

2023 NCAA Women's Volleyball Championship

Wednesday, December 13, 2023

Tampa, Florida, USA

Amalie Arena

Texas Longhorns

Coach Jerritt Elliott

Madisen Skinner

Asjia O'Neal

Press Conference



Where the sport has grown is tremendous. I still think that 2009 is one of the best finals in the history of all volleyball, people who watched that. It was a back and forth battle, probably the toughest loss we've ever had, losing 16-14 after being up 2-0 to a Penn State team that had won 111 in a row.

I'm excited to be back, and it's just a wonderful city.

COACH ELLIOTT: Extremely excited to be back at the Final Four. I'm proud of the process this team went through. And just, as a coach, you coach for your players, and to see the joy they have on their faces and to be able to extend the time we have with them is super special to me, super special to our coaches and the university.

And we take a lot of pride representing Texas and we're excited for a great venue. Tampa Bay has already shown us a lot of love and welcoming. And it just means so much to be a part of this Final Four because it's something we never take for granted.

Q. You were here in 2009, and the event has obviously grown, as has the city. First of all, what did you think of the reception last night? If you think back from then to now, what kind of different experience is this for the athletes?

COACH ELLIOTT: I mean, I think Tampa should be hosting it every single year. I think they get super excited about it. I think it's a great location for weather. And for our players and our coaches and our administration to kind of walk off the plane last night and see that welcoming party was super special.

It means a lot to me to show that our team and our sport means a lot, that our players mean a lot to these young athletes and that they get to look up to them. It was a wonderful welcoming.

They topped it off with that, when we get back to the hotel there's a huge band welcoming us and a nice little speech and just a lot of special moments that they've already shown us.

Q. You guys are markedly better the last few weeks than the previous part of the season. Was there a turning point? Anything in particular that you can put your hands on, not you two individually, I mean the Texas team?

ASJIA O'NEAL: I just think we just stayed really committed to getting better. We knew we wanted to peak in December not September or October. We just really kept working hard in the gym and knew that eventually it's all going to click.

Like you said, lately it's been really clicking for us. I think it goes to show how committed our coaches are to staying on us and staying confident in our abilities and then with one another.

We haven't had any doubt or stress in our minds throughout the whole year. We knew that everyone here is capable of doing their job. So just staying strong with the process and it got us here.

MADISEN SKINNER: Spot on. I would just say just trusting in our training and trusting all the practices and all the things that we were doing behind the scenes from our nutrition to our sleep to all the crucial things that play a role that are off the court, just keep trusting the process and staying committed to what we were trying to accomplish. And just being the best we can every single day and growing our connection on and off the court and our chemistry.

It's paying off, obviously. Like Asjia said, we're peaking right now. It's a great feeling knowing our hard work is paying off. Still a long way to go, but it's exciting for sure.



Q. As much experience as you two have, how have you helped Ella come along as a young setter and the way that that is a mentorship, I think, that you guys both have with her?

ASJIA O'NEAL: Really just emphasizing with her that nothing needs to be perfect. I know coming into this program as a freshman, trying to run the offense is a really daunting task to do. And I know she feels pressure on herself to do all these incredible things.

I think we've done a good job just having good dialogue and feedback, that knowing that no one's expecting you to be playing at this, like, 1,000 percent level and doing everything perfect all the time because that's not expected from anyone.

But I think Ella and I have had really good feedback loop, like the middle-setter connection is obviously really important. And that wasn't where we wanted it to be at the beginning of the year. But we spent a lot of time in positionals, just working on that connection with one another. I think we found a way to properly communicate with one another and know what each person needs, whether it's feedback or asking questions.

Like Madi said, we've been fostering our relationships off the court as well. So throughout the season we've just gotten a lot closer and been able to have that positive feedback loop with one another.

COACH ELLIOTT: The maturity, you see the people sitting up here, the quality people they are, when you have a young setter there's a lot of frustrations early on. You could never see it from the way they wore it on the sleeve, the way they talked to Ella. They were always in her corner supporting her and just telling her that it was going to get to this point.

They could have ruined her confidence early on, but because of the women they are, they just were such good teammates and added to her confidence and gave her a lot of good things to think about.

Q. When you have a moment like your team had in the region semifinals where you're facing a match point and the end could be right there, and you get out of it, and you come to a place like this, what does it do to your team to confront the end face to face and push through and here you are?

MADISEN SKINNER: We talk about confidence all the time. And you never want to walk into a match or be in the middle of a set expecting yourself to lose. So we all just looked each other in the eye and we're winning this thing,

we're taking this set and there's no other option.

I think everyone was kind of bought in to that common idea and just found another gear, to be honest, just found another level of confidence and just energy and momentum on our side.

So I would just say we all believed from the get-go. And it's exciting to be here. But there wasn't a doubt in our mind that we had the capability of just taking it. And obviously it took a lot of energy and investment over time, but we just had confidence in one another in what we had trained for so long and all the work that we've put in up to this point.

Q. I realize it's not like you have players who are short, but how do you get your team ready to play against 6'9" and 6'7"?

COACH ELLIOTT: Well, I think we have a super competitive gym. We see big blocks in our gym all the time. Obviously Wisconsin is really big.

And one of the things we have is super dynamic athletes. We have our own physicality. We have our own speed and things we can do.

It's part of the fun match-ups. It's always trying to figure out the puzzle of how to beat teams. Some teams are super fast. Some teams are a little bit bigger. It's the component that we'll have to figure out.

But we have a great coaching staff who can get them ready. I think our players in this great mindset right now. I think they have a little chip on their shoulder to go out and find a way to make that happen.

Q. Madisen, with all the pomp and circumstances surrounding the trip, it's still a business trip. You've got to win two games. How do you balance something that you really want to remember with, let's remember what we're here for?

MADISEN SKINNER: I mean, it helps having experience. I mean, I've been here a couple times. So it's funny because one of my teammates were, like, you're so calm literally walking in here. I am, like, yeah.

But it's exciting, but it's nothing new. You've got to find the balance of just enjoying in the process and finding joy in it and also knowing that we're here for business and don't want to walk home empty handed.

It's going to be a challenge for our underclassmen and for people who have never been here, but it's exciting to

embrace all of this and celebrate all of our hard work up to this point. It's a mindset thing and just lock in for the rest of the trip.

ASJIA O'NEAL: I agree, it's definitely a mindset thing. And I also realized every Final Four you've gone to I've gone to, too. That's fun, that's cute.

We've been here a couple times but I'm the type of person when we're off I want to enjoy the moments and be here with my teammates because my college year is almost coming to an end at this point.

But when we're on, we're on. And I think we have a good mindset switch as a team in general. You want to enjoy the moments, but when it's time to practice or it's game time we're in it and all the other stuff is just out the door.

Q. Coach talking about puzzle pieces, trying to beat teams, what have been the biggest puzzle pieces for you this year that you hope to see over the next couple days?

COACH ELLIOTT: Well, I think it's, our process has been slower than normal. I think we started off the season 5-3. And now we're 20-1 in the last -- close to that.

One was getting healthy. One was developing Ella to be able to set different kind of balls and get our systematic approach a lot better to strategically take advantage of match-ups we have or things we wanted to do.

And third was the confidence of our players being stick together. All this stuff you guys are talking about starts in the practice gym. And it starts with players that are not even starting on our team, that have just been showing up every single day and putting stress on our team every moment.

And the confidence from winning these games or where we're at is all developed in the practice gym. And this team is not a team -- I've had teams where they may constant decisions not to compete, constant decisions not to go for balls.

So when we're in the crunch times -- and we've had it; we were down 24-19 to Baylor, we've been way down at TCU and kind of down and out. We've had a lot of times where we've been in situations where it's been really uncomfortable.

But you could see the fight that we had, even though the Tennessee match in my mind was pretty ugly. It got pretty ugly after the first set. And we just kind of found ways to kind of stick together and play.

So you don't need to play perfect to win a national championship. You've got to be good enough that night. You've got to find the grit and you've got to find ways to win.

When we were down and out at Tennessee, we found a way to be able to do that. And that says a lot about these women and the trust they have and the trust in the system. And the next night was a lot smoother for us in terms of our confidence level.

Typically we've played better when we play big-name T-shirt teams like a Wisconsin or Penn State or Stanford or Nebraska. It's a lot easier to go into those matches.

Q. The Big 12 has evolved quite a bit since you've been in that chair. What kind of an impact has that had on getting to this stage in terms of being more spread out and bigger names and kind of challenges throughout the season?

COACH ELLIOTT: I've got really fond memories and great things to say about the Big 12. It's been a big part of my life and my career. To see it evolve with BYU and some of those teams, the competition is always great.

I think you're seeing it across every big conference, it just gets better and better.

As a coach you don't want to be in stressful situations but you do. So you need to go through that fire a little bit to understand your team, understand that makeup.

And, again, this season was really up and down for us. But they stuck the course. We've seen their confidence. You know a lot about that when you're calling timeouts and how they're behaving on the bench. So their calmness in these situations, you can see they're confident in what they're doing, they believe in each other.

We haven't always had that as a program. But this year we can see definitely that's continued in the program, and they've embraced the big-time environment.

Q. Asjia, when you watch film on Anna Smrek, I'd love to hear your thoughts on her, any familiarities you see in her style of play, and maybe any differences between you and her as well?

ASJIA O'NEAL: Obviously she's a lot bigger than I am, a lot taller. But I think just with them and their whole entire team, like Jerritt said, they're a large block. But we have a really large block in our practice gym every single day. And I think just how dynamic all of our players are that

we're able to find ways around that and aren't going to get frustrated.

So it will be really fun to see because those are two really good defensive blocking teams.

But not really anything specifically to say about her as a player or person, but I think we're well prepared and the coaches are going to do a great job today in practice and in our film session giving us ways to fight our way around the block.

Q. You've been a part of a lot of Final Four fields and have seen a lot. When you look at this year, three number one regional seeds, and you're the outlier, you're the defending national champions. Is this as about as quality a field as you've seen for this event on paper?

COACH ELLIOTT: Even as a tournament, as a whole, it's been super competitive. I think this year obviously it's a little bit different for us. Last year all the expectations were Texas, Texas, Texas, and that was the talk. Now no one's picking us.

So it's a different role for our team, but we feel like we have a really good team right now and we can go execute at a high level and we have confidence in what we can do. That's all that matters, the 18 people we're taking to go to battle with.

I think any team can come out of this with a victory for sure. And I have confidence in what our team's doing.

Q. You challenged or you had a challenge and a replay last week, and the decision might come down any minute now. It takes really long. What are your thoughts about the replay and the challenge and what has to happen?

COACH ELLIOTT: I think, I was a big part of the challenge system coming into play. I think it all happened when we played BYU back in 2015 or '16, and they hit a ball out and it cost the match.

I think getting the replay system in place was a big component for our sport. But the growth of where the sport is going, what TV needs to see, it needs to change. There needs to be some responsibility to be able to put the best effort to be able to showcase this game and also to be able to give teams the best shot of being able to this.

Internationally there are not even line judges anymore. The replays only take 15 seconds. The graphics are a lot better. It's part of the evolution of the sport.

So I've been talking obviously to ESPN and other places. I'm super excited that when we moved to the SEC there's going to be a new system there that's in place that should be pretty good.

But there's some urgency behind it for sure because it's really hard to see and it's really unfair to the referees and announcers because they're sitting there from anywhere from 2 to 5 minutes to try to figure out what the best camera angle is.

Q. What's the most difficult part of having a freshman setter? And what's been the most rewarding part of having that?

COACH ELLIOTT: I think Ella came in obviously with a lot of accolades, but she puts a lot of pressure on herself. If you came to our practice gym or saw Ella play, you can never see whether she's playing good or playing bad.

I think Asjia hit on it, she's put a tremendous amount of pressure on herself to be a quarterback. To be at Texas there's a lot of pressure being an athlete with the fans and things that go on with the media. For us it's been desensitizing that a lot.

I talked to her mom and I talked to her. And they're like, how perfect does she have to be. I'm, like, she's not going to be perfect. We expect her to set 60 to 70 percent of the balls good. There's going to be 30, 40 percent of the time it's not. Our hitters will be able to find that out.

A lot for me has been desensitizing her; we'll catch her when she falls. It's can you be good with the process, can you be good with the next point and eliminate that thought process.

So when things get stressful it's always hard for a quarterback to be able to do. But watching her set in practice I was just like she's grown so much and developed so much in what she's doing.

And you got to see it on display biggest match of her career at Stanford on the road, being able to set Asjia the way she did and being able to get Madisen the ball and find the right swings has been pretty impressive.

Q. Anything that Wisconsin does that will take a couple minutes to acclimate to that you're kind of expecting, yeah, we'll just see how that plays out?

COACH ELLIOTT: I think there's super efficient in system, out of system. They're super efficient as a blocking team. We've been blocked a lot this year. So it's not something

that's new.

We've just got to make sure we're taking care of each other, making good decisions and when those decisions need to be made. There will be times and situations where our outside hitters do not get a good ball. Are they going to close their eyes and blast, or are they going to find ways to swing and hit the edges?

We train every single day of trying to hit edges and flat hands and mix the game up a little more. It's something where we're trying to find space and do that. You can negate a lot of that by passing well and controlling the ball well and controlling the ball from the defensive side off the block.

I thought that's what we did really well against Stanford. We got a lot of quality touches and we were able to transition back and put pressure on teams.

So yeah, just like any other match. It's going to be a big match against -- we told our team, every round you go it's a little bigger, faster, better. So they've been in these situations. They've been in the pressure situations. And we're here to have a lot of fun and go out and compete and do it when the time is ready.

Q. Your last loss was early November. Are you starting to peak now? And the fact that you had to go five sets to beat Tennessee and you won the national championship last year, are you battle tested that way?

COACH ELLIOTT: Well, I think battle tested is a really good question. I think I stated on it earlier, how do you deal in adverse situations when things aren't going well.

We've got a lot of experience. We've got great leadership sitting up here and being able to give that confidence to our younger players. And we've been here before.

So I like the way we played against Stanford. I think when we have our emotions in the right place we're able to execute and do the things that we can.

But it's going to be a battle. It's going to back and forth. There's going to be momentum changes. And can our process be good enough to sustain that?

I believe we are in the right mindset right now. I have a lot of confidence in what we're doing. These two are playing tremendously well.

Molly, who doesn't get a lot of attention, is a really good volleyball player and her numbers are starting to go up and

we're starting to evolve our middle. So we've got a lot of different keys we can do. We've got to serve and pass well and take advantage of that.

Q. If you had to guess, who do you think Nebraska fans are going to root for in your match?

COACH ELLIOTT: That's a great question. Whoever the winner is of that is probably going to cheer for us. You always cheer for the underdog.

Again, we're embracing that. It's nice to not be in the front. Last year it was a lot of stress with the expectations of trying to win that. And now we can go out and be Texas and compete and have a little bit of grit to do that. I'd love for them to cheer for us.

Q. It's the end of an era in terms of Texas and the Big 12 and everything you've meant to that conference volleyball-wise. I know you've known it for a while, the move, but how do you think that's going to change next year when you consider you're going to have Stanford in the ACC. You're going to have UCLA and USC in the Big Ten? These conferences have been so successful, are going to get even more powerful in some ways.

COACH ELLIOTT: It's really fun to think about the SEC being good in volleyball and where the sport has come. When I started in 2000, the south didn't really exist in volleyball. Now that's really starting to come along.

But I've learned really fast that I wake up and check the news and see what conference we're going to be in and how things are changing, what's the evolution of sport and all this stuff with NIL.

So it's always changing. I would imagine that right now my goal is to be an influence on the SEC to really promote this sport. Obviously women's basketball is having a lot of success. And I love it.

I think there's two sports we can really celebrate and get behind to be able to do that. We need women's basketball to be good. We need women's volleyball to be good. And I think we're joining, at least in my mind, we want to join hands with them to let people know how great women's sports are. And I think there's a lot of men now that are willing to sit in front of TVs and watch the entertainment that comes from these incredible athletes.

So it's now getting the SEC and the other conferences to really kind of get behind it and continue to do what they're doing. I feel confident about where we can head with this and where the sport is heading. Thanks to you guys for all

the publicity you're doing in promoting and growing the game. When you see this game live, watching these guys jump and the speed of it, it's pretty phenomenal.

Q. Have you spoken at all to Jenna Wenaas about her experiences playing against Wisconsin while she was at Minnesota?

MADISEN SKINNER: We briefly chatted about it, because we both played them in previous years. She didn't mention too much other than it's a big block, obviously, and she's excited to hit against it. Same for me. I'm like I'll be swinging for shots maybe I don't regularly swing for. I'm excited. It going to be a new challenge for us, going to grow us not only right now but if we play pro in the future.

We briefly chatted about it. Can't give away all of our secrets, but we're super excited and pumped up.

Q. Asjia, some commentators have called you the slide queen. I want to ask you about the slide, how valuable it is to your team's offense, to your toolbox. Madisen, when that's running, how it opens up everything else for the offense?

ASJIA O'NEAL: I think it is very valuable for our team, especially like in our two-hitter rows, we're able to spread the offense more and the block has to make the decision if they're just going to try to stay neutral or try to cheat one way or the other. Once we get that going, it opens it for our pen so they're not sitting there with a huge double block waiting for them.

That was our main goal with me and Ella for most of the season was getting our connection going because we knew we could be really terminal there. And we've worked a lot on it, and I feel like our range right now with the slide is really good, even running the A or B a little tighter to the setter. I think it's been really helpful for our pens. What do you think, Madisen?

MADISEN SKINNER: It's been incredible. You have to respect the slide queen. You can't just dip out to the outside. If you do, then, like, be my guest.

But, I mean, it opens so much for us and there's a lot of teams like "slide, slide, slide." I'm like, all right, great, they're going to the slide, I have free range on 1-v-1.

The connection with them, too, it's grown so much. And obviously it's confidence for them. But it gives our team having so confidence knowing we'll have more space and more opportunities to hit different shots and whatnot. It's great.

COACH ELLIOTT: I think we need a T-shirt that says "Respect the slide queen."

MADISEN SKINNER: I know. Give me my credit, guys.

Q. Tampa has hosted lately the NCAA football final, two Frozen Fours and a women's basketball championship and there hasn't been an empty seat. You're going to come out tomorrow night and there's going to be 21,000 screaming fans. What's that emotion going to be for you?

COACH ELLIOTT: For me, it's about seeing where this sport has come. That's where I look at it because I've been around for a long time. But where this sport's come, how big it's growing is so much fun.

If you look at Texas and the way that we travel, it's pretty crazy. We went to Houston. We set the all time attendance record for a woman's sport. A couple of weeks later we went to TCU, did the same thing. We're used to playing in big crowds. Stanford is probably one of the ones we're not used to playing in because we draw so well.

And it's awesome to be here in Tampa. We hope the fans get behind us, and we're really excited to see 21,000, what an amazing accomplishment for where this sport has grown and thanking all the former coaches and players that have come before this group to establish that -- and the media.

MADISEN SKINNER: It's incredible. I mean, watching national championships in big matches growing up and just seeing how many more people come out to support and just the viewership online and people watching at home is awesome.

The energy is unmatched. I think people underestimate how much we feed off of that. And we hear everyone in the crowd screaming for us. And Greg is an awesome place to play. It's super loud, and the environment is really feisty and fun.

It's really great for the sport and it's inspiring. And I'm excited to see how much more it's going to grow in the future. It's exciting, for sure.

ASJIA O'NEAL: I really love playing in really loud, packed environments, whether they're for us or against us; it really gets me going. I'm really excited for that tomorrow.

I've been in college six years now, and just seeing where the sport's gone from 2018 to now is so incredible. I'm sad I'm leaving when it's getting really crazy, but it just goes to show that everyone behind the scenes and involved is

doing to make sure our sport keeps growing. So hoping for many, many more sold-out Final Fours.

COACH ELLIOTT: I think the numbers speak for themselves. You can see it continue to grow. It's a matter of getting people behind it and keep pushing it and keep growing it and be committed to it.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

