

# 2023 NCAA Women's Volleyball Championship

Wednesday, December 13, 2023

Tampa, Florida, USA

Amalie Arena

**Nebraska Cornhuskers**

**Coach John Cook**

**Merritt Beason**

**Lexi Rodriguez**

**Bergen Reilly**

Press Conference



Make sure we're not taking any of it for granted and enjoying the experience. When it's time to lock in for practice and games we'll lock in.

But we definitely don't want to look back on this experience and regret not taking it all in. That's been a key topic amongst our team, just making sure that we're enjoying the moment and being grateful for the opportunity to be here. And then we'll lock in when we need to be locked in as well.

**Q. Coach and Lexi, when you guys had obviously the big game at Memorial Stadium, that night you guys both talked about a special feeling about this team that early, August 30th. What was it that you saw then and how has that played out if both of you could answer that?**

LEXI RODRIGUEZ: I think this team from day one has been very special for multiple reasons. But there's just so much passion for the sport of volleyball and for the people that we're playing with every single day. And every single day when we're in the gym, everyone just wanted to get better for each other, and it's not something you can find in every team.

I just feel like there hasn't been a single day, a single practice, or a single match where not everyone was just so excited to be playing volleyball with this team, playing for Nebraska.

I just think that day, in Memorial Stadium, it kind of showed that and showed the team we are and how much we love playing together. And ever since then I think it's just grown so much.

COACH COOK: I knew this group was special way before that. This is a great opportunity for me to give credit to Merritt and Lexi being our captains because I think there has to be great leadership for a team to come together and feel comfortable and be themselves and set big goals and dreams. And these guys have done -- they went through a lengthy process they were selected as our captains, and have done an amazing job of leading a very, age-wise, young group.

COACH COOK: This feels like a great environment. Tampa is a cool town. There's four great teams here. The people here have been awesome. I feel like every year the Final Four, they're just doing a better job of making this a really special event. So compliments to the NCAA and the people of Tampa here. This has been a first-class deal. And it seems like everybody's really excited that Nebraska is here, and we feel it.

**Q. Bergen, it's a business trip. But how do you balance the fact that you're playing in the Final Four, dream come true, with still gotta win two games?**

BERGEN REILLY: I mean, especially days like today, we're really just taking in the experience and just trying to have fun with it. But, yeah, we came down here to get a national championship. So it's a hard balance and we're working on that still. But today's been a lot of fun. We're just trying to take it all in.

LEXI RODRIGUEZ: I would agree with what Bergen said. I believe with some of the big matches we played this year, we've had a little bit of experience with balancing the media part of it along with the business and getting-the-job-done part of it.

We played in Memorial Stadium, which had a lot of publicity and media around it. And I feel they prepared us for -- that match prepared us to be down here in Tampa and to just take it all in and also to be prepared for the game.

MERRITT BEASON: They pretty much covered it, but I would say for sure we're just making sure we take it all in.

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Playing-wise we're experienced, but age-wise we're young. And pretty much almost half our team's new from last year.

I think it's a great credit to them building the relationships that are needed to have a team that can get to this point and have the season that we've had. So that's where I think a lot of the credit goes.

**Q. Bergen, we talked earlier in the year playing in non-volleyball arenas you specifically as a center. What was your first impression and what's your opinion of Amalie and how you fit in with that practice?**

BERGEN REILLY: We had a good practice today. It's a huge arena, and obviously, we're getting that depth perception down. Coach said this was one of the best pre-Final Four practices he's ever seen. So we're locked in. We've got it all figured out. Just hoping to get better every day.

**Q. How often have you said that in your Final Fours?**

COACH COOK: First time ever. Seriously. Seriously. I could give you history lessons here and years. I don't forget any of it. But, no, you guys have brought up a great point. There's so much going on here and it's gotten more every year.

It is hard to stay focused in why we're here. But these guys had to get up this morning, get ready for all this, go to a morning practice. We don't practice in the mornings, and we're the first practice. They came in and took care of business. But they've been doing it all year. So I was not surprised. Sometimes they deserve a compliment.

**Q. You mentioned at the outset the reception and being greeted here. You've done this several times in a lot of different cities. What stood out to you last night about the reception? And just from what you can see, how the players are going to be treated, what do you think about the student-athlete experience that's going to happen here beyond the matches?**

COACH COOK: What stood out to me was, you can tell Tampa's put on events. They know what they're doing here. It's very organized. The communication, the people -- hey, we're in charge, we're taking care of this.

Just getting off our plane last night, there's a band, Club Kids are there, starting there, it's been nonstop. And of course in this arena and our hotel, it's just first class. And you just get a feeling.

And I've been to other places where maybe they haven't put on a Final Four before or something like that. But you can tell the people here are used to having great events and they're pretty fired up about it. That stood out to me right away.

**Q. Merritt, you were a good player when you got to Nebraska but I think you'd agree you're much better than you were. Were there any key things along the way, maybe coaching, circumstances, things you did that made you improve so much?**

MERRITT BEASON: I think since I've been at Nebraska, every area of my game has improved a ton. I think the biggest thing that's helped me is the relationships that I have with each of my coaches. And I think that's bled into the way that I'm able to play on the court.

So I know that I have a really good relationship with each of our coaches and all of our staff. And that helps me be myself and play like me. But I think every single area of my game has grown -- hitting, block, defense, serve-serve, especially serving -- every single day, Coach is pushing us and all the staff is pushing us.

And I think I've been pushed in a lot of ways that I wasn't pushed before, and that's increased my games in tons of way.

I would say both physically, like, volleyball skill wise, but also mentally and emotionally I've been able to develop into the player that I want to play like here.

**Q. I know you've been asked about the game at Memorial Stadium a zillion times, but a lot of people in Tampa might not know about that. What did that mean for you, and what did it say about the growth of this sport as a whole?**

COACH COOK: That's a really good question. I still don't know -- by the way, do you know Tom Brady? Okay, good, because I know some of our players cruised by his house, they were down here in the summer. So Tampa Bay Times, I figured you might know him. And Lavonte Davis is a Nebraska guy, too. Great player.

Anyway, sorry I got sidetracked there but I love Tampa Bay football.

Okay, the stadium match. It's still hard to put into words what happened that night. I mean, it was almost mystical in a way. And no one ever expected that would happen.

But I think it was a defining moment for women's sports, very comparable to 1999 when women's soccer won that

great soccer match. I just think it's elevated the sport of women's volleyball. It's created an interest, and it's been not just in Nebraska it's been across the country.

So I think it was the defining moment in the history of women's sports. The fact that it took place in Lincoln, Nebraska, still people probably can't believe it. But I just see everywhere where we go people just want to be around our team and want pictures, autographs, those things. I've never seen it like that before in my years at Nebraska.

I think it was a magical moment that people still have not forgotten about.

**Q. After that elite match you said you were kind of in shock. I guess now that you've had time to reflect, what feels significant about the season that you've had to get to the Final Four?**

COACH COOK: Well, the hardest match to win is that regional final, and I've always believed that. There's a lot of pressure. You're so close to this unbelievable goal of going to the Final Four.

But this group has really blossomed and played their best in the biggest moments and in the biggest points. And it's not anything we're doing different. It's just the belief in the relationships that they have and the trust that they have. And it's a group of people all working together to try to get it done.

And they're very competitive. Like I said, like Lexi told me, stadium night, just try to soak it all in, Coach. So I'm trying to soak it all in.

**Q. Those of us from the state of Florida have known for decades, really, through bowl games of what the state teams playing, Nebraska, what this is like, the fans and the following that you have. Now it's in volleyball as well. What is it about Nebraska? What is it about this fan base? What is it about the pride of everybody that's involved? If I could ask Lexi to chime in, too, her reaction to the following that you have.**

COACH COOK: The way I've always answered that is we have no pro sports, really, in Nebraska. And, of course, Coach Pettit decided to build off of Nebraska football at the time they were having a lot of success. So having matches after football games because the coliseum where we used to play used to be right next to the football stadium.

All of a sudden this football and volleyball kind of became synonymous, together, in Nebraska. And then in 2001 we said we're going to get a sell-out streak going in volleyball.

We sold out every match in 2001 because football had this thing I kept hearing about. So I was, like, why can't we do it?

I think Nebraska's had some great small-town -- Jordan Larson is here from Hooper, Nebraska, a one stop-light town. She's now considered maybe the greatest player in the history of volleyball in this country, female. There's been a lot of things that have happened and great stories that have built this relationship.

And I think the other thing we do, the players, people want to be around these players, and we do things like we went to Central City, Nebraska last year and played a spring match. To them, Central City, that's like a Super Bowl for them. It's like a Final Four for Tampa here, even though it's a small, little town. We do that every year to help build the connection with the state of Nebraska.

LEXI RODRIGUEZ: I think you pretty much hit it all.

I mean, it's awesome. We're super grateful for all of Husker Nation. They show up where we're at. They will be here in Tampa and they always support us and help us when we're at home games. And it's awesome.

And, like Coach said, we always get opportunities to kind of interact and give back to them. I think that's something that they really enjoy. And that's something special that they'll remember, and it kind of allows them to just be so supportive of us every single year.

**Q. You have an uncanny record this year with challenges. It's just amazing. Can you talk about that, how that's unfolded and except for very few instances not been right?**

COACH COOK: Purdue, I think, is a world record for challenges. I think we went nine in a row or something. It's Jaylen, Jaylen is back there. The guy's got a hawk-eye system in his brain and eyes. He sees everything. So I just listen to them.

And the one player I trust is Merritt. Merritt's always right. I always look to Merritt. Jaylen and Merritt are the ones who get the credit. I just pick up the green card.

**Q. Conversely, though, during all those challenges there's a couple of weeks of your life you can't get back because of how long they take. How do you address that? What do we have to do in the sport?**

COACH COOK: Well, we need to go to the same video systems that football and basketball have, and international football, which would be the Hawk-Eye. Of course that's

going to be an investment. But those setups take care of it. It's instant as you see internationally.

I think there's one message that has to come out of college volleyball now, we have to speed the game up. We can't have these three-and-a-half-hour matches like the other night out at Stanford. We've got to speed it up.

We've got to get rid of timeouts, go to what international is doing. International volleyball is moving really quickly, and part is there's all kinds -- some of those they don't have linespeople anymore; they just go to the camera system. The ref looks, great, in or out, let's go. I think that's the next evolution.

Now there's going to have to be a financial commitment to that. We actually tried to buy a Hawk-Eye system when the USA team came to Omaha. They were going to sell it to us. But the Big Ten said no because they didn't want us having something different than everybody else.

**Q. Coach, you've played Pitt on this stage before two years ago. Obviously a different team now. So what challenges does this team pose to you guys?**

COACH COOK: Well, are you a Pittsburgh Steeler fan? Okay. Okay. All right. Pittsburgh's had some great football teams. But their volleyball team is very athletic. They're very well coached. This is their third Final Four in a row. Coach Fisher has figured a way to get that team there.

They've rebuilt through the transfer portal. He has two fabulous freshmen. And he's been able to recruit the whole country. And they're playing at a really high level. Statistically, they're one of the top teams in all categories. It's not just one or two. They're up there everywhere.

They've done a great job. And it's going to be a great challenge.

**Q. When you played Arkansas, you said it took you a while to adjust to what they were doing offensively. With Pittsburgh, is there anything that you think will take you a while to adjust to that you can't know until you see it live?**

COACH COOK: Maybe their physicality, but we've seen a lot of that. Obviously Arkansas wasn't that physical. So they played a different style. Pittsburgh's playing a system like we're playing. And they're going to hit the ball hard and they're physical.

So I don't think it's any different. It's just they're playing at a really high level.

**Q. Merritt, you played under Dan Fisher and also with Rachel Fairbanks at the U.S. Pan Am World Cup in 2022 and played against them in Wisconsin for Florida. What's it mean to be playing against Dan and Rachel again? And what was the experience like playing with them back last June?**

MERRITT BEASON: I loved playing for Coach Dan. He was one of the few coaches that I could instantly click with in a very short amount of time. That was really, really cool. He was very good about building relationships and being very personable, even in a very short amount of time. That stood out a lot about him. And he pushed us and I loved playing for him.

And Rachel, she's one of a kind. She's hilarious and a great person. And I absolutely loved playing with her. They're both great people. Rachel's obviously a great setter. So I'm excited to see them again and to be able to play them and kind of get another rematch like last year and kind of have another chance at that.

But, like Coach said, they're a great team. They're going to challenge us and push us. We have to be ready for that. I think it will be a really good match. We are very similar in a lot of ways in the style of how we play. So I think it will be a fun match.

**Q. Coach and Bergen, are freshmen more prepared than ever to play at the college level? If so, why? Bergen, could you talk about being prepared to step into the role you've stepped into as a freshman?**

COACH COOK: Good question. Bergen, what do you think?

BERGEN REILLY: I think that we're all very ready for this. All five freshmen have been working since January, since day one, to get to this point. And every single day we've come in and we've worked our butts off to get here. So we're prepared.

We've had a lot of learning to do, obviously. So we've had to lean on some of the older girls. But we're prepared. We're ready, and we've had a lot of big moments behind us this season, too. So this is another big game and we're excited for it and we're just ready to go get after it.

COACH COOK: I think to answer your question, you're talking about freshmen in general? Yeah.

**Q. (Inaudible).**

COACH COOK: Yeah.



**Q. If you could put it in that perspective more historically, if they're more prepared, better?**

COACH COOK: They are definitely more prepared to play high-level volleyball because the club system has gotten so good across the country. Bergen is from Sioux Falls, South Dakota. And I remember her club coach who started a club program up there, I'm going to say Bergen was probably in about third grade, and I went up there and helped him do his first clinic. And now he's built this club program that can produce a player like her.

Lexi is from a small town on the Iowa-Illinois border. Merritt is from somewhere in Alabama, I don't know.

You watch club volleyball now, there's not just one or two teams that are dominating. There's great teams all across the country. I think that's really helped prepare them to transition to college. Yes, that's where I would give it the credit.

**Q. As you kind of look back on your journey to get to this point, are there any matches, moments along the way that stand out as particularly significant or memorable that helped you get to this point?**

MERRITT BEASON: I think there's two that stand out for me, I would say. The Stanford match was a really big test for us. And I think that match kind of showed us a lot about who we are as a team.

And I think after that match we were all just kind of like, oh, we are really good. So I think that was a very big telling factor for us.

I think also the Penn State match was huge for us being down 0-2 and figuring out a way to rally in a very, very tough environment. That was an environment that most of us had never played in before. So I think that match also taught us a lot about ourselves and how we were going to be as a team.

So for me these two would be the biggest.

**Q. Coach, since your only loss, you haven't been pushed to five games, are you peaking now? The second part, not having the pressure of being undefeated, does that help?**

COACH COOK: We have two sayings, to answer your question: One, the game has no memory. We're not worried about what happened, whether we went five. Yesterday's in the history books. And I think the other thing is that this team's done a great job of focusing on is

that we're just worrying about winning the next point. We don't care about records. We don't care anything about it. They've done an amazing job with that. We've put the systems in place. They've really committed to it. We don't worry about any of that stuff.

**Q. Lexi, that arrival last night, I guess kind of step by step from when you get off the airplane, what all did you see and experience, and what did that feel like?**

LEXI RODRIGUEZ: I think as soon as we landed and they were pulling the plane around, we saw, like, a big group of people. We're all, like, oh, my gosh is that for us. They let us off and there's a lot of people. They were giving us waters and beads and sunglasses and everything. Just really welcoming us into Tampa. And then they kind of gave us a little -- they introduced us, let us take some pictures. It was just super -- it was a super warm welcome and it kind of set us into what this was going to be like and how much media there is but also how much support we're going to get. So it was pretty special to get that as soon as we landed.

**Q. Coach, obviously you have bigger fish to fry with Pittsburgh, but if you had to venture a guess, with all these Husker fans that are going to be here, who are they going to root for in the late match? You have Wisconsin and you have Texas.**

COACH COOK: I think what will happen is all the fans are going to stay, watch both matches. Doesn't matter who they're rooting for. And that was one of the cool things about our regional: People stayed to watch the next match. And I was surprised how many people were there.

Again, I think volleyball fans are just going to be in store for two great matches.

**Q. Looking at opponents' defense hitting percentage, you're number one in the country. Pitt is number two in the country. The top two defenses in the country against each other tomorrow. Can you talk about your defense? What makes it so good? What have you noticed about Pitt's defense and how do you hope to attack that offensively?**

COACH COOK: I think both teams have made a commitment to that being a strength of theirs. Both teams are really well coached and really well prepared. And they're disciplined teams. So defense, a lot of it is being prepared and having a great mindset of what we want to do.

And obviously both teams are at the top in the country in that. Means probably both teams are will hit .400 tomorrow



night.

**Q. Have you set up a situation so Bud can watch?**

COACH COOK: That's a good question. I'll answer that by -- Bud wants to see a crocodile. We haven't seen one yet. That's what I've been looking for. We've got water right outside our hotel. But I've been looking for the crocs out there. Or, alligators. Sorry. Now I'm really a Floridian. My roping buddies will be watching, though, I can tell you that.

**Q. Nebraska's last two Final Four setters are on your coaching staff. What have Kelly and (indiscernible) meant to you and how have they helped you round out your game?**

BERGEN REILLY: They've been huge for me, coming in as a freshman and taking over the offense, just having their experience behind me has been huge and giving me a lot of confidence, knowing that they have belief and trust in me has just helped me have trust in myself. So they're two amazing setters and they're two amazing coaches. So that's just helped me immensely throughout the season.

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