

Big Ten Volleyball Media Days

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Chicago, Illinois, USA

UCLA Bruins

Coach Alfee Reft

Cheridyn Leverette

Zayna Meyer

Press Conference



ALFEE REFT: First and foremost, thank you to the Big Ten conference, to the Big Ten events team for putting this tremendous couple days on for us. It's really special, for myself and our athletes to be here representing UCLA. It says a lot about where we're at in women's sports, and it's just very exciting to be boots on the ground here, so thank you all for that.

I'd like to say thank you to UCLA, of course our administration, our athletic director Martin Jarmond, and our sports supervisor Kenny Donaldson who help us carry out the vision of what we are doing this year at UCLA.

They've been a part of this journey with me since I've been at UCLA, and I'm excited for the continued growth we have for our program.

Sitting with me here, I have two of our athletes. To my furthest left, Cheridyn Leverette, who is a senior returning All-American outside hitter for us, and Zayna Meyer who is a senior setter.

I think it's really -- this is representative of where our program is right now. Our program has been in a place where we've been evolving and growing over the last couple of the years, and I think there's a lot of talk right now around the transfers in our program.

I want to highlight the integration of these new people along with the people like Cheridyn who have been with us from the beginning, have been with me from the start. She was here prior to my getting to UCLA, so she's a Bruin through and through.

I think with the conversation of integrating a lot of people, it's really important to understand that this process of our program has been on a pathway now for a couple years, and we're very excited to cash in on something unique and special that includes a crux eight players that have been in

our program for the past two to three years.

We've added 10 new players, five transfers, five incoming freshmen. And I think that's important to note because those players coming in have bought into the vision of our program, they've bought into the direction of what we're doing, and that's really exciting.

I'm thrilled. I can't wait for the start of our season for us to finally be in the gym together. The team has been working hard this summer and we're really excited to kick off this '25 fall season.

Q. Talk about Lola Shumacher, getting her to UCLA, and what you think she can add to this team this year.

ALFEE REFT: Yeah, Lola is a tremendous player. Let's talk about her as a performer. I think we all know she can pass the ball, she can defend. She's shown that at a high level in the Big Ten. She did it at Wisconsin for her team.

But I think people don't see the spirit of what she brings to the opposition as a defender. She adds -- she's a tremendous piece that we've added to an already strong core of passers and defenders we have.

Lola elevates us in that position. She's feisty, she's competitive, she sees the game really well, she moves really well.

I think she's not only going to bring a great competitive level to our gym, she's going to make our hitters better. Honestly one of the best things about having this many pieces in a gym is your players, whether on this side or that side of the gym, have to put the ball down against the best every day, and I think she's only adding to that prowess we have.

She's been -- I haven't gotten the chance to be with her in the gym yet, but I feel the impact she's having on us with just her being herself.

Q. You're all in a major market in California. What is it like being a student in California, a lot of the perks you get, special requests for autographs, things like that,



celebrity sightings?

CHERIDYN LEVERETTE: Yeah, LA is, like you named it, just a hub for just culture in general, and I think we're surrounded by so many things. We have so many things at our fingertips.

I think we just capitalize off of that.

And yeah, we love the city we live in. Personally, I love living in LA. Lots of opportunities come our way just because of where we're located geographically. To answer your question, yes, we do.

ZAYNA MEYER: It's truly such a blessing to be in the Big Ten and competing against Midwestern teams while living in Los Angeles. Like Cheridyn said there's so many opportunities. It's just a hub, and it's really fun. I love it.

ALFEE REFT: Yeah, our athletes are certainly leveraging I think the full-life experience of being a student-athlete these days. It's a multifaceted experience, and we certainly want that to be. Our athletes know you come to UCLA and you've got to be great in the classroom and you've got to be great on the court, and then you've got all these other things which I think are really specific to our landscape in LA.

So I think they have a pretty good life.

Q. Alfee, the fellow coaches in the league picked you fifth in the conference. What was your reaction when you saw that, especially with 10 newcomers?

ALFEE REFT: Yeah, I think it's humbling for sure. You don't expect that. There's just so many good teams in the conference. The margins between fourth and sixth or fourth and eighth are so slim.

I think we take that as a great responsibility as a team. I think we know what we're capable of this year.

So in the moment it's like, cool, let's hang on to this for a split moment. And then it's, let's get back to work, because we've got to make that happen now and maybe even better. That's the goal.

Yeah, it's always nice to be recognized by our constituents, our peers, and for them to see the potential. But the proof is in the pudding for us, so we go to work.

Q. Cheridyn, how has the integration gone of getting the newcomers and returners meshing together to form one cohesive unit?

CHERIDYN LEVERETTE: Yeah, that's a great question. I think definitely everyone is meshing super well. It's been super fun. I think the biggest thing is honing in on our relationships outside of the court just so that when things get challenging as they do in every season, we have these other bonds that we can rely on and trust each other.

So I think just like we've been doing a lot of fun team bonding activities, like I said earlier, living in LA, there's so much always to do, so I think we take advantage of that to, like, amplify our team cohesiveness, too.

Yeah, definitely just building bonds outside of volleyball.

Q. Alfee, you talk about you want to talk about the other players, but it's not every day that you get a transfer class like this. I mean, PK went to all those Final Fours; Singletary played on a National Championship team. (Indiscernible) How did it all come about that you got them?

ALFEE REFT: I think the fun thread that ties all that together when I think about it is it felt like we didn't have to oversell ourselves. We told them what the vision of this program was, and from day one with Cheridyn when we got here, the narrative has been the same.

It's taken some time and it's still evolving, but we shared what this vision and this looked like for our program.

We shared who we are as people and what we want to do as competitors. So kind of looking in hindsight, yeah, I can see from an outside lens looking in, it's like, we have these great pieces, and it felt so organic and normal that they are with us because these are the people they are. These are the things that they want. They want to win at the highest level but also want to be a part of something that's transformational.

It really was -- it was just a really natural process is the best way I can put it. But also looking back it's pretty awesome that we got some of these big pieces in here to make us better of course.

Q. Is there any pressure to get a lot of them playing time?

ALFEE REFT: I'll tell you after week 2. I anticipate everybody to compete. Our freshmen can come in and I know they can play volleyball. I haven't had my eyes on them just yet, but the word from our open gyms, it's pretty heated and competitive in there. We tell our team, hey, I don't care if you're Mari Singletary, PK, Cheridyn, Zayna, whoever it is, you got to come in and compete. That's what we're doing, is we are creating a roster that in the gym is



just going hard at each other.

So I think they all know that.

Q. Since you've been in the open gym can any of those freshmen break the lineup?

CHERIDYN LEVERETTE: We have some fierce, fierce freshmen who are hungry and competitive. They bring so much to our gym. I'm so excited to see everyone compete.

ALFEE REFT: I was hoping they'd say a name, like this person is going to play. If you're asking just across the board, Eliana, our freshmen, she is great ball control.

We have Mija Bensuite on the right-hand side. She can block. She can attack.

And we have a freshman, in Sak Codling who is one of the best liberos in the country. She held her junior team. Yes, we have Lola as a transfer and we have these other pieces that are just right there that are going to battle and compete. I think it's anyone's game honestly.

Q. Zayna, as Coach has said, a lot of transfers that have bought into the mindset, the goals of the program. What have those been for you?

ZAYNA MEYER: I think honestly getting on board and being on board with the journey and the goals of this team. Because we have really big goals this year, and I think, yeah, coming in as a transfer, just integrating myself into that and having conversations with all the girls on the team, building those relationships and gaining really closeness with all the coaches to just really align ourselves with those goals.

Q. Are you able to speak to what any of those goals are, either individually or as a team?

ZAYNA MEYER: Yeah, we want to win a natty. We're going for the Final Four. We want to be Big Ten Champions.

Yeah.

Q. Being from Wheaton, Illinois, is this special to you joining the Big Ten?

ZAYNA MEYER: Yeah, for sure. I'm so grateful to be back here. I honestly think Chicago is one of the best cities in the country, and it's amazing here.

Q. For Coach, I think definitely on paper you see the talent, the capability this team has, and you're going

into your third year with the program that hasn't made the tournament since 2021. How are you able to still give the team the confidence that yes, you can make the tournament, yes, you can compete for a national title?

ALFEE REFT: Yeah, I think the narrative is we kind of make the narrative what we want, and really I think what we fundamentally believe is none of us are happy with probably the results of the last two years, and we use those experiences to learn and get better.

We keep doing the work. The work we've done I think has been consistent, and it's been in the right direction, and I feel really confident. I feel very confident about the pieces we have, and we have the people in the right seats this year.

But the work remains the same. We don't change that. We just adapt and kind of evolve and get better.

Q. Coach, what would you be doing if you were still in your 20s?

ALFEE REFT: That's a good question. If I were still in my 20s? Well, believe it or not, I actually used to play volleyball, and I played for our USA team, so in my 20s I was playing on the national team and trying to make an Olympics.

I probably would still be playing if I was in my 20s and not having my knees hurt anymore.

Q. What is the most challenging thing about your sport?

CHERIDYN LEVERETTE: I would say the most challenging thing about our sport is the teamwork aspect of it. You see in sports like tennis, swimming where it's kind of you just perfect your own craft, but when you're having to rely on your teammates or -- your skill affects your teammates.

It's more about how can I make my teammates better or what can I learn from my teammates that will help me make them better. So yeah, definitely the teamwork aspect of it, especially in volleyball, because literally everyone's touch affects the whole game.

ZAYNA MEYER: I agree. I think it's one of the things that's really beautiful about the sport of volleyball and I think it's very challenging, but it's amazing, too, having all those different pieces and all those different positions but then also being able to play every skill is something that's very difficult.



I'm trying to think of sports, but even like tennis players, I feel like there's no other sport where you're contorting your body in the way that volleyball players do and that have to be dynamic and athletic and also maintaining a culture and the team aspect of it as well. It's pretty cool.

Q. Was there anything you learned going through the first season of the Big Ten that altered the way you ran the program for this season?

ALFEE REFT: Yeah, I think the way we rest and recover and travel, we knew heading into the first year there was going to be a lot of trial by error and just learning kind of in the fire of things, and we certainly took away from that.

I think we've dealt with a lot of specialists this year in terms of how we sleep, the timeline at which we travel and making sure that we get a little more time on the front end.

Yeah, I don't think -- even though we knew what those hours look like. It's not necessarily the singular travel trip. It's the cumulative effect of that over the course of the year. So how are we playing our best volleyball at the end of the year, and what decisions are we making in early September to make sure that we're preparing for that.

Q. What goes into your clothes for an event like today?

CHERIDYN LEVERETTE: So I actually planned out my outfits like two months ago. I already kind of knew the vision what I was looking for. Yeah, just lots of early prep and trying things on.

ZAYNA MEYER: Yeah, it was a trip to Nordstrom and just trying a lot of things on and figuring out how to make business attire look good on me.

ALFEE REFT: I probably spent more time on social media than I have in like two months, on Pinterest, and also my husband made me do a lot of fashion shows at our house. I had to try a lot of things, and, yeah, we came up with this. Hopefully it works.

Q. The first real match of the year against Long Beach State. What are your emotions and thoughts going into that match?

ZAYNA MEYER: Yeah, at first I was like, wow. But truly I'm really excited to be back in the Pyramid. I think it's one of the best volleyball venues in the country, and I have so much love for that community and Long Beach in general. I'm an alumni from Long Beach. My boyfriend plays there.

Like I'm so passionate about that community and how much they love volleyball and how important it is to them, so I'm really excited to be back there and just competing and it's going to be a little interesting being in a different jersey, but it's going to be a lot of fun.

Q. Alfee, the House settlement before it was finalized, how has that changed roster building or revenue sharing? Are those conversations you're having differently or how does that alter your approach to roster management?

ALFEE REFT: Yeah, I think we've all navigated it in our own unique ways, and I think LA and UCLA is a really unique space. Prior to all of that being moved, we actually had a movement that was a little bit more independent to us as a program and it was called Bruins Edge, and we're really just around the professional development of our athletes.

I think we'd be remiss in not providing these opportunities or helping at least network. Our athletes do a lot on their own. We don't have to do a lot. They're handling their own socials, they're networking in LA, and it's a tremendous, I think, credit to them.

But we also understand as a program, we have an opportunity to really have a further reach in LA, so we've utilized the networks, I think, that we have currently and also the networks that we're trying to create and billed to give them more opportunities in the NIL space.

That's how we've stayed competitive. I think it's unique to us at UCLA and being in LA, and I think it's actually built in some purpose and meaning. We want them to do things that they're passionate about, and it's not just a money grab, it's hey, how do we get you to have some sort of connection for when you're done playing for UCLA. You have this door potentially opened for you to go do some big things and hopefully make some money in the process.

Q. Cheridyn, obviously you had a breakout campaign last year and the Big Ten schedule is always going to be a gauntlet. You're also throwing in pre-conference games on the road. Sort of what Coach alluded to, but how do you manage the workload, the energy you're putting in to having another good season?

CHERIDYN LEVERETTE: Yeah, I think we actually were just talking about this. I think one of the things that allows me to be so successful is just the balance that I have in taking care of myself outside of the court.

I think the city and the space that I'm in is a big part of that, and that's why I just love UCLA, living in LA so much, is



because there's -- on my off days I can do so many things just to take care of me and just my mental health and just my well-being in general, doing things that fill me up outside of volleyball, and that way I can be my best self when I am playing volleyball.

So yeah, I think definitely just taking care of my whole person pretty much.

Q. For Coach, a bit off topic, but last year you were coaching the Olympics, so we had coaching here Lugo-Rodriguez representing UCLA. I was curious if he's still with the program?

ALFEE REFT: Amir is no longer with the program.

Q. You brought in Coach Vogel from the men's program. I was curious what went into that decision? What do you think he brings from the very successful men's programs?

ALFEE REFT: Yeah, I think his resume speaks for itself. Him being a two-time national champion on the men's side is certainly impressive. I think he has a tremendous acumen for the game, especially on the block and defense side. He sees the game at a really high level. He's implemented systems at a very high level on the men's side.

As that process unfolded and there were a number of candidates that were really credible, he certainly -- him being a Bruin himself, him having played for UCLA, coached for UCLA, I think that was on top of his volleyball acumen was an incredible pull for us.

So it's been a really fun integration process, and we're really excited to get started with him.

Q. For the players, I was curious about having the men's program be so successful, does that put pressure on the women's program or motivate the women's program in any way, or is it separate because you guys play at different times of the year?

ZAYNA MEYER: I came from Long Beach so I'm used to having a very high-level men's program. I think it's amazing. It could not be better watching men's volleyball at a super high level. I honestly think it just fires us up to be better. I don't think necessarily it's more pressure, but I think at UCLA we're destined for greatness, and I think that's kind of the standard of going to that school and having the men's program be that example is great, and I love watching them play and I love watching Andrew Rowan, their center, play. It's a great example for me and for our team.

CHERIDYN LEVERETTE: I think when you go to UCLA, you're entering one of the most insane volleyball communities in the world, whether that's men's volleyball, beach volleyball, indoor volleyball. All of these programs, I would say this is probably one of the top volleyball hubs in the country, if not in the world honestly.

I think just knowing that and knowing what you're a part of is motivating in itself, to be great for the volleyball community that we have here and alumni network, just everyone.

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