

Big Ten Volleyball Media Days

Tuesday, July 29, 2025

Chicago, Illinois, USA

Washington Huskies

Coach Leslie Gabriel

Kierstyn Barton

Julia Hunt

Press Conference



committed to growing, competing, and representing Washington and the Big Ten conference with pride.

With that, I'd like to open up.

Q. Julia, how do you go about building on what you accomplished last year in your freshman season?

JULIA HUNT: I would just say continuing to be confident. Last year I feel like I played pretty good and I got my name out there, but it's time to just keep going. The journey never ends, and I'm trying to win a National Championship.

Even though I had a big year last year, I want my team to have a big year, so I want to continue to keep growing and keep getting better.

Q. Coach, you mentioned in your comments just a moment ago about adding Krista to this staff. What is the value of adding someone who loves this university and this program and bringing them back into the fold and how that exudes throughout, especially having that familiarity?

LESLIE GABRIEL: Yeah, I think it's huge. Kind of like you said, there's a familiarity. There's a pride, being that it's the school that you came from.

Krista, she's done it all in our program. We were just at camp the last two weeks, and when we do staff introductions in our arena, after she would introduce herself, all of our players would be like, look, and her jersey is retired up in the rafters. Someone who has done it. She can relate with these players and help them do what she did at Washington I think is really motivating and exciting.

Q. I know both you players go through summer workouts, but what has it been like to add her to the staff, the pride she has for Washington?

KIERSTYN BARTON: Yeah, I think for me as an outside hitter, just having someone to look up to that did the things that you want to do and just being able to have a role model with you every step of the way, every single day, every single play, every single game is just really important

LESLIE GABRIEL: First, I just would like to thank the Big Ten Network, the Big Ten conference just for the special day that we've had today. Just like last year, we definitely feel like queens up here, and just celebrated. So we just appreciate everything that you've done for us.

Also want to thank the press for showing up today and for our sport. I think that says a lot about volleyball and where it's at today.

But as you know, we're heading into our second season in the Big Ten and are excited to get going. Last year competing in the nation's toughest volleyball conference pushed us to grow individually and as a team.

It showed us new parts of the country and gave our players new experiences. With all that we learned last year we are excited to start year two.

On the court, we're returning a strong core from our starting lineup last year, including Kierstyn Barton, Julia Hunt, Katy Wessels, all key contributors who helped carry us through the transition into the Big Ten.

We've also added some exciting new players to this year's roster, Taylor Simpson, a grad transfer from Colorado, and Alexa Markley, a grad transfer from Penn State, and international outside hitter Simona Mateska from Belgrade, Serbia. We're excited that they're Huskies and excited to get them in the gym and in purple this year?

Finally, I'm incredibly excited to welcome back a Huskies legend, Krista Hendrickson, formerly known as Krista Vansant, who has joined our coaching staff this summer. Krista knows this program inside and out, and her leadership and perspective will add so much to our team and culture.

There's a lot to look forward to this season. We're



growth-wise, and having someone to lean on as well.

Then also in the weight room, she really motivates me to keep doing better, keep pushing myself and trying to be the best person that I can be.

JULIA HUNT: I'm really grateful for her. She's a great player, obviously, but she's also a great human, which really fits into our culture. To have her around literally means the world. She is such a hard worker, tough nut, big softy, obviously, but she has always the qualities that we need in order to be a successful team and she adds so much to our program and is going to help us build even more.

Q. Leslie, your schedule looks really interesting and must have been a hard one to put together with the different levels of competition and places you play.

LESLIE GABRIEL: Yeah, when we sat down as a staff and we were super excited about the team that we have going into this season. One thing we wanted to do is make sure that we had some tests, and we have actually a lot of tests. We go into Colorado and we play Colorado State and Northern Colorado, and then the next weekend it doesn't get any easier, and then the next weekend it's the same thing.

We just wanted to make sure we got all the information that we needed on our team to help get us ready for conference.

That was what our decisions were when we looked at our preseason conference.

Q. The coaches picked you eighth; is that a fair assessment of your team and where you should be?

LESLIE GABRIEL: I think so, yeah, and then we'll see what happens when it's over.

Q. Leslie, the NCAA had a waiver for moving up the start of practice. How did that affect your plans and the student-athletes' plans and what was your reaction when they allowed you to start practices earlier?

LESLIE GABRIEL: Yeah, our conference let us know when the waiver was going to go through, and once I found out, it was right before the girls took off for the summer. So I told them in our last team meeting, I said, hey, I just want you to know that there's this waiver that's going through the paces. If it gets passed, we will start early. So these are the possible dates of when we could start so that they kind of knew how to plan it.

Some of our girls had things planned and they had to go back to their families and let them know we've got to make some changes.

Obviously it passed, and once it did -- they actually knew, too, because the day I found out seemed to be the same day they found out. There was text messages coming through saying you said if it was going to pass we were going to start early. I let them know that we were going to get going on the 2nd of August and everyone was excited and ready to go.

Q. Did you have plans that you had to change?

KIERSTYN BARTON: I did plan on playing six man in SoCal, but I could always do that another year, so it's not like life ending.

JULIA HUNT: I was just at home, so I just had to cancel my flight, but I'm excited to start earlier because that means I get more practice in for the year.

Q. I wanted to ask, coming into the second year of the Big Ten, you guys started 13-0 last season. What were some of your biggest lessons or takeaways that you want to bring into this year now that you've got that grounding, that footing of one year in the conference?

LESLIE GABRIEL: Yeah, kind of like I said, we as a team learned a lot, but I think we as a staff learned a lot.

I thought that going into preseason and the beginning of play last year, our team got into some really good routines that helped us improve and get better each day we were in the gym.

As you know, once school starts, which for us is in late September, schedules got a little busy. Film watching maybe happened less, and then travel happened. So our routines kind of changed, and I remember addressing that with the team late in the year.

So that's one thing for me going into this year, I want to make sure that we have routines that can last through the whole season. Once school starts, can we keep those same routines; once we start traveling, can we keep those same routines. Maybe they're a little bit different but they don't take drastic dips.

I think another learning thing for me as a coach was just in every season there's always a point where rest is just way more important than training, and I felt like I started that process a little too soon with our team. So we didn't make as much -- we could have maybe made more progress if I would have pushed that window a little bit later.



So those are two things that I think about going into next year after going through a year of what travel looks like in the Big Ten and what our girls can handle for us.

Those are two things.

Q. Kierstyn, I want to ask you about starting The Athlete Diaries podcast about what your message is, the discussions you want to have and why you felt like your voice was important in those discussions.

KIERSTYN BARTON: Well, I started The Athlete Diaries just because I was going through a tough time. My sophomore year just dealing with a bunch of different things, personal issues, injuries, playing ability, confidence, just all of it was all at once.

When I went to the BSA Summit and like started talking to people, that was like end of spring, just talking about my experience and sharing content ideas and my passion for content, I was like, I could totally merge the two and bring it together with a podcast. And I love talking, so I was like, why not.

Just put that together, and just basically showing athletes that it's okay to have hardships and have things going on, but it's about how you move about the situation that really matters. Like leaning on your teammates, leaning on your coaches, family, trying to find the help that you need and not taking it so internal and personal.

Because everyone is dealing with something at the end of the day, and talking about it, advocating for yourself is really what makes you get better at the end of the day, and I really want to show athletes this is how you do it and these are other stories.

Not every single person has the same story, but they do have the same outcome of getting on the other side and becoming a better person out of it, which is what I love to share.

So yeah, that's a little bit about my podcast.

Q. Coach, how does that make you feel when you have a player who wants to be a leader in that space and lead these conversations and really putting her voice to something that is meaningful to her?

LESLIE GABRIEL: I think that's great. I think as a coach you want to help develop your players to feel empowered to do those things. I'm grateful that she's able to be vulnerable enough to share her stories. I know nowadays, especially with TikTok and Instagram, everyone wants to

put their best foot forward and show that, and to show that, hey, I do have bad days, I do have days that are hard, I do have great days, too, and these are the things that help me in this space.

I think they're great because I think a lot of people want to see how other people are doing it or also just know that, hey, they're normal, that other people are going through what they are. I think that's awesome that she's doing that.

KIERSTYN BARTON: Thanks.

Q. Leslie, how has the House settlement affected how you're running the program and the fallout with that?

LESLIE GABRIEL: Yeah, obviously this is an exciting time in athletics with the House settlement, and just grateful with the opportunities at the University of Washington is giving our program.

As far as how it changes my program, it doesn't change anything. Volleyball is still volleyball. We have to come in every day, work hard. We have to be disciplined. We have to do all these things.

I think the House settlement brings just blessings to people, and we just have to remember that because I think if you don't, it can end up being a distraction, and then we lose sight of why we play this game and what is really important in my eyes.

Q. We've been hearing from players throughout today about their thoughts of navigating this and I'm sure you hear a lot about it and it goes up the rung. How is that affecting you guys as well?

KIERSTYN BARTON: Yeah, I think being able to have the opportunity to have blessings like that, I think that's really cool, and it only propels women's sports in an upward trajectory. I think that's really cool.

Not everyone can say that they played Big Ten volleyball, and I think for those people that have done that, I think the House settlement does help with the exposure and being able to talk about it and also representing people of color, white people and different races, different ethnicities, being able to share your experience through that is really important.

JULIA HUNT: I'm very grateful. I feel like this is a great opportunity for all student-athletes. But it doesn't really affect me or the team. I always put team first, so anything below that or any outside distractions, I just like to focus on the team I have at hand and trying to win games for the program.



Q. Can you talk about your grad transfers. What's that integration been like and also bringing Alexa from Penn State, why did you want to go the route of grad transfers and what are they adding to the program?

LESLIE GABRIEL: Yeah, when we looked at our roster and what our needs were, obviously graduating Emoni Bush and Madi Endsley and Audra Wilmes, some girls who brought some offensive power. We needed to do that, bring in some other people with good arms, so Alexa Markley obviously entered in as a grad transfer and she was someone that just fit what our needs were. Luckily she felt that we were a program that met her needs too.

Then as far as a setter, Taylor Simpson, we knew going into this year we wanted to make our offense more dynamic. We felt that we ran an offense that was a little on the slower end, so we wanted to speed it up. She's been a setter at Colorado running their offense pretty fast, so we knew right away that, hey, this could be another good fit for our program.

It was basically just looking at what our needs are, what we wanted to try to do this season, and who was available and out there.

Q. I want to get your take on what have you guys been doing since you've been here, and what do you think of the Big Ten media day?

KIERSTYN BARTON: Yeah, first time being here, and I think so far it has exceeded my expectations. Like the dinner yesterday, oh, my gosh. I've never had such good food, and the salmon was my favorite.

LESLIE GABRIEL: That says a lot. We're from Seattle where seafood is like in abundance.

KIERSTYN BARTON: Yeah. You can get seafood anywhere in Seattle, so it's saying a lot. I don't know, just the people here are very welcoming. It's not like rivalry at all. It's more like we're all one big conference and we're here to support each other.

JULIA HUNT: Yeah, I agree with Kierstyn. I think this is an amazing experience. This is my first time also. I get to meet new people, see new faces, and just have the opportunity to be, like, big things like this go on, make some TikToks.

I don't do that on my own time, so just getting the experience of meeting all these people is really fun.

KIERSTYN BARTON: And from someone who played in

the Pac-12 their first year, they would not do this. This is, like -- this is cool.

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