

# Big Ten Volleyball Media Days

Monday, July 28, 2025

Chicago, Illinois, USA

Illinois Fighting Illini

Coach Chris Tamas

Kayla Burbage

Averie Hernandez

Press Conference



We've always preached that, and that message doesn't change with us. Like I said, we have an awesome spring, and I'm just really looking forward to the new journey that we're on. Every year is a new journey, and based on what we've seen in the spring, I'm really excited for it.

As big of a loss as it may seem on paper, I always think that the gain or the challenge is to try to do it all over again, and we've done that for several years, and we've looked forward to continuing to do it again.

**Q. I'll ask the players as well what Coach is talking about with taking that mantle from someone who put up such great numbers and was such an important leader for this team.**

KAYLA BURBAGE: It's been such a privilege to learn under Raina, too. She provided a lot for us obviously from a skill standpoint and putting a lot of points on the board. I think we were all challenged in the spring to find new ways to score.

We lost our workhorse and we're so happy that she's able to continue her career after in professional volleyball.

But we knew we had to step up. I think Chris hit it perfectly. There's people that are going to be in new roles, some young talent that have to step up, and I think we're all ready for the challenge. We've seen it in the spring and we've seen it in the summer.

AVERIE HERNANDEZ: Yeah, just to second that statement, I feel like even transferring in she was a great person to learn from, and I definitely take some of the things she taught me and apply that to now helping the group as well.

Yeah, I'm super excited for our newcomers. I think we have a really solid foundation and culture that we're creating even since the spring, and like Chris was saying earlier, I feel like we've really tried to implement more of that over the summer.

I'm looking forward to it. I think it's a really exciting challenge to be able to have a group of people go off of

(in progress; sound issues.)

**Q. Kayla, you're back. It's been a long journey to get here. What has that been like for you and what has been your motivation to use your fifth year to come back and get back on the court?**

KAYLA BURBAGE: I think one word that keeps coming up is I'm so grateful for this opportunity to come back. I transferred into Illinois after my freshman season, and I think sometimes when you are in that situation, I feel like it's really easy to get timid, and I'm so appreciative of the people that I'm surrounded with every single day. They've pushed me to be better and better.

And I think when I was approached with the opportunity to come back for my fifth year, I think Illinois was a no-brainer for me. I think I've developed and developed more and more on the court, off the court, and they've set me up really well for proscribe life as well.

I'm so thankful that I get to be surrounded by amazing people every single day, so I'm excited.

**Q. Coach, when you are playing without someone who's one of the all-time greats in your program in Raina Terry and trying to find that production again, what are you seeing so far in terms of filling that hole?**

CHRIS TAMAS: Yeah, she's a big one to lose. You know, all team leader in aces, all team leader in kills. You just don't replace a Raina Terry. But what I can tell you is I've worked with several great players over the years and I know it's always about the team.

So that player or that leadership doesn't exist in that vacuum. It's up to players like Averie and Kayla to step up and take the challenge of what we need to do as a team.



their own strengths and try and apply that to the greater good of the group, so I think that's something super exciting to look forward to as well.

**Q. Talk about having to integrate a new setter and what that process is like and how you're feeling so far at this point when it comes to that adaptation and the reps required?**

AVERIE HERNANDEZ: Yeah, Kenna has been a great addition to our group. As well as the things we were just talking about, everyone's strengths coming together as one whole group, something that's really exciting, and she's definitely put her head down and worked through all of it.

I think adapting well and we're all hitting off of her well, and I think it's going really great to be quite honest, but just another person that's wanting to apply to the greater good, so I think it's going really well.

KAYLA BURBAGE: I think in general we have three people that are vying for that setting spot as well and I think they all do a really good job of pushing each other every single day.

I think they know that it's going to be battle for who gets that final spot, and they're all ready for the challenge. There's not a day that any three of them come in and are kind of dragging their feet. They are the people that are pushing us the most in the gym every single day.

**Q. All three of you, you get the opportunity to start the season at (indiscernible) arena and then three teams going into Mackey Arena at Purdue. Talk about how you're embracing those opportunities and what it means for the growth of the sport to be playing in some of these venues that host 15,000 people.**

CHRIS TAMAS: Yeah, it's just a tribute to the growth of the game. You want to be a part of those events. We want to be out there. We want to be on TV. We want to be exposing the game to as many people as we can. We see internal numbers every year from the Big Ten. If you look at even just the TV coverage, it's outstanding, let alone now, like you're saying, you're having these big events, people are hosting them in basketball arenas.

You want as many eyes as we can on the game, and as we travel the country and recruit and go to these tournaments where you've got 10,000 kids at a tournament looking up to you knowing who you are, it's just a big deal in terms of growth of the game.

For me, it's just -- coming from men's volleyball back in the day when you've got maybe 100 people in the stands, I'll

take 15,000 any day of the week. It can maybe seem like more pressure or whatever, but we've played in the Big Ten long enough where this is every single night in the Big Ten.

To have these bigger events that we're able to be a part of and help showcase the game and University of Illinois, the more the merrier.

**Q. Averie, you got to play against your sister last year. That must have been fun. Talk about that, and also what it's like to grow up in your family with all those people who play sports at a high level.**

AVERIE HERNANDEZ: Yeah, just to start, I'm so beyond grateful for my family and just the support they've had for me all the way through. I think to go through transferring and all of the chaos that that comes with and then to be able to have the familiarity with playing a family member is crazy, and I think going into it, I wasn't too sure -- like we didn't know going into it.

But I think the fact that Sydnie is also going through her freshman year, had gone through her freshman year, it was exciting for her to be able to have her whole family and other supporters that we have had come to that game and watch us play each other which was such a fun experience.

Back to the grateful statement with my family, my parents do such a great job of just keeping us humble but also keeping us motivated to become the best version of ourselves, and I think that comes from them both being athletes in college but also just being one of my kids, it's super fun to have the brothers and sisters who kind of push you to get better as well, and I think being able to go past high school with that too has been a super cool experience.

**Q. We're seeing on the roster this year Kayla switching over to middle. Talk about what went into making that that decision and how has that transition been so far this summer?**

CHRIS TAMAS: Yeah, great question. Good observation, too.

Kayla had shoulder surgery last year and we didn't know what her timeline for return was and just based on how recovery came up and kind of the load that the shoulder can take, being on opposite again was maybe not in the cards.

About halfway through October, she jumped back into practice, and long story short, started dominating everyone



in the middle. We're like, okay, KB, how about we do this again, but let's think about going back to the middle. Sometimes you get some push-back because maybe you don't want to change back. We brought you here to be an opposite and she looks at us like, yeah, I like this a lot.

If I can say a word, these kids -- they probably know, LFG (laughter), so that's where we're at.

KAYLA BURBAGE: Yeah, for sure. Yeah, the transition has been great. I played a little bit of middle back in like my club and high school days, so it's kind of like riding a bike in a way getting right back into it. I love it. I'm trained by one of the best middles coaches in the country. She's done great, great things. I'm pushed by really good middles every single day to get better.

But yeah, just feels natural to be back there. Always been more of a defensive minded person so being able to get back in that mindset has been awesome. Post-shoulder surgery as well, it's just been great. Everything feels fluid, and I'm ready to go for the season for sure.

**Q. Chris, volleyball is one of four sports your AD singled out to receive money from revenue sharing. What did you have to do to make that case to him and how will that impact program building and roster building going forward?**

CHRIS TAMAS: They came to me and just said this is something we're invested in and obviously they've been invested in us for several years, since my whole time there. The fact that we're considered for that, and I know several other schools in the conference, if not all of us, are in line for that, as well. It shows where the sport is at.

Again, going back to the amount of eyeballs that are on the sport and you all that are helping push that, as well, I just think it's the right thing to do. We've always been supported by Illinois, and the fact that we're in this capability and have the capability to do this, you start to become a little bit more like a general manager now and how do you design your rosters based on what you're given.

It's a fun new challenge that we're facing, but it's great for these players because I do think they deserve it, and we're happy to be a part of it.

**Q. To follow up on that, how does that impact maybe your approach to the transfer portal and navigating that, now knowing that the path is clear?**

CHRIS TAMAS: Yeah, I think you've seen it already in the case of NIL, not just obviously with football and basketball

but as the years go by you're just seeing more people interested in one, wanting to be at this level, and I think the money aspect of it is great.

But to me it's more the opportunity to play in the Big Ten and play at a big level. That's really what we're seeing. Yeah, you've got to be aware of that, and like I said, we are new. We have some transfers with us. We have three transfers. I think that's just a part of the game. You can go down all the rosters in the Big Ten and see the same thing. It's nothing that's particular to us. It's just how the sport is evolving.

I think it's just a new challenge that us coaches have to weigh out and figure out how to construct those rosters. Maybe it's a little bit more on a yearly basis, two-year basis. Obviously we still have long-term plans, visions, everything else. You want kids that really fit your values, your culture. That's the first thing we look for. Then if we can aid that with some ref share or NIL, that's what we're trying to do.

I just think it's one of those things, it's a great option to have, and we're happy to be a part of it.

**Q. What made you get into the sport of volleyball?**

AVERIE HERNANDEZ: I got into it when I was younger, and I actually didn't know much about it. My mom played volleyball in college and I was like, let's just see how it goes. I was really tall as a 12 year old, so that helped. I kind of just fell in love with it from there.

My 13s year I was traveling. We went to a couple tournaments further away in like Florida and stuff. That was a fun experience, being able to be around those other girls on your team.

I think at a young age, I really realized how much of a team sport it actually is, which is my favorite part of volleyball. Ever since then I've stuck with it, and I'm super happy my mom put me in the sport because I probably wouldn't have stuck with it as long as I did if she didn't.

KAYLA BURBAGE: I think my path was a little bit different, too. I think I played pretty much any sport you can think of besides volleyball up until high school, and then I'm from North Carolina, so I kind of got tired of wearing hot softball pants in the 90-degree heat, so I switched over to volleyball pretty much immediately fell in love with it.

My family loves it. My sister plays now. But again, I think going back to the team atmosphere, it is the ultimate team sport, and I think it's so fun to have a bunch of people together that are all working towards a common goal. I



think that was the thing that really attracted me to volleyball.

CHRIS TAMAS: And every volleyball player hates running.

AVERIE HERNANDEZ: True.

**Q. Ashlyn obviously had a phenomenal freshman season. What have you seen change with her heading into her second year now that she's more equipped for Big Ten level?**

CHRIS TAMAS: Yeah, she had an awesome season, all-freshman Big Ten. I think for me no matter what year you are, the challenge is to get better every single time you step on that floor, and again, the makeup of the team changes a little bit, as well, and we had several challenges for her in the spring, but that kid just competes and works hard every single time she's on the floor.

A lot of it for her, it was just about adding some more pieces to her skill set, becoming a better blocker. She's a phenomenal attacker off one foot and just trying to add layers to her game, and challenge all of our players here to always add those layers.

I think sometimes when you start talking about freshmen having successful sophomore campaigns you can talk about maybe the sophomore slump or something like that, but with her, I don't foresee that. I think some of that becomes a mentality piece and some version of expectation that you may have for yourself.

For her, she just gets after it. We talked a ton about one of our pillars is being in the moment, and she is really good about just every single rep getting after it and working as hard as she can, and she does a great job.

**Q. Where were you when your schedules were released and how excited were you?**

AVERIE HERNANDEZ: That's a good question. I honestly don't -- I think I was just at home. But yeah, obviously my family members wanted to hear about it, so I would probably text my mom and dad first knowing that I wasn't with them.

Other than that, extended family always wants to hear about it too. We have a little extended family group chat so I sent a little text there.

My siblings are usually pretty interested, too. They have social media so they see it all the time.

KAYLA BURBAGE: The first person I 100 percent texted

was my aunt Michelle. She lives out in LA county, so she's been waiting and waiting and waiting for us to play anywhere near her.

So being able to go out to UCLA and USC this year, she's already marked down her calendar. It's actual my cousin's birthday that same weekend so it will be a family affair. Yeah, that was definitely the first text I made.

**Q. How do you balance academics and athletics, and what resources do you have available to you?**

AVERIE HERNANDEZ: I just want to say, the support you get as an athlete pretty much anywhere is phenomenal just in term of helping you manage academics and athletics. I think with any questions you have or concerns you have, going to really anyone, a coach, a sports psychologist, an academic advisor, they'll find a way to help you, which I think is a good thing to remember, considering we have to travel, there's a lot of stressful situations happening.

But yeah, I think they do a great job of supporting you with any questions you need, and depending on what your major is, if you need more support than another athlete, they've got you covered with tutors and other things like that.

Other than that, I think managing being able to have those conversations with the loved ones you need to have, I feel like I talk a lot about I'm close to home from Champaign, so making sure I take the time on a Sunday, on a weekend going home, seeing my family for a little bit, or having those phone calls with your family members always helps me.

But other than that, I think Illinois specifically does a great job with helping student-athletes manage athletics and academics.

KAYLA BURBAGE: And I think I'm done with undergrad, so I'm in grad school now, and I think one of the reasons again that I chose Illinois is they have done a great job with the player development aspect of it. I feel like I'm really equipped to enter the real world when I'm done with collegiate athletics at some point.

But yeah, I just think their player development programs at Illinois are top tier, and you can see it with all the student-athletes we have.

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