

# Big Ten Volleyball Media Days

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Chicago, Illinois, USA

## Michigan State Spartans Coach Kristen Kelsay

Evie Doezema

Zuzanna Kulig

Press Conference



is really unique.

**Q. Talk about the connection you have and your experience with someone who is a former Spartan and has a connection with the university and your experience there.**

EVIE DOEZEMA: Yeah, I stayed with the coaching switch because I love this school so much and this atmosphere, and when I heard Kristen was coming in, it was a full-circle moment for both of us because I was doing camps when I was just a kid as a Michigan native with Cathy, and Kristen was there watching, recruiting me. So to have her back as my head coach, it's just really surreal.

We are so lucky because she brings such a family atmosphere with her passion and her dedication to the school already, and she just brought that in with all the new players and the coaching staff and really just made everyone feel so at home right away with her love for this place.

ZUZANNA KULIG: Adding to that, I think having her back as alumni is a great feeling. She left a legacy, a big legacy here, and she's a great person on and off the court.

I think also, to be able to see her outside of the court, like in her office when we are talking, that I can tell her everything, she's a great supporter.

**Q. Coach, you are one of three new head coaches in the Big Ten this year. What is the impact of having so much familiarity when you are stepping into a new role where it's not a new program to you?**

KRISTEN KELSAY: It's really been maybe one of my favorite parts of this process, is that I get to stay in the conference that I know. I'm biased. The Big Ten is the best conference in the country and the only conference I've played or coached in. What a privilege that is for me.

So to have so much familiarity within the conference, not only with the coaches that either recruited me or I've played against Dave Shondell for 15 years, to then the players, I've recruited so many athletes in this conference,

KRISTEN KELSAY: Thank you, everyone, for being here. Thank you to the Big Ten. This is such a world-class event, and it really shows the support for women's volleyball in our conference. It's not done by anybody else, and so I think to see the platform that we have as not only Michigan State Spartans but Big Ten volleyball student-athletes and coaches is phenomenal.

Thank you everyone for being here and I'm excited to share our stories and have these two wonderful women share their perspective.

**Q. Yesterday we asked Keegan about what he thought about losing you, and his first words were, who? He said he was happy for you. What did you learn from Keegan to make you ready for this opportunity you have in front of you?**

KRISTEN KELSAY: It really was at Minnesota when it clicked for me. This will be my 10th year coaching in the Big Ten. I played in the Big Ten for four years. Played four really strong women in Cathy George, who has prepared me, and all of my mentors being at Northwestern for three years.

My year in club volleyball at VCN with Maggie Griffin taught me so much on the other side of the student-athlete experience, but it was my two years with Keegan that I had that moment of not only am I ready for this because I could have been ready for this at any period, but I want this.

I think mostly I learned from Keegan that you can do this at the highest level, and you can do it with integrity because that's not something I'm going to compromise. I will not compromise my character or my integrity, and to see him at a place like Minnesota commit to that fully really showed me that this is something I want to do and I want to change these young women's lives and have them have the same transformational experience that I had as a Spartan, which



have relationships.

But then you go more macro into Michigan State, and to have so many people in the athletic department who were there when I was a player or as a coach who are still there and have made that transition back home be really unique and really full circle -- I've been looking for an adjective to describe it. Full circle is the best way for it to be that.

These people there who know me and have watched me grow up and continue in this career, now to be back as a head coach who are now here to support me and walk this journey with me as head coach, just so much gratitude for the people.

**Q. Kristen, Keegan didn't even replace you as a coach, he got a general manager. Seriously, you and he must have talked about that kind of move for the future for both his program and yours. What are you doing to navigate the new world in this job?**

KRISTEN KELSAY: In what way?

**Q. NIL, NCAA, paying players, getting more foreign players, transfer portal --**

KRISTEN KELSAY: Yeah, I am grateful for the experience that I had under Keegan at Minnesota because what he hired in a GM, that's what him and I were doing, especially the last six months to a year in my time in Minneapolis, was we were navigating revenue sharing, navigating NIL, raising NIL.

When we walked in, that was a big part of transforming that experience when we started. He gave me a lot of autonomy and we worked really closely together in how to navigate that so when I was going through the hiring process at Michigan State, it was not only do I know what this is but I've done this. We've already written the contracts, so I have a lot of experience with this going into that role. That's a testament to Keegan for allowing me inside that world with him during my time at Minnesota.

**Q. We remember Julia Bishop as a setter last season, but she's joining your staff. I know from doing games of hers, she is obsessed with Michigan State. Her entire life has always loved the Spartans. Talk about her addition, staying with the program, and will she also wear her sweatband on the sideline?**

KRISTEN KELSAY: Julia Bishop is a Spartan through and through. There's people in this world that bleed green. You cut them open, I would have argued that was me, and then I got to work with Julia Bishop. What a testament to hard work. What a testament to love for the place that

you're at and pride in her school.

So when she came to me this spring, she was kind of a student manager for us, about being our GA, it was honestly a no-brainer. Mind you, she had gotten calls from other Division I schools about being a full-time assistant coach. I'll never forget, she sat across from me in my office and she said, I want to be here and I want to be with you and I want to leave this place better than I found it, and we both cried.

It was one of those, okay, join us on this journey. And I don't know how long I'll get to keep her because she's going to be an incredible coach. She already is. But she's going to do anything she sets her mind to.

But so grateful to have her on my staff in my first year.

**Q. For the players, too, to see her in this different role, someone you played with and the kind of leader she was as a setter as she looks toward a coaching career?**

EVIE DOEZEMA: Yeah, she was a phenomenal captain, phenomenal leader on our team. We had the joy of having her as a captain for three years, and I just -- it was so natural for her to step into that role.

She was born to be a coach, and she just has a way with her words and her relationships with us that it was just a very, very smooth transition, and we love that we got to keep her.

ZUZANNA KULIG: I think adding into that, it's also having her as an assistant right now, it's a great opportunity for us to hear her advice as before she was a player. So the advices that she is giving us, it's like they are -- it's different when the coach is giving you feedback and when a player is giving you feedback.

Yeah, it's been great working with her.

**Q. With Julia gone now, someone else has to set. Cameron is back and you have two newcomers. How would you assess where that position is heading into the fall?**

KRISTEN KELSAY: Yeah, we're going to have a lot of position battles heading into the fall which I'm excited about here in a couple days. Julia was a true rock of the team and of the program, and losing her and Nalani were two our first and second contacts.

Knowing that was something I was going to have to complement and replace on our team really early, we

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brought in Malayah Long and we brought in Kalea Norton who's here, came in in January. We also brought in two transfers in Sarah Vellucci and Lea. And so we're excited to see them in the gym as transfers who moved in January. I haven't even seen them play live yet.

But they know that we're going to have some big position battles this fall camp, and it's going to be exciting to see.

**Q. Zuzanna, did you know Julia when she was at Wisconsin, and did that have any influence on you coming to America and playing?**

ZUZANNA KULIG: Yes, to be honest. Yeah, we are friends. I saw her play in the first year in Wisconsin. We played also -- we were teammates back in Poland. We played for three years together, so also coming here was a decision that I made because of her. She was a part of it. She helped me also throughout the whole process. I asked her some questions and she was really helpful.

**Q. I want to ask you about these two returners that you brought here to media days and how you're leaning on some of your returners in this new role for you and where each of their respective games you feel like can make a stride under you in this coming season?**

KRISTEN KELSAY: Yeah, it was really -- put me at ease when I walked in the door on day one and knew we had returners like Zuzanna and Evie on our roster, people who know the league, people who have had great success in the league.

People like Evie who's played every position except setter getting her back on the pin in our offensive system.

And then Zuza, just her blocking ability I think is oftentimes overlooked, her offensive production that she'll have with us in our offense this fall. Having these two rocks for us was really important.

And then really seeing when I walked in, okay, what are the strengths of this team, what are our weaknesses, and how do I complement that. And you'll see that with the additions to our roster, is we really tried to complement the team we had, not just replace.

We brought in pieces that made sense to who we lost and where we had holes in our roster. Because I want everyone to have a role, right? I want everyone to have an opportunity to make an impact, and I wanted to make sure the athletes that we joined to this program, our staff and our athletes -- we just got out of a big people phase of our program, hiring staff, bringing in players, that everyone had

an opportunity to make an impact and that everyone was going to bring value in some way.

**Q. For you two, where do you feel like you want your game to grow and just coming off last year under a brand new head coach?**

EVIE DOEZEMA: I would say the place I want my game to grow is my consistency emotionally on the court. In the past I feel like not being as much of a standout leader, we had our two captains that were the rock, and I felt like I could vary a bit more in my emotion.

But this year stepping into a bigger leadership role, I want to stay as consistent as possible so that my teammates can always rely on me even when I'm not having my best game and that they can still feel comfortable and have faith in me that I'll get the job done.

ZUZANNA KULIG: I think about me, I wanted to be as a player more versatile, and I want to add some -- in my offense, some attacking behind the setter.

Also I think as now an upperclassman and being here for two years, I just want to show my teammates how great I can be on the court, and I think -- yeah.

**Q. What do you like doing when you're not playing volleyball?**

EVIE DOEZEMA: Our team a lot -- we have a big yard out by our apartments and we all live together, so we'll go out and play spike ball and we'll throw the football around and we just like to spend time outside together, especially this summer before it gets cold in Michigan.

KRISTEN KELSAY: It never gets cold in Michigan.

EVIE DOEZEMA: Right. Yeah. Whatever.

**Q. Any cold-weather activities?**

EVIE DOEZEMA: I'd say inside I like to cook.

KRISTEN KELSAY: Didn't you guys go ice skating last spring?

EVIE DOEZEMA: Yeah, we did. We'll sometimes go ice skating.

**Q. Kristen, your first three Big Ten games at Minnesota, home with Michigan, at Northwestern, I imagine that will be an emotional journey. Would you rather just have those three games, get those out of the way?**

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KRISTEN KELSAY: Just knock them out. Yeah, well, and the weekend before that we play at Jenison, so we're hosting our alumni weekend in Jenison Fieldhouse, which is special in a lot of ways.

We get to honor the 1975 team. We get to honor our 1995 Final Four team. We get to bring back many of my teammates and those who came before us. Then I get to go back to the Pav with my family, my Minnesota family. Then our arrival at home with Breslin, which we know is going to be buzzing. Breslin is going to be hopping.

Then to Northwestern, which is another former -- I loved my team at Northwestern. I'm from Chicago.

I think part of it is almost every school has some sort of memory. Every school has some sort of relationship, and I lean into that because it's what makes this opportunity so special is the relationship piece, and they know this now, but it's my why. The mentoring and relationship piece.

To have these memories and to have these relationships at every place across the country is really special, and I don't take that for granted.

But yeah, those first couple weeks are going to be a warm welcome.

**Q. Did you coach with Erin at Northwestern?**

KRISTEN KELSAY: I didn't. She went with Team USA and then I got hired. We actually coached against each other at Michigan. Erin and I went to the same high school so Erin is someone I have looked up to and admired for a very long time.

**Q. What high school?**

KRISTEN KELSAY: Wheaton St. Francis.

**Q. For Kristen, you've been at three different schools in the Big Ten. What stood out to you about the depth of this league, and how have you seen that change over time?**

KRISTEN KELSAY: This league has always been incredibly deep. I'm older now, right, so back when I played, we were still getting eight, nine teams in the tournament. So from top to bottom, right, you have that top tier that is legit competing for a National Championship, with half the Big Ten teams, with Katie and Penn State winning it all last year, and then you have this middle tier that is as good as a lot of other conferences' top group and they're fighting for the tournament.

Then you have that next tier that's working so hard to make the jump.

Then you add Washington and Oregon and UCLA and USC. So where I'd love to see this go is we get 10, 12 teams in the NCAA Tournament. The Big Ten is clearly deep enough and has the tradition and the success to do that.

It's also the growth of women's volleyball. That's, I think, been the biggest change from when I was in their shoes to where we are now is the amount of matches played on BTN, the amount of matches played on NBC and CBS and nationally. Nebraska is selling out a football stadium. Having two, three pro leagues on our home soil, it's just a tremendous time to be a women's volleyball player and to be a woman athlete in our nation and in our sport.

That's probably been the biggest change. The Big Ten has stayed this premier conference, but now our platform is even bigger than it's ever been.

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