlessly integrated what he was about and his values and thing outside of volleyball, like mental practices or mental health were integrated really soon.

I think it was a great mesh, and we were able to listen really well and be really competitive for him, so it's been great so far.

Q. Can you just talk a little bit more about your decision to leave Grand Canyon and why you thought



Northwestern was the right fit for you and your family moving forward?

TIM NOLLAN: Absolutely. There are very few jobs that I would have been interested, quite honestly, leaving Grand Canyon, and the opportunity to coach in the Big Ten, the premier conference in women's volleyball, to live in greater Chicago, in Evanston, and be at a world-class institution, it just became a no-brainer.

You get to live in a world class city, coach at a world class academic institution in the best conference for the sport I coach. There was no decision-making process at that point. It just felt like it was meant to be.

Q. Was that one of those reasons why, because you can keep your purple ties?

TIM NOLLAN: Purple is fitting. Ironically my middle child said we could only change if we got to stay purple, so it worked out.

Q. You were named coach in February. Two months behind after Northwestern (indiscernible). Do you feel like you've had to play catch-up a lot, and what's that been like learning everyone and figuring out what the Big Ten is about?

TIM NOLLAN: I feel like anytime you take a new job or a new space, that there's always going to be catch-up. Doesn't matter if you take it in November or December. That doesn't matter.

In terms of catching up on the conference, I mean, I knew the conference. Everyone knows the conference. It's the biggest and the best.

In terms of building relationships, I think that's what one of my strengths is, and hiring a staff that would help me do that was a really big premium for myself.

Having our staff finish out and round it out, we're just trying to pour into these student-athletes and enable them to succeed in all aspects.



Q. Kennedy, now being another year older, taking over that main blocker spot from Leilani, how do you feel like your voice has grown as a leader in the middle of the floor?

KENNEDY HILL: Honestly it grew immediately from the time that I became captain. We obviously have gelled as a team since the beginning, so we're open and honest with each other as a team.

And Lex and I decided that carry that over with the new coaching staff, as well. We've been open and honest the entire way through. I feel like there's a great feedback loop between all the coaches and all the girls. So I am excited to continue this on.

And like Lex mentioned, Tim and Jeff have been incorporating mental health and openness between the coaching staff and the team that I think will work well with our team style and how we operate.

ALEXA ROUSSEAU: I can also speak, Kennedy's voice in contagious with our team because of how hard she works. Everyone sees the constant display she puts on of work ethic every day, and wants to work hard and follow her because of that.

So she's done an amazing job right off the bat.

KENNEDY HILL: Thanks, Lex.

Q. Alexa, two transfers from Washington and South Florida. What has it been like developing a connection with Buse and Sophia? How has it been to connect with them and learn who they are?

ALEXA ROUSSEAU: It's been great. I can start with Sophia. Obviously she's a fellow older veteran like myself now, so we kind of just immediately clicked based on experience and our time playing in Power Five conferences.

But I also have realized kind of over summer training that she's a very strategic thinker like I am, so it's been a huge pleasure so far playing with her and seeing the game in a similar way. I think we've been able to experiment and have a lot of success from that together.

Buse is just a ball of energy. She's super competitive. She works her butt off every day, but she's also a really good cheerleader and supporter of her other teammates. Her energy is definitely contagious as well and she's been awesome to be around and works really hard trying to catch up to the speed of Big Ten volleyball, and I think she's going to be a huge asset.

Q. Alexa, last year the team brought in six or seven new girls before last season. How has that experience helped building a team and coexisting quickly before the season this year when you bring in six new players, as well?

ALEXA ROUSSEAU: Yeah, that was definitely helpful last year. And I think, again, just like last year, we did a really good job of carefully picking who we were going to join our team. Obviously all of them are incredibly talented, but they also have a lot of shared values with us as individuals but also us as a program.

We knew because we took the time to pick really amazing girls as volleyball players, as people, as teammates, and as student-athletes. It was going to be a really easy kind of crossover.

So having them here in the summer, it's been very seamless and they've been really open to feedback and trying to cultivate different shots, different skills that fit into our play set. So it's been great so far, and I think all of them fit in very well, so I'm very excited.

Q. Coach, follow up on that, coming to Northwestern, the academic standards, the admission standards are much higher, especially to bring transfers and non-grad students. What did you learn quickly when you got here about working the transfer portal at Northwestern?

TIM NOLLAN: Well, as you mentioned, Northwestern is an incredibly rigorous academic institution, but thankfully the student-athletes that we were able to pursue met those standards.

Northwestern, we don't compromise. You're going to have to meet our standards academically. You're going to have to meet our standards off the court and on the court, as well.

I think that there's always going to be challenges no matter what institution you're at, but I have been very fortunate to have a team that helps us with our admissions and things like that, kind of walk me through the process and walk my staff through the steps that it takes to get a kid admitted to Northwestern, what the standards exactly are and how that works.

Thankfully we have a great team around us helping us do that, and we're looking to rise and meet all those challenges.

Q. This is a program that's come really close to

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

making the playoffs a couple times. I wanted to ask how that's motivating you and how you're managing expectations and priorities in a year of transition.

KENNEDY HILL: I can take this one. Lex and I were just talking about how being underestimated motivates us every single season. Like you mentioned, we've come close the past couple years to come into the playoffs, and that is a motivation for us coming into this year.

Tim has made it clear that that is his goal, is to make it to the tournament this year, and to make it to the tournament the year after that and the year after that.

He's working hard to get recruits coming into the next season and the next season, so I'm very grateful to have a coach that is that invested in us and believes in us that much that we'll make it to the playoffs this season.

ALEXA ROUSSEAU: Yeah, and I can say I committed to this university in 2017, so I've been a part and bought into this program and wanting to rebuild it and make the tournament since then, and I think every single year we've come a little bit closer since my freshman year.

And while that can be frustrating, it has been incredibly motivating, because now that we have a few top 10, top 15 wins under our belt over those seasons, we've started to see that the greatest thing is in a program, and that's self-belief.

I think now we know we are capable of going head-to-head and beat some of those really good teams. All we have to do is go out and do it on a consistent basis and take care of the teams that we need to beat, and I think we'll be just fine for the rest of the seasons.

Q. As a new member of the conference, what's one team you're really looking forward to face, and could you speak on how the addition of the four new programs impacts conference play?

TIM NOLLAN: Well, adding the four West Coast schools I think is great depth for the conference. I think it brings in four really high-caliber volleyball institutions to, again, the best conference in the country.

In terms of what team am I looking forward to playing most, you know, Maryland, because that's the first Big Ten match we play. For me, it's really every match.

For me, the most important match of the year is UNLV because that's the first match of the year. You can't look past people. You can't look down the road. Every night in this league is going to be a battle, and you have to show

up prepared and disciplined and focused to give your team a chance to win.

I think people get caught up sometimes in looking, oh, this match is going to be really good; this is highlighted or this is primetime TV. You're going to miss the three or four, and if you're not doing your best every night, this conference is going to kick you in the tail.

Q. Before you play a game have you ever got so nervous that you almost had a panic attack before?

KENNEDY HILL: That is a good question, and the answer is yes, many times. I didn't play my freshman year, and I remember my first game, my first real game as a sophomore, I think I had something was wrong with my body. There's always something wrong with my body, but it was something on the more painful end, and I remember I was going, I can't let it show, I can't let it show, I need to just perform.

A lot of the time I feel like injury or non-injury, you have this feeling that I just need to perform, especially being Northwestern, we want to perform every single time so that we can prove everyone wrong.

And also, of course, for ourselves.

But yeah, definitely. I feel like a lot of people get extremely nervous. Even Simone Biles, you saw she gets nervous before every single vault she does, every single event she does. You see her doing her routine. She has to calm herself down.

So I feel like that's a common thread between all athletes. If you really care, you will get nervous.

ALEXA ROUSSEAU: Yeah, growing up and playing in high school in AAU I wasn't a huge nerves person, but since I got the privilege to start my freshman year, I thought it would kind of be a similar transition, but I remember getting subbed into my first game, and I couldn't feel my legs.

Obviously I touch the ball almost every time it crosses the net, so trying to run without being able to feel your legs and making them feel like they're 100 pounds is a very scary feeling.

If I were to give advice, after that I realized how important visualization is to me, so at the first 19-minute mark for warm-ups I always will sit on the bench and try and run myself through myself doing things successfully, running Kennedy on the gap and getting a kill if that's our game plan, things like that.

Visualization has helped me a lot, and just trying to calm myself and watch myself do things before I get out on the court and do it so I know I can do it and I've done it before.

Q. What is your favorite opponent to play during a season?

ALEXA ROUSSEAU: I think I like playing Illinois. It's the in-state rival. And especially at Illinois. They have a really great crowd and really great student section session. They're really funny. They like to mess with us a lot. So I enjoy that, and I think it's also fun to play in those rival environments because as competitive as it is, it kind of takes the edge off a little bit that they're just trying to have fun and they take it serious, too. I really enjoy that and that pressure.

KENNEDY HILL: I'd say I really like Minnesota. They also have a great crowd, and I also just love the area surrounding the school so we get really good food before, as well really good food after. It's really fun. It's a fun experience.

Q. Alexa, you mentioned earlier the area of mental health. How do you do that and what does that look like in your team?

ALEXA ROUSSEAU: Yeah, individually, like I said, I like to do a lot of visualization just because if I've seen myself do it before, then I feel like I (feed interruption).

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