

2021 NCAA Women's Volleyball Championship

Friday, December 17, 2021

Columbus, Ohio, USA

Nationwide Arena

Wisconsin Badgers

Coach Kelly Sheffield

Lauren Barnes

Sydney Hilley

Dana Rettke

Press Conference



Q. Sydney, Lauren, Dana, any of you guys, coming off an intense match last night, how are you guys feeling today? How was practice? And obviously it's such a quick turnaround with what's at stake tomorrow.

LAUREN BARNES: I'd say we're feeling great. I think sleep helped our bodies recover. We had practice today. It was pretty light. Get our touches in, get our touch and feel. Don't beat up on the bodies too much. We'll do that plenty tomorrow night. But we're feeling real good right now. I felt practice went really well.

Q. Dana and Syd can take this one. You've been talking all along how there's this goal that you still have to accomplish that's been there for years and especially this season. Do you kind of feel like it had to be this way, that you'd have to go through another Big Ten team and maybe even Nebraska to get over that last hurdle? Have you thought about it that way?

SYDNEY HILLEY: Honestly, when I was looking at the bracket, I only looked at our next opponent. So I tried not to look too far ahead. Didn't try to think about what the matchup could even possibly be. Even last night I didn't think too much about it.

So Nebraska is a really great team. I'm not surprised to see them again. Every time we play them it's a battle and extremely competitive. So it's going to be a fun one for sure.

Q. The first time you guys played Nebraska, Anna had 12 kills. And she kind of had a career high. Last night she goes for 20. So kind of a two-part question. Number one, were you surprised, if I had told you before the match that Anna last night was going to have 20 kills, what would you have said to me? And the second part, how valuable is she going to be in your guys' opinions on Saturday night?

COACH SHEFFIELD: Would we have been surprised that Anna had 20 kills and hit for over .700 as an 18-year-old freshman. That happens a lot.

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Wisconsin.

Q. Kelly, when you look at Nebraska on film, over the season, how do you feel they've changed, and especially last time you guys played them in the tournament and so forth?

COACH SHEFFIELD: It's an interesting thing, because I think both teams have evolved. If you kind of look at last year, Kentucky and Texas were in the finals. And both of them evolved quite a bit as the season went on.

Their lineups changed. They were developing their system. It wasn't something they got locked in right away and they just stayed with it for the entire time. Stanford the year before that I thought was the same way.

Our season has been a work in progress. Our rotation, our lineup has been that. Nebraska has been the exact same way. They haven't been in a hurry to figure it out. Neither have we.

This is a really, really -- it's the best defensive team in the country. And it's really tough to score. It puts a premium on us being patient. You've got to be really patient when you're playing them.

They're younger kids. I think, I mean, they're playing their best volleyball right now, some of the younger ones. It's been impressive to watch how they've put this together. And you're not surprised because it's an excellent coaching staff. And they've been through this rodeo once or twice before.

[Laughter].

You guys can answer that.

DANA RETTKE: I can answer that one. Like Kelly said, that was pretty special night for her. But all of us know that she's capable of that.

She's a phenomenal player. She has some really awesome gifts and works really, really hard. So we were just super proud of her. And I don't think that throughout the career, Louisville didn't -- I don't think they thought of her as a priority attacker. She just owned it.

And it was really awesome to see and you saw her confidence just continue to go up as the match went on. I've been seeing that from her throughout the whole entire tournament. She's in there, huddles, she's talking, getting people ready to go. That is everything you want in a teammate, especially a younger teammate.

So I was so, so proud of her. And just she really rose up in the big moments yesterday. And she's definitely a force to be reckoned with, absolutely.

Q. Dana, we talked a couple days ago about the fifth time of being a first-teamer. Today you get another honor that comes your way with the National Player of the Year. What's your response to getting that award?

DANA RETTKE: Initially, I was shocked because there are just so many great players this year in this division. It was crazy, honestly. So it was really an honor to be recognized with that today.

But with that being said, while that award has my name on it, that really is just so special to be in our program because I couldn't have done it without our whole entire team, especially these two up here. It was -- and three. Kelly too. Why not?

[Laughter].

It's such an honor. And to have that in our program, we worked so hard every single day. And they really do make me look good. Let's be honest.

I'm really thankful that the team was able to -- I'm thankful that award gets to be part of on your program because it just says so much. And so I'm really pumped about that. But it really was an honor.

Q. Lauren, Nebraska put on a video last night of John Cook addressing his team after the match, and he said something about we get to see our buddies again. I

don't know that he meant anything by that.

But you see that program so much, I'm curious what the relationship is. Is it familiarity can sometimes breed contempt? But I'm sure there's a respect level too. How do you view that?

LAUREN BARNES: There's definitely both, familiarity and respect. These are two really good teams that are about to go at it tomorrow night. It's going to be a battle. And we had that last night. I think it will be just as good if not better. I'm very excited. Like you said, both sides have a lot of respect for each other. There's a lot of good players, front row to back row. Two really good defensive teams, two really good offensive teams. I'm excited to see what happens.

Q. Dana was saying she was both surprised and shocked, but to me this is an award she obviously deserved. Could you talk about bringing her into this program, being the first Wisconsin player to be Freshman of the Year and now first Wisconsin player to be National Player of the Year, and what it's meant to have her for these five seasons?

COACH SHEFFIELD: She's had a special career. She found ways to get better every year. She's an incredible teammate. She's one of those rare breeds of a superstar player that doesn't -- she carries herself with the confidence of that but doesn't -- has unbelievable humility to her.

All three of these guys do. They're all three multi-team All-Americans. And they're three of the most down-to-earth, humble kids you can have.

I don't know. There will be a time probably to put words into what each of them have meant and what they've accomplished. And hopefully I'll do a better job of that than I am now. Excited to get one more match with her.

Q. Kelly, what does it mean to have this whole season to come down to two Big Ten teams playing for a national championship?

COACH SHEFFIELD: I don't think we'd care who we play, to tell you the truth. Nebraska, I hope -- we really try to go about things the right way at Wisconsin. And one of the things, when you're trying to be an elite program, when you're trying to be the best program, which is something we aspire to be, you study other really elite programs.

And Nebraska's certainly right there. That's something, I think, they go about things in a really good way. Not just their team, but the program. There's a lot of things that go

into building a program. And volleyball's taken very seriously there by the administration and by the staff and by the fan base, by the media.

And I feel like we're building that. We have built that. I mean prior to us getting there. But I think we continue to grow.

Like these guys have said, you're not going to hear anybody up here say anything poor about Nebraska. It's not because we don't want to give them bulletin board material, it's because there's a genuine level of respect for what's going on there. It's genuine. And we're excited.

So, when you've got one of the premier programs that have been through this over and over again, like they have, and they have won so many -- look at how many white banners they have in Devaney. We want a white banner.

The white banner is their national championship banners in there. And that's something, we've been close. We've been painfully close. And that's something that I think is driving everybody, is we want in to that exclusive club that they are certainly VIPs in.

Q. What do you enjoy about playing Nebraska? And would you call it a rivalry?

DANA RETTKE: Like Kelly said, there really is a genuine level of respect with that team. And with that they played good, hard volleyball. That's exactly the type of team you like to play. We want to play people who give us their best, because we want to play the best. And we see that from Nebraska time in and time out.

So I think, yeah, it's going to be an epic match. And I think just what Kelly said, there's a genuine level of respect for that team. And they're going to fight hard, we're going to fight hard. It's going to be an epic battle for sure. It always has been. Every time we've played them it really has been.

Q. Sydney, you all come back for a moment like this to win tomorrow for sure. But what was the realization that you get to move on to Saturday after such a competitive match? Just take us inside the emotions for yourself yesterday.

SYDNEY HILLEY: I mean, that was one of the most fun matches I've played. It was just good volleyball on both sides. It came down to the wire. Super excited it turned out in our favor, but most of all I was just happy that I get one more game with my best friends to get to ball out in one of the coolest environments ever and just keep balling out.

And I think that's what hit me is I'm not done yet. So it's very exciting.

Q. Dana, what was the reaction like in the locker room and kind of that moment yesterday after sealing your berth into the championship match?

DANA RETTKE: I'm going to go off of Syd and say that was absolutely one of the hardest, grittiest, most exciting matches of volleyball I've ever played. That was just fantastic volleyball. Both sides of that were making crazy digs, crazy swings. You can't ask for anything else in a semifinal match.

And so when we came out with that win against a really, really good team, we were just pumped. Like, I think that's just when you look side to side, and that win was also -- it really sticks out to me because that was such a team effort. Across the board, everybody had something to contribute and everyone made big plays in big moments.

And that's how I felt going into locker room. I was just so proud of the team because everybody did so well. It was such -- the best team-effort win I've ever been at Wisconsin.

So I think there was just a lot of pride and joy for everybody in the locker room from everybody in the locker room. It was so fun to be part of.

Q. Kelly, with your server seam, when you get a good pass, what percentage of the time does Dana get a kill on that pass?

COACH SHEFFIELD: Not enough.

[Laughter].

Probably not true. It's pretty high. But kind of across the board because there's a lot of attention that goes to her as well. And it opens up some other people. We can get you those stats later on if you want some accuracy on it.

But I don't think there was any secret that when we're in system, it's a handful. And what has been really fun is that early on in her career it was -- I keep flashing back to that match at Minnesota when you had maybe your sophomore year or something like 30-some kills -- that was at home? Home against Minnesota. And Barnes won that match.

She had like 30-some kills and hit for a really high percentage and we still lost. And we'd been able to get her some help. And it's not just the Dana Rettke show.

But she draws a lot of attention, a lot of attention, and makes things a little bit easier on some other people to score that gives us the balance that allows us to be pretty good.

But, again, like last night, our ultimate goal isn't to be balanced; it's to find ways to win. So Syd got to a point pretty early on where she wasn't trying to balance the offense. It's like, all right, Anna, you go girl, and we'll feed you every ball.

But Dana, the end goal is to try to find a way to win. And certainly Dana, if you want to go at her one-on-one she's going to make you pay. And if you're going to double or triple up on her, I think we've got some other people that can do the same.

Q. You just practiced with these three for the last time. I know you've always had a big match to prepare for it. But do you find yourself stopping to try to savor moments during this last run?

COACH SHEFFIELD: No, we've got work to do. We'll get in a group hug at a later time.

[Laughter].

But one of the things we've really, really tried to do, we've talked about it quite a bit, is we try to practice gratitude. And it's really tough when you're in a grind and when things -- you're the middle of competition, but going through the season of appreciating what we all have and what we get to do and what we get to be a part of and how many people are supportive of us.

And so we try to recognize that as we have kind of gone through the journey. So doing that right now wouldn't be anything different. Did that flash through my mind a little bit while we were out on the court? Very briefly.

And then it's, like, all right, we've got to find a way to handle the short serve here, come on now.

[Laughter].

We'll get to that point a little bit later.

Q. Five years ago or whatever it was you and Grace played in the UnderArmour together here -- the one that Dana wasn't good enough to get invited to?

SYDNEY HILLEY: Yeah, that's right. Grace actually showed me a Snapchat memory the other day, and we were in the exact same locker room we're in right now. Me and Grace were in there holding up some W's. That was

pretty special.

COACH SHEFFIELD: Epic.

SYDNEY HILLEY: Epic.

[Laughter].

Q. Dana, can I ask you, would you talk about Grace a little bit, as a person and as a player?

DANA RETTKE: Oh, my gosh.

SYDNEY HILLEY: She's right there.

DANA RETTKE: Oh, Gracie. So a little fun fact about Grace and myself. We actually played basketball against each other in eighth grade. That was my first introduction to Grace.

And, wow, we've been through a lot together. Full five years, hung out a lot during club and got to know each other really well. And Gracie is just one of those people that you want to play so well for. She just brings so much energy, so much fire.

Just seeing her improvement this season alone has been incredible. And she's such a huge part of this team. And you see it every day in the gym. She goes in, gets her extra reps, makes sure she's where she wants to be to perform well for this team.

And that's just how Grace is. She's really selfless. She works really hard. And she's just fun to be around. We always joke around and have some fun. But, yeah, I love that girl.

Q. Dana, can you talk about the fact that these two programs probably have the most engaged fan bases in all of women's college volleyball? But this sport being on its biggest stage tomorrow and having these two really passionate fan bases that go back decades for both programs, what do you think that means?

DANA RETTKE: Yeah, I think that it just really shows a dedication to the sport of volleyball and to the two universities. I think it's really special, like you said, probably the most dedicated fan bases in college volleyball. That's pretty rare to have fan bases like us and Nebraska.

We both probably have two of the biggest facilities in the game, and it's packed every night. Probably two of the most fun facilities to play in. Those fans are going to be making their way over here.

So I think that's really special and it's really a testament to how -- it's really a testament to the sport. It's really a testament to the game of volleyball and just how knowledgeable both fan bases are.

I think it's something really special considering that professional volleyball is getting there in the United States. But, yeah, I think it's really cool.

Q. Coach, I asked Coach Cook about this how these two programs have been able to have so much success but also so much passion in their communities. He talked about it being two college towns and everything else. But I wonder what you think goes into that type of passion that Dana was just talking about in Madison as well as in Lincoln?

COACH SHEFFIELD: They've been built from the ground up. I think Terry Pettit put a lot of blood, sweat and tears and just really building not just a team but a program, and did a great job of selling it and getting the -- and showing what is possible to the entire state of Nebraska.

And I think when you've got, here in Wisconsin, I think you really saw a big jump when Steve Lowe got there to Wisconsin. And then John took that to the next level for his years in Madison. And Pete Waite took it to an even further one.

None of that happens without administrative support. It's really, really critical. I think what we've seen is, in both cases, administrations are able to see what is possible with volleyball.

And it is an unbelievable sport, as we all know. And when it's played at the highest level I just don't think there's anything more compelling than that. I think last night was one of the most compelling matches you'll see.

The dance of that match last night, the beginning of it was just two teams, highly, highly offensive at each other. And then the match evolved into unbelievable defense on both sides as both teams were kind of figuring out how to deal with the stress of it. Us dealing with the stress of their speed; them dealing with the stress of our size. And both teams just grinding and going.

And I think you've got coaches, when you're talking about John and Terry on their side and then the coaches that came before me on ours, that have really been able to show that and get an administration and a fan base and the media and the staff and everybody to kind of see what is possible.

And then to see -- we had no West Coast schools in this Final Four. Could you imagine that 10 or 15 years ago, that you've got two ACC schools in the Final Four? That would have been ludicrous, what, three years ago, four years ago. The game is evolving. It's special.

The last time we played each other, Nebraska and us, I think that was the most watched match in BTN history.

And I wouldn't be surprised if tomorrow night isn't the most watched volleyball match in history. I think it's set up to be very compelling.

Q. I'm curious, how do you get yourself in the head space to play a match with the high stakes going into tomorrow; was it certain song you're listening to; something you're eating; spending time by yourself? What are guys doing to prepare?

DANA RETTKE: I don't think this is something you prepare a day for. You have to prepare for it the entire season. I think part of our culture here at Wisconsin is we approach every game the same. We do what we do; we play Badger volleyball. And we know our chances are good if that happens.

Yeah, the stakes are going to be higher tomorrow, but I don't think it really changes anything. We'll go through our routine, game day routines. And we're going to have fun with it too. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, honestly. So I think that's how we're going to prepare, just kind of the same we have for every match.

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