

Big Ten Volleyball Media Days

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Chicago, Illinois, USA

Michigan Wolverines

Coach Erin Virtue

Maddi Cuchran

Allison Jacobs

Press Conference



last season when there's so much carryover and continuity?

ALLISON JACOBS: Yeah, this summer was special because we got to build some momentum in May which is a time we don't normally get to be in the gym. Because of our foreign trip we had 10 days to train together under the coaches and start integrating some of the new faces that we see, and also get to carry that momentum that we developed in Italy and Greece into our July training months.

This didn't feel as much as a stop-start as a lot of summers often do. It was more like we know what the flow is and we show up in July and commit to each other and do what you've got to do before the coaches get in the gym. It's really been a fun time.

MADDI CUCHRAN: Yes. I think also to add, we've been able to build connections, grow closer relationships with one another and once we continue to build those close relationships we'll play better with one another on the court, and that will show.

Q. Coach Virtue, this is, I don't want to say a free summer for you; you're not working double jobs and going to Paris for the Olympics and winning Olympic medals. How does that affect how you go into this next year, and tell us about that specious overall, how it led into last season and being able to be the offensive coordinator for the Olympic team.

ERIN VIRTUE: Yeah, I'll start with that and move as we moved through the season. Yeah, I didn't know what I didn't know. Was the first time head coach the last two years and working with the national team and then the Olympics last year, and as I was just on this merry-go-round, we just went around and around and I was just living day-to-day just trying to make sure I was good for both programs.

I don't know that -- I think I did the very best I could to be good for both, and yes, we had a medal and a really nice season for Michigan last year and certainly upgraded.

ERIN VIRTUE: Really happy to be here. This is my second time at media day, third time with Michigan as the head coach. Thrilled to be here, the BTN, Big Ten Network, everyone puts on such a great show here. I love having our athletes with us and supporting and kind of working through this whole experience with them.

This season this team has been crushing it through the winter, through the spring. We were able to take an international trip, so huge advantage there.

But I just love the absolute joy that it is to work with these women on our team, and I'm really excited to see us go to battle this year. We have the deepest team we've ever had since I've been at Michigan, and that includes the times I was an assistant coach at Michigan.

Everyone can step up for this team, so it'll be a really fun experience.

Q. An 11-win increase from the season before. What were some of those ingredients that led to such a jump, and looking at last season that you want to carry over into 2025?

ERIN VIRTUE: A big part of that was -- technically was our ball control. So that's from the reception to the setting, as you look at just the actual talent and what we have on the court, I think that was something we put a ton of work into was how do we have our first and second contact. That allows us to run the type of offense that we want.

These two, Allison and Maddi, were a huge part of that first contact in the reception space. To that where Allison was on the court the year before and Maddi kind of sparingly for us, so that was a big, big jump for us last year.

Q. With 13 returners on this team take us through summer workouts and forging those connections built



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But now coming into this summer and prepping for the season and getting to be around our athletes more and at camp and we're onboarding three new staff, and my presence and just time in Ann Arbor has certainly been something I can't even fathom what I did last year.

This year it's been nice also getting a little time -- even just an evening or a weekend day for myself, this is really nice. That's been great.

But mostly I just feel really prepared for the season, practice planning and chatting with my staff about what we need to upgrade, what we want to focus on the first week of practice. But more prepared than ever.

Q. Coach, you mentioned the international trip and this is for all of you. We've heard this from other teams, too, how much those trips help. Can you tell us why? What's the secret sauce of an international trip and why is it such a boost to a program?

ERIN VIRTUE: Yeah, I can start and then the athletes will certainly have great perspective there.

I think from the volleyball point of view, you have Allison mentioned it, but you have 10 days of extra training. For us, incorporating our transfers, we have two, and two of our three freshmen were able to join at various parts of that. So incorporating them into the mix at that point was amazing.

You have your spring season and then the training and international trip is almost like a season in itself, like a semester in itself. For Michigan, we are done with our winter semester in the middle of April, so from middle of April to the early part of August, we don't get to work with our team on a normal summer.

This part we went at the end of May with training, the beginning of June with our trip, four matches overseas, so just a chance to kind of reinvigorate the volleyball in us and have a little bit slower days.

Ann Arbor is amazing in the summertime so just to have the team around in that space -- and I'll let the athletes touch on also the volleyball but also the connection from the team because they certainly felt it on our side. On the staff side of that, I will say with three new members and their spouses, being able to be around and connecting with each other but also for the athletes to see our staff in a way that's not only practice and only volleyball is really critical.

ALLISON JACOBS: I'll definitely second everything, and when I think about the impact of a foreign trip my mind kind of goes to three different places, the first being you get to

see different kinds of volleyball around the world, and on top of that you get to play with them and against them in a pressure-free environment, playing alongside people on our team that you don't normally play against in a match format.

We have so many different lineups, so many opportunities for all of us to play together. So that's huge.

The second piece is just the fact, as Erin touched on, that you get to spend so much time with each other. It was really fun to kind of go stir crazy with your team. You learn what boundaries you push, and it's so much fun. We made so many memories.

The third spot I land on is kind of like, we'll see. We'll see what the impact is. I'm really excited and hopeful to feel the momentum that we built kind of bleed into fall.

MADDI CUCHRAN: I would agree with everything everyone is saying. I think being on this trip allowed us to get a deeper understanding of everybody because you get that time off the court when maybe you're not focused so much on learning more about other people and what their personalities are.

So I feel like this Europe trip helped us really stay in touch with one another, learn how Erin is outside of a volleyball environment. So I feel like that has really helped us to play better with one another and learn how to play with each other.

Q. Who do you think jumps higher, a basketball player or a volleyball player?

ALLISON JACOBS: That's a great question.

MADDI CUCHRAN: That is a good question.

ALLISON JACOBS: My gut instinct is volleyball because we jump more. Basketball jumps a lot, but we jump more. Someone can research that and figure out if it's actually true. What do you think, Maddi?

MADDI CUCHRAN: I don't know if I can pick a side. I think it depends on the individual more than the sport.

ALLISON JACOBS: What do you think?

Q. I think volleyball.

MADDI CUCHRAN: Good answer, good answer.

Q. Allison, being First-Team All Big Ten, coming back from your injury, how you feel like that's going to



propel you into this next season and how great that was for you getting back to your game.

ALLISON JACOBS: I just am really excited. I'm filled with a lot of joy and gratitude for the sport that I play and the people that I play alongside. I've experienced a big shift in kind of my mental relationship with the game, and it's now coming from more of a place of -- rather than playing hard to win something like that or earn something like that, I play because I love it and I love the people that I play alongside, and then cool things like that just come about.

It feels a lot more rewarding because it's more about the process and getting better every day, and it's just something I'm looking to carry in and continue to prove to everyone coming forward.

Q. You founded the group Michigan Mindfulness. How much did that experience inform creating that group, being a leader in these kind of discussions and sharing those experiences?

ALLISON JACOBS: Yeah, I have a little club called Michigan Mindfulness. We meet on Wednesdays at 7:30 and it's just a time to learn about who we are off the court and really take an intentional moment to journal or just ask questions about ourselves that are separate from our identities as students, separate from our identities as athletes, as sisters, as daughters or sons or whoever comes to the club.

It's just a moment to pause, foster some gratitude, and it's helped me on the court a lot.

Q. You guys are two of the most experienced players on this roster obviously as graduate students. What are you bringing into the team this season? Obviously you're returning a lot of athletes, but with those couple of freshmen, how are you hoping to guide them through the first season?

MADDI CUCHRAN: I think a big thing for us and for myself is leading by example. Sometimes I'm not the loudest person on the court, but I think one thing is that people really see how you portray yourself and how you just go about things, so I think one thing that we try to do is just lead by example and I think the freshmen and all the people that are coming in new really appreciate that.

I think being able to do that will really integrate them into our system better, and then also obviously on the court, teaching them our sisters early on is going to help a huge amount.

ALLISON JACOBS: I agree. And in the same vein,

leading with curiosity, that's something I've learned a lot from Erin, just approaching them as like a human and just asking them questions about their life so they know we care about them deeply and it doesn't have anything to do with volleyball.

Q. Erin, when you took the job and in the time since, you were so involved with two jobs, and the landscape has changed so much, especially in the last year. How have you navigated it? How do you keep up? How do you assess what's going on?

ERIN VIRTUE: Yeah, obviously the NCAA landscape and just college athletics, there's just always a lot of shift in the last two years, and frankly when I was with the national team prior to coaching Michigan, I wasn't in college. I was only USA Volleyball.

For me, it was my last year in college was years before. So jumping back in after working just with the national team, there was a big shift.

I think the luxury I had is I think it wasn't this gradual, okay, what is happening. I think I came into it with eyes wide open. Of course the last eight months, even year, for me the biggest thing is my attention sometimes gets pulled away with things with revenue sharing and roster management.

I have to make sure that we don't miss a beat with what's happening in the gym, with the video, with the training.

I think as I think of the staff that I was able to bring in this year, we have a new director of ops and then two new assistant coaches, and wanted to be really mindful in those hires of people that were very passionate about the game, recruiting, studying the game, reading books on motor learning and understanding how to teach because my time sometimes gets pulled away.

Those are things I thoroughly enjoy, and just as a head coach, as someone that has to take on more roles with these things and making sure we're doing it the right way, I want to -- that's all going to fall to me, those decisions, making sure we have really sound background of why we make the decisions we do with the rev sharing and how we disperse that and communicating as well as I can with the athletes.

That falls so much to making sure that I'm supported with an incredible staff. So my three assistants, our video analyst, our ops are amazing, and I communicate as well as I can to the athletes, especially as things are shifting a lot. In the last three months we found out even the settlement passed while we were in Greece, and talking

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with the team about that and how that's going to impact them, of course we had plenty of conversations before, but that's some of the strategies that I've used as far as making sure I'm staying on top of the ever-changing pieces to that.

Q. Allison, for someone like yourself, there are other players in exactly the same situation you are. Did you have the option to transfer? Did you negotiate at all? Did people contact you? Why did you stay?

ALLISON JACOBS: Yeah, it's an amazing question because I committed to staying fall of '24, like before the season even started, because in my heart of hearts there's no other place in the world I'd play my sixth year other than the University of Michigan under Erin and our new staff.

Yeah, sure, there's other opportunities or people in my position that maybe did -- yeah, they transferred for who knows what reason, but I know that this is the place that I'm meant to be. Yeah, money.

And I committed to stay without even knowledge that volleyball was going to be included in any rev share, and now it just feels like a blessing that we have that opportunity to be supported as student-athletes at the University of Michigan.

There was not a question in my mind that I was going to play my last year at Michigan.

Q. You mentioned that the foreign trip was a pressure-free zone for you guys. We all know the Big Ten is a gauntlet. For you guys, when does the pressure cooker start? Is it the beginning of the season? Is it the beginning of Big Ten play? When do you feel that as a team where it's like, okay, now you're really in this?

MADDI CUCHRAN: I feel like something that we are hearing from other people is that this day honestly is starting to make everything feel real. It's kind of like we have been on this kind of -- continuing to play volleyball, still playing with each other, and this Europe trip allowing us to get more reps in with one another, but I would say yeah, like today has really made it come to light. I think we're super excited.

ALLISON JACOBS: Yeah, I really like that answer. I think Saturday is when we start official practices, and that's like -- we as a team have developed a culture of being very intentional and focused and there's not going to be a moment of -- we hope there is not going to be a moment of, yeah, we'll lock in when we have our first preseason game.

We know how important every practice is, every rep is. The second we're in the gym, it's go time.

Q. Erin, what is the next step for Morgan Burke at center? What's her next evolution?

ERIN VIRTUE: Yeah, so Morgan, she took the reins and didn't set them down all last season as setter. This spring for her, that evolution, as no one had got to see this in practice, but was really leading more.

We have two young setters behind her, or just younger than her, and those two setters had a ginormous January until now.

We really -- within position groups, and I think our setters are a good example of that, we want to make sure our teammateship is really strong. So Morgan not only in her craft but in her leadership style, she's always wanting to do extra work and learn, and our setters have a great relationship with their setter coach Kassie.

But for her it's how does she lead, how does she understand the game tactically even more, and just as any quarterback or setter, you have to know your receivers, your attackers and you have to know them. You can't just know the system that works well for them, but you have to really understand and know them.

Morgan with the time and the care that she puts into that position and as a friend as a teammate, I think that's growing -- that has grown so much since we saw her last play in November. I'm excited to see her do that and continue to lead, not only within her position, but we have two amazing leaders on the stage that are finished in December with Michigan volleyball.

Come next year, I don't want to think about you guys finishing already, but it's happening soon, and so Morgan is somebody that certainly could step into some spaces in a formal leadership role, too.

MADDI CUCHRAN: I would like to second that. As a team I think Morgan is always trying to get in the gym. She's always wanting to bring people to lift with her, and I think she really is going to be somebody that's going to step up when Allison and I are gone because I think that I can see in her someone that spends a lot of time and has gotten to know her that she's a very caring person, looks out for her teammates, and I think is really going to be integrating into that leadership role.

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