

# Big Ten Volleyball Media Days

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Chicago, Illinois, USA

**Michigan State Spartans**

**Coach Leah Johnson**

**Evie Doezema**

**Taylor Preston**

Press Conference



LEAH JOHNSON: I want to thank you all for being here and taking time to highlight this event and the sport of volleyball. What a special thing we're creating, and being in the Big Ten, to lead in that capacity is very special. So thank you, and let's continue.

What I'd like to say, I get to sit in this seat with two young women who are here on behalf of their entire team, and they have the honor to speak about Michigan State and the Grand White and the Spartan community. What is one season will be a lifetime of memories.

This summer they've been putting in the work to create those memories. Every day I pass by the gym and there's a new practice plan on the board. They may be running, they maybe conditioning, they might be lifting, they might be practicing.

As I go into my office and they're on the court and the amount of work and intensity that they're investing in one another without anyone else there is phenomenal. I'm lucky to be sitting here alongside them because on day one, I just get to show up and take over where they've left off.

That's a coach's dream.

**Q. Taylah was kind of a revelation last year. I don't know if a lot of teams knew what to expect from her. How do you prepare her for the second go around now that teams are aware of her potential and what she can do?**

LEAH JOHNSON: It's not as much preparing Taylah any different than any player moving into their second season. I think the second year is the hardest year for anyone for athletes and I think it's the hardest year as a coach.

I'm glad it's over. It was great. But Taylah is just more

mature now. I think for her, it's not like growing up in the U.S. where you see it and you hear it every day. The noise isn't as loud.

She's just on a path, and we're just going to keep her there, rather than focusing on what to expect.

My job is to surround her with good pieces and make sure there's more complements to her game so she can't be the only known target. I'm excited, especially with these two women next to me, what they're going to do to provide Taylah that support and multiple players in our gym doing just that.

**Q. When growing up, what was your favorite sport before volleyball?**

EVIE DOEZEMA: I started with basketball. My dad got me into basketball and I loved it and played all the way until my senior year of high school.

I even had the opportunity to go on and play basketball in college, but I loved volleyball too much and I knew I could play at a bigger level and play more intense, so I chose that.

TAYLOR PRESTON: Mine growing up I actually used to do swimming, and then my sister started playing volleyball. I loved watching her play volleyball. I fell in love with the sport, so then I switched and started playing volleyball. But swimming was my childhood sport for sure.

**Q. What do you believe to be your strength as an athlete?**

TAYLOR PRESTON: Strengths as an athlete? I think one thing for sure is to -- well, one, be resilient. Two, confidence. And three, just not worrying about your mistakes.

I think trusting the process is a huge thing, especially as athletes. You have lots of ups and downs, lot of roller coasters throughout your journey, but I think you know your end goal. You know what you want to achieve. I think trusting yourself, trusting the people around you to make



you better, I think those are three things that, at least for me, I strive to as strengths in my life.

EVIE DOEZEMA: I would say especially in our gym, we talk about our values, serve, grow, and honor. The strengths of our team as athletes is that we are not on that court alone. That we're always working every single day to serve each other. We're not just trying to get better on our own and improve our own game, but we're also trying to help our teammates, whether they're playing above us or below us or they're on the court or we are on the court. We are always helping out each other to improve their own game.

LEAH JOHNSON: Okay, that was a good answer. Just saying, write that down. I want to comment to the students that are here. It takes a lot of courage to show up and do something like this, and I hope you recognize how special it is that you arrived today to put yourself out there to be courageous and to enjoy this moment. We're proud to be doing it with you. Thank you.

**Q. Talk about the movement to get yourself to be a Spartan.**

TAYLOR PRESTON: First off, our assistant coach, Jake, was the very first person to reach out to me when I first entered the transfer portal, and I think that right off the bat showed me how much they were dedicated to me and just how much they cared about me and wanted me.

Then that obviously led to me talking with Coach Johnson, and just the person she is and the coach she is, I could just tell how much this team meant to her, the goals she had, the competing -- like the mindset, everything.

It was something that I was so eager to be a part of, and being able to just talk to her as a person to person, not even just as a player, it's something super special and something that I was super attracted to, and I absolutely loved it. I loved every second of being here and being coached under her.

EVIE DOEZEMA: Same.

**Q. You mentioned a little bit about your second year and you said last year and again today that it was the hardest -- it's always the hardest going for you. Made it through it; lots of big improvements for this team. I was wondering if you learned anything from last season and what you're looking to carry into this season.**

LEAH JOHNSON: Yeah, good question. It's interesting, because I think that reflection happens in December and

January, so I'm a little removed from the immediate, because you build that into your spring training.

So when I walked out of the fall, a big emphasis for the spring for us was in point management. When you watch Big Ten volleyball you see very few mistakes. There are no -- no one is giving you points here. There are no friendly whoops, here's yours, enjoy. Everybody is sharp. The volleyball is clean.

We spent a lot of time in the off-season focused on our point management.

Now, from year two, the big picture, what did we learn. I've said this once today, but there's a cadence to how you do things, and you don't want any match to be bigger and more important than the next because they all matter.

If your goal is postseason and then to make a run every single match matters. It doesn't matter what name is on that jersey because we are the only name that matters to us. It's Michigan State.

So building a cadence where everything is normalized, that one thing isn't more or less than the other but each equally important and it's about who shows up in our jersey day in, day out.

**Q. What is something that motivates you every game to win that game?**

EVIE DOEZEMA: I would say my teammates. Whether I'm having a good day or a bad day, I'm always playing for them, so that motivates me. And I'd also say my family because I am super close with my family and that's why I chose to stay close to home, and when they come to support me, I just want to do the best I can and make them proud.

TAYLOR PRESTON: I would absolutely agree with that. My family and my teammates for sure. I would honestly give the same response, but to add to that, I would say the fact that we all have the same end goal, to make postseason.

That's something that motivates all of us every single day in the gym to work harder, reach that goal. I think the fact that we all have that same end goal, we all know what we know what we're here to do. So yeah, I'd say that.

**Q. What is a personal goal for this upcoming season?**

EVIE DOEZEMA: I would say for me personally, now switching primarily to the middle, is to be the best middle blocker on my team, to have my coach rely on me to be a



really dominant force up at the net.

TAYLOR PRESTON: I would say to have one of the -- one of the biggest point scorers on our team and in the Big Ten as a whole.

**Q. Last year, that Penn State match, where does that rank in the matches that you've been a part of? How do you use that to motivate and carry over into this year?**

EVIE DOEZEMA: That one, that was a good feeling. I know the entire team. All the fans and our families, that place has a special -- that match has a special place in our heart just because it was such a well-fought battle on both sides.

To come out on top against a ranked team like that as we're building our program back up, it was surreal, and it just showed the amount of effort and work we've really put into this team and how much more we can accomplish this year.

We're hoping to do it a million times over again.

**Q. Coach, you talked about getting things figured out in your second year. This year you have a West Coast trip to figure out, too. How do you prepare for that and what do those four new schools bring to the Big Ten?**

LEAH JOHNSON: Yeah, so it's back to the cadence. I'm going to say that again. They're just further away. They're not that different. They all have a unique style of play, just as any school, just like non-conference. When we prepare for non-conference, this is a team we haven't seen very often or at all, and so you're preparing for them in a different -- through a different lens.

You don't have history in the back of your mind. You don't have that match-up last year where you made an adjustment you know that can work again.

You have the ability to lean on preseason game prep and to know what's worked for you through preseason to then carry you into conference play when you see an opponent you've never seen before.

Second, it's just a game. It's just one game. We'll play that game in that moment in that time zone in that city in that state, and then we'll do it again. If we can keep things normal like that -- and don't get me wrong, we're going to go sightsee a little bit and we're going to make the most of it because that's what we do in our program.

We don't just get in a plane and sit in a gym every day. We

have life experiences and we have memories to make. But when it's game time, we're prepared because that's what we do every day.

**Q. The idea of changing positions and to be able to support your team, coach, how are you thinking about the versatility of players in the recruiting process, and for the athletes, how does that change the energy and the competition in the practice gym?**

LEAH JOHNSON: As we're recruiting, there's one thing that's important to me: every player has to have something elite. So when I'm recruiting you, what is your X-factor. What's the thing that right now you do at the most elite level in your age group or in the region, in your position.

Then what's the next best thing that we think we can develop for you. Because it's not about what you're not good at. Those things will take a lot more time to get better. You're going to be here in six months, a year and a half. Okay, then what's your top 3 best things.

From there, whether it means it's a different position, a different offensive tempo, a different training style that I think might support your development best, we talk about that from day one.

I've had athletes say no to me because of it, because they identify a certain way, and I've had athletes say, oh, my gosh, that's really exciting, let's go.

Having versatility to recruit great people and great athletes allows me the flexibility then to put a lineup together that may not be as prototypical as you might assume, and right now that creativity has been an advantage for us.

EVIE DOEZEMA: I would say as a player, when I was younger I identified specifically just as an outside hitter, and it wasn't until I got here that I opened my mindset to being more versatile.

Especially under Coach and switching to play right side and now middle, that is probably the thing I give advice the most about for young volleyball players, is the more versatile you are, the more you can offer a coach and the more you stand out against other players, and the more likely you are to be on the court and help your team.

**Q. Coach, what is Evie's elite ability, and what skills does she have that allow her to transition to the middle?**

LEAH JOHNSON: So when she arrived and she was recruited to the roster, I was excited because, one, she has something you can't teach, and that's physicality; but two,

she has a steadiness to her game.

So what you can see in Evie is a predictability, a reliability. The thing that we got excited about was a lot of her power -- she has great control and command, but when you look at a middle you don't always see the finesse game.

Evie has that from experience on the pin, but we saw her power show up when she was hitting faster tempo sets, so that didn't play to the left side as well. So how do we combine those? How do we make this finesse an elite skill for her in a position where her power can show up and maybe separate her?

So she runs the slide at a really elite level. She's really good laterally pin to pin as a blocker, always available in transition, and who knows, I might just put her on the left so Nebraska has no idea.

**Q. Coach, third year into this program. When we first met, you were just going to become a mom and now you have grown the team and your family. Talk to the young women out there that are thinking about getting into coaching and saying you can do this, too, because you've proven that despite whatever others might see as limitations or starting a family life, you've done so and recruited well and grown this team to where you want it to be and further.**

LEAH JOHNSON: Yeah, thank you. It's special to be able to be a parent and a coach. And there's many, men and women alike, right, who are parents and who show up every day wearing multiple hats in their capacity.

But there is something different about going through a pregnancy and going through a delivery and going through breastfeeding and going through sleepless nights as a mother. That has made this an exceptionally different kind of challenge as a parent because my time is not my own in those circumstances.

Yet I still had to develop a program for maternity leave, I still had to develop a program while my baby is in NICU or I'm in the hospital for eight days because I have an emergency C-section. No one knows that. No one cares. But here's the thing: they do when you recognize who matters.

So they care, and that made me want to show up. So when I speak to young women who aspire to coach, you have to focus on who your circle is. The circle isn't someone out there who thinks, oh, well, she won't have time to do this, she'll be distracted. Or also when you're hiring assistants, well, they're probably in their childbearing years so that could be a disadvantage.

No one is saying it out loud but they're thinking it. What I would say to you young women, continue to persist. Persist and persist, because it's hard and possible. It's hard and exciting. It's hard and an advantage. It's not or. We have to take or out of the options. It is and and and and and, and these are some world class women who are going to go do huge things in their line of work whether it's coaching or not.

**Q. What skills would you like to improve throughout the season?**

TAYLOR PRESTON: Me personally, I would love to improve on my blocking, which I already have come a long way with. We've been working a lot at it. I would say that's my main one for sure. I think another thing would just be continue to work on my point management skills, as we touched on before. That's something that we've been continuing to work throughout the spring and the summers but my number one would definitely be blocking.

EVIE DOEZEMA: To touch on switching to middle again, I've learned the basics very, very well, and I've mastered the basics -- well, not mastered, but we're getting there.

But to find more range and find those shots that are hidden that I know I've got.

LEAH JOHNSON: And surprising coaches are always trying to improve, too. Don't forget that. We're always seeking the best of our craft. So one of my goals this year is to continue to find more ways to give more voice to the athlete, give more space to the athlete and let them be in charge of the season.

I would say that to you guys as youth and young people, find your voice like you are today. Keep creating more space for yourself because your potential is endless, and I'm excited to continue to create space for them.

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