

Big Ten Volleyball Media Days

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Chicago, Illinois, USA

Minnesota Golden Gophers

Coach Keegan Cook

McKenna Wucherer

Lydia Grote

Press Conference



KEEGAN COOK: Gratitude first. I think my colleagues have done a good job thanking everybody for spending time, but we're here on day two. I think stamina has come into play. I think this group has it. But Big Ten leading the way as usual with this event.

Thanks for having us back. Welcome the four new member institutions to the Big Ten. Get excited for them and I'm excited for our athletes to compete on an even bigger stage.

We're 18 months into this with this group. You've heard me say, people, values, volleyball, in that order. And these are my people. Really excited to share time with these guys.

Excited for the players we've recruited. We've added a new member of the team, almost one every six weeks. And so it's a lot of work.

This group has put in the work this spring. I think you're going to see a new type of urgency, new type of energy, and a new type of effort, one that we can be proud of.

We're a little bit of a mystery, which is how I think we like it. And I'm looking forward to getting into the gym with them on Saturday.

Q. Your team at times struggled a bit offensively last year. What steps are you taking to get back on track and go back to the Minnesota offense that I think fans are familiar with?

KEEGAN COOK: That's a great tough opening question. I think we thought side-out was a space that we could be better. I think we sided out somewhere around 56 percent. You need to be in the 60s. Defensively we did a pretty nice job, met a pretty high standard -- fourth in aces, pretty high up in blocks as well. Pretty confident in those skills.

This spring has been mostly spent on receiving and middle offense. Those two areas you'll see some growth right away, as well as the range of our outside hitters, the decision-making of our outside hitters on tough sets.

These two are probably nodding from all the trauma this spring. But they're ready. They did great work. They had a great spring, had a great Europe trip, only lost one match the entire time. And they're allowing themselves to be coached. And that's how I see it. Love to hear their perspective.

LYDIA GROTE: Last fall we had some new additions to the team. I think this spring has been really, really great for us and getting to know each other and working together on the court. I think we've built some really great relationships on the court.

MCKENNA WUCHERER: I'm going to shout-out our depth. We brought in a lot of transfer outside hitters and pins, and they've done a really good job of just stepping in and getting to learn our offense.

And also shout-out our middles for coming into practice every day and being open to learning new sets and learning how to run a slide. That's going to help us spread out our offense this year.

Q. There's been so much talk about the growth of this sport over the last few years. Just wondering, why do you think this sport has grown so much in popularity? And how would you like to see how it all capitalize, where would you like to see this sport maybe five years from now?

KEEGAN COOK: Big question in a big, important time. I think volleyball has had the collective support of the conferences, of the coaches association, of the NCAA, some big entities really recognizing the value of the sport and the ability of these teams.

And a lot of work behind the scenes, a lot of committees, a lot of pushing for rule changes. Being flexible, I think, is probably the most important thing for the next five to 10



years as we can see in college sports.

If you're not flexible, it's going to be tough. Things are changing quickly and you have to be okay with it. You have to transition quickly. I'm pretty confident in Minnesota, in the Big Ten and even in the NCAA for the work they're doing right now to make the situation better for volleyball.

LYDIA GROTE: I think the sport has been growing because it's a team sport, which I think helps. As many people on the court at one time as possible.

And then I think there's just great people leading positions of volleyball growth. We watched the USA national team, and they're such great role models to everyone out there. I think it's huge in getting people to play the sport.

MCKENNA WUCHERER: I think volleyball is growing a lot because it's really easy to pick up on, and you might not need to know the sport at all and you can watch it. And you can realize how intense and exciting it gets when someone scores a point.

But obviously a lot of teams have been doing a lot to promote the sport. Like, we're playing in the Volleyball Showcase the first weekend at Fiserv Forum, the Bucks arena -- 15,000 fans, which is so exciting. But also you see Wisconsin playing at the Kohl Center and Purdue playing at the Mackey center. I think those opportunities for us athletes are incredible. And just being in that atmosphere and seeing the fans celebrate for our sport is super exciting.

Q. Keegan, you mentioned the uncertainties coming down. One of those is the House settlement. How are you seeing that impacting the sport? Are you having conversations with the administration to prepare for roster limits and scholarships?

KEEGAN COOK: Yes. They've done a great job giving us the updates they can. The work has been done at Minnesota and a lot of Big Ten institutions, the way they've chosen to support women's volleyball.

Do I know exactly how it's going to work out? Of course not. But I'm pretty confident in our leadership that volleyball is going to be in a position of growth and not in a position where things are more difficult.

There's going to be more opportunities for the athletes. There's going to be more revenue. I have a lot of faith in our leadership, and I think most big institutions should feel that way.

Again, if you want certainty, you're in the wrong business here. But if you want growth and opportunity, then hang in there because it's coming, I think.

Q. You've had a chance to coach at the USA level with under 19s, and there's a lot of Big Ten representation both in recruits but also at the under-23 level and at the Olympic level in Paris. How has that helped grow the talent level of the Big Ten? And how do you use that as either recruiting pitch or developing it into your program?

KEEGAN COOK: It's a fun time right now. I think USA is almost up 2-0 on Poland. It's going great on that front.

You want to be part of things bigger than yourself, and that's what USA volleyball has represented to me. You want to give back to the game. That's what it's always meant to me.

I think about what the athletes are doing in the summer. They're pushing themselves. They're away from their families. They could be home resting but they're still pushing.

For me the USA program is that. I'm still pushing, I'm away from my family, I'm working to better myself for them.

The Big Ten is leading in that space. The players that want to play at the highest level are finding themselves in the Big Ten within the USA program at all levels.

And, again, it's a lot of collective work on the athlete's part, on the coach's part. And McKenna has been a part of that program. Lydia can be a part of that program. And I think, McKenna, you can probably speak to what it's been since you were there this summer.

MCKENNA WUCHERER: This summer was insane, honestly to be part of the collegiate national team with USA. But for me just putting on the red, white and blue is an honor like no other. And competing with some of the best athletes in this country.

This year I was fortunate to be with a lot of the girls older than me that I've never played with before. In the past I've played for U18, U20, U21. But being with the same team the whole time, so like branching out and playing with other collegiate athletes who are better than me and pushing me to be better is just an amazing experience.

Q. Lydia, McKenna, you both have sisters that played at a high level. I wanted to know if you could share a little bit about how that's impacted you as players and as people?

LYDIA GROTE: My sister played at the University of Washington. Now she's a professional volleyball player. She plays for the Grand Rapids Rise in the PVF.

She's someone that's so stable and I can talk to her whenever and she offers such great insights. She has had such great experiences in college. She's someone that pushes me and she knows really well how to push me. And just she's so competitive and she inspires me every day to be my best.

MCKENNA WUCHERER: I have two older sisters. The oldest sister, Miranda, played four years at Northern Kentucky, and then played her fifth at Minnesota. I actually got to play with her.

Abby, our middle sister, played at Southern Utah University. They both played college volleyball. My mom also played throughout high school. For me it was more of a family affair. I wanted to follow in my mom's footsteps just because I lost her when I was young. Just being able to represent her on the court was something I wanted to do.

Miranda coaches at Northern Kentucky. I'm really close with her. And to be able to see how much love she had for the sport was something I really admired. And she's someone who I can go to at any time and ask for volleyball advice.

She's been around our program a lot. So Lydia knows her too. But just being able to have her right by my side through it all has been really cool.

Q. We heard one of the themes so far is the unknowns, obviously with more West Coast teams coming into the conference. How do all of you guys approach the unknown? How do you see it? How do you view it? Is it fun? Is it exciting? What are the challenges as part of it?

KEEGAN COOK: I think if you don't have your values in place, if you're not sure who you're trying to become, uncertainty is a real dangerous space. You can get lost pretty quickly. I think it's a big challenge for young people right now. There's not a lot of certainty if you're younger than us.

But helping them figure out what their values are, individually and collectively, is the best thing we can do for them. Once have you those things in place, then I think the uncertainty becomes fun. And you know how you're going to show up in those spaces and who you're going to be. Then you're just along for the ride.

So that's been the challenge here for these past 18 months is getting to know these young people, talking to them about their values individually and collectively, giving them those tools so that when the excitement and uncertainty and the change happens, that they just crush it. And I think we're closer -- we're a lot closer than we were 18 months ago, and we're a little uncertain, and I'm excited about it.

LYDIA GROTE: I would say the future is not written in stone. We like to attack these unknowns head on. And we're writing our own future and we're working every day. And how lucky are we to get to play in this great conference that's still expanding and finding so many new opportunities. We get to play against four new schools for the first year. And for me this is my last season here, so I'm just really grateful for these new opportunities.

MCKENNA WUCHERER: I'm super excited for the unknown. It can be difficult with four new teams joining the conference, but I think it's going to be super cool to obviously only play a lot of teams once, so you have one opportunity to obviously help you in the postseason.

So I think that's going to be a huge stepping stone for us is that we only get to see this team once. I feel like a lot in the past we were, like, we lost this one, but we can go get them again later. This time it's, like, this is our one time we're going to see them until the tournament. So I think that's huge for us.

And also just obviously the four teams coming in are national championship contenders every single year. Just getting off to a hot start, watching film on them and just understanding how they play the game is going to be a lot different than obviously the Midwest schools.

A lot of West Coast players, more scrappy, beachy kind of vibe. I think that will be super interesting to see what they bring to the table.

Q. You've got three transfers coming in, including two native Minnesotans. Didn't play a lot at their previous school. How do you go about evaluating when there's not a lot of game tape and figuring out if they're a right fit for your team?

KEEGAN COOK: We've had six transfers now total, and I think the first three in Lydia and Kali and Phoebe, you're talking to people you trust. I try and explain to these athletes that the volleyball world is small. Has everyone who met you met the same person?

And from there, once you get a little picture you have to

take some risks. But it's not about picking. It's about integrating these kids. So the first time around, man, we hit it really well. And I think this time around, the same.

Again, having some kids from Minnesota helps. There's a little background on them. Spending time in the northwest, where Alex played, helped, knowing -- probably called 15 people about her, gives you a big picture.

With what we've seen, whether from the foreign trip or time here, I think we did it again. I think we found depth. I think we found competition. And I think we're a more well-rounded team than we were last year.

Q. McKenna, where were you when you guys found out that you were going to be coming back to Fiserv Forum? And how excited were you to have a couple of home matches?

MCKENNA WUCHERER: I don't even remember when I found out, but I remember, I think E.J. told me. I was literally blown away. Is this even real life? I get to go home. Because never in my four years I would have thought I get to go home and play in my home state of Milwaukee.

And we get to go to Green Bay and Madison; we get the whole Wisconsin tour this year. I'm so happy to be playing at home in front of my family and friends. My house is literally 15 minutes away from Fiserv.

That's a real insane experience. It reminds me of high school, like, I get to go home. We even got to play in Waterloo in spring. I feel like I've been on like my whole Wisconsin tour. But no, I'm super excited and obviously just for the sport of volleyball, there's going to be so many people there.

I think a ticket's selling for a thousand dollars on StubHub. To just have that experience and memory throughout my four years is something I'll remember forever.

Q. Having competed with and against the four new schools in the league, what do you maybe know that other coaches in the Big Ten may not know about those four in competing against them?

KEEGAN COOK: Besides the coffee shops to go to and the airports to fly into. Logistics are a big deal, especially in this day and age; you've got to know your way around. So certainly how to have familiarity with those four institutions.

I think they're going to respond. People ask, are they ready? I don't think they're ready, but they will respond.

Knowing those two institutions, I think ready is a little overrated in this day. Can you respond? And those four institutions will.

Even today, watching them walk around, seeing where I was a year ago, they're going to add a lot of value. And the winners are the players and the communities and the fans. They all win. Coaches are stressed out. But everyone else wins in this. So I just credit the Big Ten for making it happen.

Q. Coach, I heard you coached at Washington. My question is, why did you stop coaching at Washington?

KEEGAN COOK: It's the hardest thing is to know when to leave something, especially a team I intended to coach at Washington my entire life. I signed a new contract at Washington. I had players I loved coaching.

But in some sense I maybe thought I had stopped growing in that I had become a little too comfortable a little too soon. That's not what it's about.

For you as a young person or for me as a less young person, we're still growing. You have to put yourself in spaces that help you grow. That's what Minnesota felt like to me. So I made the jump.

And Washington I think is going to be better for it. They have a tremendous leader in Leslie Gabriel now who has been leading that program for 20 years. And I know I'm better for it and it's worked out for everyone. So a really hard decision but the right one in the end.

Q. How do you prepare for games against a strong opponent?

MCKENNA WUCHERER: For me, it's like, I mean, for the team, we do a lot of film. We'll break down each hitter, attacker, where their tendencies are, where we have to block on them, and also we see their servers, how we think we're going to see and receive. I think that's a huge part.

I'm a huge film person. I'll go back and watch a lot of their past matches, see how they compete, since I'm an outside, see what the block takes for a lot of these athletes.

And seeing what spots are left open on the court, where I can attack and find different places on the court that are open. So I'm a huge film person but also you have to get in your visualization and think about how we can do this and see yourself succeeding in that atmosphere is a huge thing for athletes nowadays and just the mental health aspect side of it.

You have to be ready for the big moments. You have to be ready for the big pressure moments. That's something I've gotten a lot better at throughout my career understanding you're meant to be here and you're meant to perform in these atmospheres.

LYDIA GROTE: We talk a lot about we can't control the opposing side of the net but we can control ourselves.

Like Coach Keegan said, we can control how we respond. We do a lot of preparation for that in the weeks coming up to matches.

And personally I like to do a lot of visualization and film review and just focusing on a positive mindset of what I can do and what I can make happen.

Q. Coach, what is something you would do to make sure your team rises on the board, on top?

KEEGAN COOK: I think one thing I try to remind them is your good is good enough. You don't have to try and press for great in big moments. Volleyball is played over a lot of points, and I think a lot of players fall into the habit of a great play, then medium play, can we just be good over long periods of time? We have enough skill and talent to win those matches if we can stay in that lane.

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