

Big Ten Volleyball Media Days

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Chicago, Illinois, USA

Rutgers Scarlet Knights

Coach Caitlin Schwehofer

Aly Borellis

Zora Hardison

Press Conference



CAITLIN SCHWEIHOFFER: Hello. I'm so excited to be here for our third annual Big Ten media days. So exciting.

I chose these two to join us this year for a lot of reasons, but they really represent what I think this season will become, and Aly obviously making the commitment to Rutgers in January and Zora having to step into some big shoes at the end of the season when our starting middle blocker was injured after we played Illinois.

I felt they were great representatives of the program, and again, I thank the Big Ten for allowing us this opportunity to be in front of you all.

Q. Aly, the transfer, talk me through the process. How did you end up at Rutgers? What was the decision? If there's future players, whether they're recruits thinking about going to Rutgers, how can that influence their decision?

ALY BORELLIS: Yeah, for sure. So my experience was very quick. I came in -- I entered in December so I had about three weeks to really figure it out and kind of pick it, and it really came down to the culture.

It's really hard to find culture just on a visit, but you could tell these were genuine people and you could tell that they had a future that they wanted to build and they were doing and taking all the right steps to get there.

I think for me it was coming into an environment that had that competitive mindset, had a group of girls that really wanted to win and knew they could. For me it was definitely tough, but I also was recruited by Caitlin I when I was I think 16 during COVID, and it was a tough situation. But I knew them from that point, and so using that to my knowledge I knew they were great people. They saw something in me that young and so for them to want me again two years later, they knew they saw something, and I was

becoming the person that they wanted.

So it just came down to family environment, came down to the people, and I think New Jersey is a really great place to just have a college experience and just grow up there and kind of learn new things. Because it is definitely different from where I'm from.

But overall it's just a really great experience, and the people is what makes it for me.

CAITLIN SCHWEIHOFFER: I'm not going to lie, Aly's dad made me work for it a bit. It was a quick process. And he's a business guy, so I basically had to create a business plan of what our future for the next few years with Aly in it would look like, and I guess I passed the test.

Q. You had to create a business plan?

CAITLIN SCHWEIHOFFER: He just wanted to know. Again, like any parent, he cared about his daughter. She was transferring from a previous institution, so there's always pros and cons to where she was coming from and what you're walking into.

No place is perfect, but sometimes in the transfer process it can be so fast that it just seems like the grass is greener wherever you visit or wherever you go. So he just wanted to be sure that they were checking marking all the boxes, that it was the best institution and program.

ALY BORELLIS: And on my visit my dad made her write out a whole little sheet of everything that I wanted. Shout out my dad.

CAITLIN SCHWEIHOFFER: His business degree came in handy.

ALY BORELLIS: Yeah. So everything was written out on my visit so, so it was great.

CAITLIN SCHWEIHOFFER: Shout out Mike Borellis.

Q. Caitlin, can you talk about the significance of that Minnesota match last year, what it meant for the



growth of the program to get a rated win, and how do you make that happen more often?

CAITLIN SCHWEIHOFER: The belief in this room -- before I talked about our goal sheet and how we had a list of small wins we wanted to meet and trying to cross these off every year to ultimately get to big goal of making the NCAA tournament, winning a Big Ten Championship, winning an NCAA Championship, which has to be the end goal.

So last year I believe that the win versus Minnesota, it proved to -- not only proved, but also showed the world what we are capable of as a program, and there was a lot of questions about this program if it was possible, if we should be in the Big Ten, can we be competitive within the Big Ten, where is the ceiling for Rutgers volleyball.

Getting that first ever top-25 win I think really blew the ceiling off. It's just exciting for the team. It was motivation for the players, for our future recruiting classes, and just kind of showed that my vision, reality was coming into fruition, and that we still have future opportunities to get wins like this.

Q. You've spoken about recruiting more within the United States. I wanted to hear about that process. Then to the players' point, how that affects culture as you bring in new people.

CAITLIN SCHWEIHOFER: So it's not unknown that when I first took over the Rutgers program, it had been significantly internationally dominated within the roster, and so I felt that it was important in order to build the Rutgers brand within the United States we wanted to recruit domestic players.

There is an importance to grow a fan base within the United States, and now that we have put effort into recruiting domestically, we're able to really have a true audience wherever we go and wherever we play. And not only from parents, but also from boosters and other friends.

I will never eliminate our international recruiting. As you'll see this year, we have three or four international players. Excuse me, but I can't think of exactly the right number. Four? Sorry. But they are -- Rutgers is a true destination for an international student. We are a 45-minute train ride from Manhattan, so it's a true destination for any student. Having three major airports so close by, it is interesting for an international student.

But I have felt that I wanted to use the relationships that I had and that my staff had with domestic clubs, and we've been very successful doing so.

I recently was told by a club in Big Ten -- I won't say which one -- but a Big Ten state that I was turning that state into New Jersey. It was interesting. It happened to be Nebraska.

Q. Zora, you're one of the youngest people here. What has the experience been like for you so far being amongst the elite of the Big Ten?

ZORA HARDISON: So honestly, my team is very amazing. They helped me adjust really quickly. I think having that experience has that helped for this season coming in, helping with our freshman Natalie with her adjustment because she'll be playing, as well. I think honestly it's just helped our game improve.

CAITLIN SCHWEIHOFER: Zora is one of the most coachable athletes that I have personally ever worked with. She had to jump into a role that she wasn't necessarily prepared for.

I remember (indiscernible), like I don't think I'm playing this year, and then when she got called in because of injury she's like, okay, I guess I'm playing. I'm like, well, you were the only other middle on the team.

But she really took that in stride, and this past spring has not only worked really hard in the weight room in order to increase vertical and overall fitness level, but just in her volleyball IQ. That is probably the area that needed to grow the most. I've seen a lot of improvement in that space.

Q. Aly, what is it like transitioning to a whole new team and having to learn players' tendencies? And for Zora, how has she gotten acclimated to the team and handled that job?

ALY BORELLIS: I would say coming in it's definitely stressful. It's scary. It's a new experience. For me I'm just very blessed to have a group of girls on this team that just want me to feel comfortable. I think a lot of people say that but it's true.

The whole time they've made me feel at home, always reached out, always wanted to get to know me. I think knowing these players believe in me it makes it easier on the court.

So when I felt that family environment off the court, once I was able to play, I felt that I could really help this team and I could be confident and I could use what I've learned in the SEC to bring it here to this team to see what works and stuff.

But yeah, I would just say that it's definitely different and it's scary because it is, at least for me, across the United States. But it's been nothing but home for me, and I think these girls are just so incredible and no one really sees it when they're playing, but it's a really good group of girls, and it's made my adjustment just so much easier.

ZORA HARDISON: Aly, she is such a bubbly person, like overall, so finding that connection in person helped 100 times more just in the game playing with her. She made it easy to connect with her as a setter and hitter. She has just done an amazing job adjusting to the new team.

CAITLIN SCHWEIHOFER: From a coaching standpoint I think having Abby Detering on staff with us who has set in the Big Ten, I believe that was a big reason why Aly chose Rutgers, she was going to be trained under Abby in a setting role.

So their connection and the relationship they were able to develop over the spring, it is much easier to bring in a setter transfer in January than it would be in June because you have the ability to create that dynamic throughout the spring.

Q. Caitlin, you guys have Washington and Oregon back to back on the schedule this year. What do you think that's going to look like going out there literally coast to coast and playing on both sides of the country?

CAITLIN SCHWEIHOFER: I think it's going to look awesome. We have an airport 25 minutes away from us. Newark Airport is so easy to get to. And we've looked at all different travel options, whether it was charter, whether it was commercial flights. And I have a very good friend who also coaches at Oregon State, so I asked her about what the travel was like between Washington and Oregon, and she was like, okay, well, do this and then drive this time. So it make it all easier. So I've used my resources wisely in that sense.

It's going to be new for everyone. It's the first year, so there's going to be a learning curve. It's actually my first time ever out to Oregon, so I'm really excited about the opportunity to play out there.

I've been to Seattle before. I've never played at Washington but been to Seattle before, so I think our players are excited about it. Obviously USC and UCLA are coming and playing in New Jersey, so that's going to be their challenge.

But Big Ten travel is tough whenever. Oregon might be

easier to get to than Lincoln, Nebraska, or who knows. But we'll find out this year.

Q. What are your long-term goals, and where do you see yourself in the world of volleyball in five years?

ALY BORELLIS: It's a great question, first off. But yeah, I think from here I think women's volleyball has slowly grown over the past few years, and now seeing pro volleyball in the States, it's just a really good step for us.

At least for me, now, I mean, it could change, but for now I want to try to play pro in the States and just keep getting women's volleyball out there. Definitely long-term pro volleyball and just continuing to finish these last two years really strong and just making Rutgers volleyball just a bigger name and more fans and getting our name out there.

ZORA HARDISON: Personally I don't see myself going pro, but for the rest of the years that I am here I see myself being a leader and taking titles, if that makes sense.

Q. What is one memorable game for you?

ZORA HARDISON: Definitely Nebraska last year. I had a lot of self-doubt coming into the Big Ten and playing, but I think I showcased my skills, and to be able to bring that this season, I'm very excited to.

Q. You have a little more challenging non-conference. You're playing Miami, Colorado, Arkansas; LIU who also made the tournament last year. What do you hope to gain out of that kind of schedule?

CAITLIN SCHWEIHOFER: It was very intentional. We looked at scheduling this year very differently than we had in the previous years. Last season it was to pass that double digit mark which we had done. And now that we have, again, accomplished some of the smaller goals that we had set for ourselves, which felt really big at the time, now we need to really elevate our level of competition.

We were the largest differential team between a Pablo ranking and an RPI last year, so it was almost a 75 point difference. I wanted to close the gap there, so playing the RPI game a little bit more closely so that if we have the ability to potentially make the NCAA tournament, we want to have that opportunity in front of us, and we weren't necessarily playing teams in the past that would've given us key wins outside of conference.

So we wanted to start off the season with a tougher competition and slowly like waver into the Big Ten. But I think our players are excited for the challenge. It's a goal

of mine to always play in front of the hometown of players on the team at least once in their career. So Krista Dooley is from Dallas and we have some other players from Texas, as well. So it's just a good opportunity to get in front of their hometowns, too.

Q. I've recently talked to Coach JoJo over at St. John's and one thing she said you don't understand how much the sport is growing in the East Coast. You mentioned earlier about not, quote, per se having to get international recruits. Talk me through the process of talking with the younger players that are in club earlier on wanting to stay in that northeast area.

CAITLIN SCHWEIHOFER: So I love JoJo. She's a wonderful mentor. She was the first time -- I was a player, and she's like, I think you can coach one day, so I give a lot of my career to her.

But we sold out our camps this year. It was our first overnight camp as a staff this season, and we had almost -- how many girls? 175 overnights. We had multiple day camps. So that was a big growth from this last season.

New Jersey Volleyball is really big. It's a mission of mine. I have a six year old daughter, so it's a mission of mine for her to have a quality club to play at when she goes to play.

So my staff is really involved in the satellite camp arena, as well, so we've been going out to high schools in the area and running satellite camps not only at the varsity level, but also JV and middle school level and try to generate interest that way.

And then from a marketing standpoint, a lot of our game marketing strategy is around youth. So things like last year we did a superhero night, and this year bounce houses and things like that that are just drawing in families into the arena.

Because I do feel if we can get players in a Rutgers volleyball jersey much earlier on than their junior year of high school, that interest is going to only going to grow the program.

I'm excited about just -- first time ever I was walking through the mall and I saw someone in a Rutgers Volleyball shirt, and I asked to take their picture. So they were like, okay, (indiscernible).

Q. Caitlin, you mentioned this checklist that you have of small wins. How much progress have you made against that checklist, and where do you think you are in getting the program to where you want it to be?

CAITLIN SCHWEIHOFER: So many things have been crossed off that list. We've achieved top-25, All Big Ten attacker, All Big Ten setter. We didn't finish in last place in the Big Ten. There was a lot of things that needed to be checked off that list.

Like I said at the very beginning of this press conference, we were in the process of proving to people that we could be competitive, and so those things were needed in order to create -- to lessen the doubt.

Now that those goals have been achieved, now it's just about showing people that we can win, and so I'm really excited about this season because the opportunity is in front of us and they have put together a wonderful team, and again, the culture as you can hear is extremely strong. I think we're going to really shock some people this year.

Q. How did you get into coaching for volleyball?

CAITLIN SCHWEIHOFER: Oh boy. Well, as I mentioned, my college coach kind of planted the seed. I actually started working in Manhattan after I graduated from college. I worked in a public relations agency and I handled for Johnson & Johnson and Ulta, so I handled PR, and I really missed volleyball.

I started coaching part-time at the Fashion Institute of Technology, at FIT, and after that I moved back home to Pennsylvania to help my mother with her business and I started coaching in high school.

My high school team did extremely well, and I got offered an assistant coach at Bucknell and then Lehigh.

I tend to take positions that aren't always -- people are scared of and they're programs that need to have growth and they're programs that maybe people are like, okay, that could be a career killer.

But putting a lot of energy and faith into that -- if all the pieces are in place, if the administration is in place and if the resources are in place in order to be successful, why not. Why not the LaSalle's of the world? Why not the Rutgers of the world?

I think these players when I recruited them, we had that exact same conversation as to why not. I love coaching, and I really love seeing the growth of my players. It's just a really fun career path.

Q. You've mentioned the inroads you made at Nebraska. You had to replace Madysen Chitty, a four-year starter. One of those people that could replace her is Kenzie. What kind of opportunity does



Kenzie have in front of her, and what do you like that she brings to the team?

CAITLIN SCHWEIHOFER: Kenzie has huge opportunity in front of her. She was able to play in a DS role for us last year. That had always been the plan was that we would have Madyson Chitty remain as the libero, and then Kenzie kind of fill her role. That's how we recruited.

Kenzie has taken a lot of ownership of that. She's put on a lot of strength. Her biggest weakness last year was her ability to control really hard-driven attacks and her serve-receive is where she spent most of the time in the spring perfecting.

She is a natural leader and she's the oldest of four daughters, four girls, so she has that -- and she's super organized. She's definitely taken on the accountability role. And you guys can speak to that, as well.

But I'm excited to see what her potential is. We did bring in Allie Dutton as a freshman this year, too, and she's out of Circle City, Indiana. So she's a quality candidate.

And we also have some upperclassmen who have gone between being outside hitters and DSs. So I think there's still some competition at that role, but it's Kenzie's for the taking at the moment.

ALY BORELLIS: Speaking of Kenzie, Kenzie is one of those people that you just feel so calm on the court with. Even if the game is really fast paced and super stressful she is so incredible at just letting us breathe and reset.

I feel like I always can count on her, and I am sure Zora can attest to this, but she just has that aura to her that you can just rely on her for anything, and that's really hard to find.

CAITLIN SCHWEIHOFER: If anyone wants to give up their tickets to the Nebraska-Rutgers game, the Dyrstads are looking for like 700 tickets.

ALY BORELLIS: True that.

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