

2023 NCAA Women's Volleyball Championship

Friday, December 15, 2023

Tampa, Florida, USA

Amalie Arena

Nebraska Cornhuskers

John Cook

Merritt Beason

Lexi Rodriguez

Bergen Reilly

Championship Press Conference



have gotten better, and there's more players across the country, and the competition for them is great.

Q. And Bergen, I understand you know Ella. I'm wondering what's y'all's relationship like? What do you like about her game? And for you, what was kind of the biggest adjustment you had to make to playing with these ladies in the college game?

BERGEN REILLY: Me and Ella have played together in the USA gym. We got to be good friends. She's a great setter. So it will be a good test for us tomorrow.

Yeah, the biggest change coming into college, I would just say, is the speed of the game. Coming from club and high school, it's a whole different game into college. That was a big adjustment to make, especially as a setter.

But it went pretty seamless, and everyone around me kind of helped me to adjust.

Q. Bergen, when you got to Nebraska and all of you came in early, did you get any specific advice on how to do things and the way things should be? Mostly, I guess, from Lexi and Ally, the old ladies of the team. You're a freshman. Do it this way.

BERGEN REILLY: I don't really think it was like that. It was kind of just learning by example. So we kind of just always had eyes on them, and they did a great job of showing us how things were done.

But I don't know if we ever really had those conversations of this is how it's done, especially for freshmen. We just kind of watched them. We followed what they did, and they just kind of prepared us as well.

Q. Lexi, even Merritt coming in as a new player, was there anything like you guys had to say this is the Nebraska way, so to speak?

LEXI RODRIGUEZ: Not specifically. I feel like we had a lot of team meetings just talking about culture and how we want to be as a team, but I feel like they have all been on big stages, and they kind of knew what it was going to take

THE MODERATOR: From Nebraska we have head coach John Cook. Our student-athletes are Merritt Beason, Lexi Rodriguez, and Bergen Reilly. Coach, we'll ask for your opening thoughts, please.

JOHN COOK: What is today, Friday? We've got a couple days to go here. We've got a nice practice and get moving and had a fun All-American banquet today. Working on prep for Sunday.

Q. Both head coaches are from California. Coincidence, do you think?

JOHN COOK: I have no idea. I'm a Nebraskan now. You can even ask the Governor. He says I'm a Nebraskan. So's our AD. So I'm a Nebraskan.

Q. Coach, Bergen and then Swindle for Texas, two freshmen in the championship game. Are you seeing young setters come out of high school and club more prepared for college these days, or do you think these two are kind of the exceptions to the rule? Then I'll ask a follow-up to Bergen.

JOHN COOK: I don't know. I've been coaching 23 years at Nebraska, and Bergen is only the second freshman setter to start. Nicklin was the first one. Nicklin, her freshman year, we got to the finals against -- we played Wisconsin, right? Stanford. Yeah, Stanford.

So I don't know. That's probably a good indicator that freshmen are becoming more ready to play. I talked about that yesterday or the day before that club volleyball is doing a great job of preparing these kids. Those coaches

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and what Nebraska volleyball was about.

When they got here, they kind of fit right in. They meshed really well. They didn't really need to be told what to do. They kind of just did it on their own.

Q. Lexi, we got to watch practice the other day. Jaylen gives the scouting report, and he goes over there, and he's hitting the shots rapid fire and talking the whole time. What does Jaylen do defensively that makes you guys feel confident when you have time to prepare for a team that you guys will be confident and play good defense?

LEXI RODRIGUEZ: I think the entire coaching staff, but especially Jaylen, he gives us a game plan, and he instills a lot of confidence in blockers and defenders that we've just got to do what we've been training all year and we'll be just fine.

There's going to be certain things that we have to look out for, but at the end of the day, I think he just reminds us to do what we've been trained to do just like we do in practice. I feel like he just gives a lot of energy and belief in everyone on the team and it really helps everyone out.

Q. I asked Coach Elliott this about what you have to do to be this good for this long year after year after year. I wonder -- he said it takes a lot of work. It's a lot of worry. He puts a lot into it. I wonder what that's like for you. Then if you could also talk about how you've changed as a coach since your first National Championship match, I guess 23 years ago.

JOHN COOK: Are we doing a documentary here? I'll try to answer it simply by, I think, coaching at this level to try to be the best, each year is a growing experience, and I'm just trying to learn. Constant learner.

If you really want me to get philosophical here, I started riding horses and roping steers, and one of the reasons I wanted to do that was, one, I wanted to learn how to do something I didn't know how to do. Two, learning how to ride a horse, you've got to get that horse to trust you and work with you, which is a great parallel going with coaching.

I've done things all through my coaching career to try to always get better and make it interesting and then try to apply those things to the teams that I'm coaching. I give them examples all the time from the roping world.

How have I changed from 2000? I've gotten a lot older, but the one constant through all that is just trying to build a great relationship with each generation of players, and that

has changed over the years. I just can't still be the same as I was 23 years ago. It's a constant adjustment and figuring that out. I think that's something that's been really important for me to continue the success.

But it is hard to be good for a long period of time. That's one of the hardest things. Sometimes it's easy, you get to a Final Four or you win a conference championship, but to do it year after year after year, it is a lot of work, and it is hard. I think it's one of the best accomplishments a program can have.

I think you look at Nebraska volleyball and Texas, both have been very consistent in each year.

Q. Coach, we know the special nature of this weekend. You're on ABC, dynamic matchup, maybe more eyeballs on the sport than ever before. And the small picture, you're going for National Championship, and there's a big picture aspect to what's going on here. What do you make of what's going to happen here and what it could mean for the sport?

JOHN COOK: Well, we already, the stadium match, we blew that thing out of the water as far as making an impact. This is another thing following up, which is great. You and I probably can remember Wide World of Sports every Sunday night. I don't even know if these guys even know what ABC is. So that puts it in perspective right there.

For me, being on ABC, that's watching the Pittsburgh Steeler people were here, I asked them, she didn't even know who the Pittsburgh Steelers were, but that was ABC, Wide World of Sports, watching Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier, those guys. ABC was the sports channel that you'd always watch for big time sports.

So to me it's a big deal, but our players probably have no clue what ABC is, but it is big time.

Q. For all four of you, I'm going to go back a little bit. In 2003, when the Bucs were playing for the Super Bowl, I asked Warren Sapp the week before, give me one word to describe what winning the Super Bowl would be for you. He said immortality. Bergen, I'm letting you off the hook until last because you probably weren't even born in 2003. One word, Coach, what would it be?

JOHN COOK: Epic.

MERRITT BEASON: One word? One word, I'm just going to say special.

LEXI RODRIGUEZ: Probably surreal.



BERGEN REILLY: I'll say historic.

Q. Merritt, last week you talked about the patience the coaching staff gave you initially. What does that look like in day-to-day practices and growing the team, and how did that benefit the team?

MERRITT BEASON: Yeah, patience was something that we talked about a lot, especially with Coach, and it's something that I remind him of a lot.

But at the beginning of the year, we understood that there were a lot of things that this team had to learn. Just with having six new players, we were going to have to learn the systems, how Nebraska plays, just things like that. There was a lot of growth that needed to happen.

We talked about how it wasn't going to happen overnight and it was going to be a process. So I think patience was huge, especially at the beginning of the season, just learning how to go through a Big Ten season, learning all of those things that you have to learn and that most of this team didn't have those experiences.

But they've done a great job. Every single one of them has been super patient with us. I would say it was probably a bigger thing at the beginning of the season because we had to get all of those experiences under our belts. We check in with him from time to time to make sure that he's staying patient, but he's done a great job at it.

Q. I want to piggy-back on this question. I want to ask Lexi, from a player perspective, by the way, I'm from the local ABC affiliate in Omaha, Nebraska. Does it matter that the match is on ABC in terms of national exposure? And what does the potential of Sunday's match have for the growth, the continued growth of your great sport?

LEXI RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, I think it's huge, and obviously, like Coach said, it's a really big deal for the sport just to be put on this stage and have so much attention around it. It's ultimately going to grow it in the upcoming years.

You can see from everything this year, from all the attendance records and media records, that it's growing in the right direction. So I think this is definitely a really huge step to keep it growing.

Q. John, before the question, the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat was Saturday afternoons.

JOHN COOK: I always used to watch it on Sunday, but I was in California then.

Q. You got it delayed (laughter). Not to take you back 23 years ago, but throughout your career, coaching a group of freshmen like this is different. How do you coach them differently than you would have all those years ago? I guess in terms of maybe your coaching personality and the difference in kids.

JOHN COOK: I don't think in the gym it's any different. Merritt brought up patience. I have to have -- I've really had to be patient at times. I think the biggest thing is just being comfortable in their world and connecting with them.

Ally and I did a TikTok, and it was over 5 million views. To me, I have no idea what TikTok is, it's some little video thing, but that's a really big deal, doing things like that and being with these guys and just being in their world. When we went to Brazil, we had a great time to really build that.

So to me, that's what's different. It used to be probably in the old days, old school, coach, player, and that was it. Now this is -- it's a whole different world. Just embracing what they're all about and maybe trying to teach them some history and the way it used to be and give them examples of those things too so they don't forget the past. I talk about stuff like that all the time.

Q. Outside of your program, you're seeing more programs, Wisconsin and Marquette, for example, take selected matches outside their normal venues into a larger venue. Texas was in here a short time ago saying they're discussing that now. How much as one who is in favor of the growth of the sport, how much do you like hearing those kinds of discussions taking place now, more places on campuses?

JOHN COOK: I think it's awesome for sports, big events. We're discussing a really big one too. We have to get NCAA approval to do it. I think it's great. If I was Texas, I'd be in that -- either in the baseball stadium or Jerry Dome. The question is can they sell it out? That's the question.

Yeah, I think it's -- we kind of showed and Wisconsin showed by going to Milwaukee that these are events that people want to be a part of. That's why this stadium event was so big because people were there. I mean, they were moved by it. That carries on, and people like big events.

Q. I'd be remiss if I didn't ask you three this. Coach Cook and I grew up with probably five TV channels, so ABC was a big deal. He said, these guys might not know what ABC is. Do you know ABC network? Is it different? And it netted 10 million for the women's basketball final, which is the biggest ever. Is that



something you guys noticed and thought about in terms of, hey, we're going to have that opportunity?

MERRITT BEASON: I feel like it was less of -- I mean, I think we all know what ABC is. It's not something that I'm just like, mm, I'm going to turn on ABC tonight, but we know what ABC is.

So I think for us it was more about just being on national television and having that opportunity. Less about exactly what site it was on and more of just the opportunity to be playing a National Championship on national TV.

LEXI RODRIGUEZ: Yeah.

BERGEN REILLY: Yeah.

JOHN COOK: For the record, after our stadium match, all of us were all either on CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, and there might have been one other one we were on.

That was great exposure. That was pretty cool going on those shows. It's a whole other world when you're dealing with those guys.

Q. John, with your offense, obviously you have great passers, great hitters. What are some of the specific things that Bergen has done as far as running the offense and setting that have helped your offense improve this season?

JOHN COOK: I think she -- the gift Bergen has, if I'm going to correct her on something, she'll already tell me what I'm going to say. She just has a great feel. We don't really give her a lot because I want her -- she's a feel setter. Kelly Hunter was that way too.

Where Nicklin was, we kind of had to program her more. The great feel setters -- just like Patrick Mahomes. He doesn't do everything that he was trained as a kid growing up. He just creates and does things. Those guys have great feels. That's Bergen's greatest gift. That, and she's a great competitor.

Q. For all three players, did you play any other sport or just volleyball? He just brought up Patrick Mahomes. Being a baseball player, he comes from the side a lot and everything. Did you play other sports growing up?

MERRITT BEASON: I did gymnastics most of my life until I was too tall. Once I quit gymnastics, I started playing volleyball. I ran a little bit of track, but it was pretty much just gymnastics and volleyball.

LEXI RODRIGUEZ: I played basketball. It was my first sport, and all the way up until high school. Then I just did volleyball, and then I played tennis my senior year in high school. Yeah, I made it to State.

BERGEN REILLY: I also played basketball. That was my first sport too. I played all the way through high school, and we won State one year.

Q. Coach Cook, you guys have played so many matches over the years against Texas obviously, regularly when you were both in the Big 12. Are there certain things, especially since Jerritt's been there, that are characteristic of his teams? When you guys play each other, what tends to be the deciding factor?

JOHN COOK: That's a good question. Texas is known for their athleticism. He's done different systems, different tempos, all those things. You play Texas, you're going to play against a physical, athletic team.

Q. Bergen, were there any nerves last night for you in the match?

BERGEN REILLY: I mean, there were a little, just kind of realizing the circumstances. But I really didn't let myself get too nervous because I knew, I had full confidence in this team, and we were very prepared and very well prepared for the game we had last night and just kind of trusting myself and trusting all my teammates.

So I think it was just kind of the circumstances. There were nerves that come with that, but nothing too crazy.

Q. Are you going to be nervous on Sunday?

BERGEN REILLY: Yeah, a little. Again, I trust our team, and I have full confidence in us. That's something that our entire team has worked on this season is just the belief in ourselves.

Q. Coach, looking ahead to Sunday's game, if you were to look at one or two keys that you want to see your team come out and execute properly throughout the match.

JOHN COOK: Serve and pass and follow our game plan and win long rallies.

Q. Coach, you started 23 years ago, and you talked about how you evolved as a coach and how the players have evolved differently. You coached your daughter in that span. Was that a good thing or a bad thing?

JOHN COOK: It was awesome. It was awesome. I coached her up until she was 14. Then when she turned 14, I didn't know anything. Then, of course, when she went to college, all of a sudden, I knew what I was talking about again. It was an awesome experience, the way she handled it with the team, and it was great. I'd highly recommend it.

Q. Merritt, I have to ask you, as a Southerner, what's been your favorite part of Nebraska? Has there been anything that you're just like, wow, I never expected this?

MERRITT BEASON: Nebraska actually reminds me a lot of the South. I think that's one of the reasons I chose to go there was it reminded me a lot of home. There's not as many differences as you think.

One is no one says y'all, so I don't say y'all anymore. I say you all, and my parents give me a really hard time, and everyone in Alabama gives my parents a really hard time when I say you all. So I would say that's probably the biggest difference.

Q. John, with the extra day in between the semifinals and the finals this year, how do you manage your anxiety and I guess some of the emotions that you feel in between the two rounds?

JOHN COOK: It's kind of nice. We'll see how long it is, but it's kind of nice to have a couple days in between because you feel like you go nonstop here. It's been nonstop. We've been going all day.

So I'm actually looking forward to tonight. They can be with their families. They can relax and get some quiet time. And I'm looking forward to that as well.

If we were playing tomorrow, it would be nonstop all day today, and then you're geared up and playing tomorrow. So I think it's good. Playing on Sunday with ABC, we'll see how that draws. Anyway, you'll have to ask me afterward.

Q. When you're a program like you have this season, you've gotten so much attention and you've been on top of things, you're the hunted by everyone else, is that something you enjoy? Is it ever a burden being the target and the one that everybody's shooting for?

JOHN COOK: It's just part of being at Nebraska. It's been that way. We get everybody's best shot. We've sold out every arena we played in this year. It's just part of it. We're used to it. I'm numb to it now.

Q. I think Jerritt Elliott said Nebraska-Texas is like

Lakers-Celtics. If I understand this correctly, you're more of a football guy. Do you have a football comparison for Nebraska-Texas in the championship match?

JOHN COOK: I'd have to think about it. Nothing pops in my head right now. We have a lot of rivalries, it seems like.

In the Big 12, that was the rivalry, but now, I mean, how many matches we have with Penn State, now Wisconsin. We've had great matches with UCLA, who's coming in the Big Ten. I don't know, I just feel like there's a lot of great rivalries now.

I would say Alabama-Auburn, but I'm not from Alabama. I don't know how big that one is, but Merritt tells me it's a big deal. But I heard her dad tell me today that both her teams were playing in red, so I think Alabama football and Nebraska volleyball.

Q. Bergen, I saw today on Twitter that O'Gorman gave you a little shout out on Twitter/X. Can you talk about having the support of your hometown and high school, and not only that, but to have fans all over the country?

BERGEN REILLY: My hometown, they were so special. Especially my high school, it was really just a family there. I went to a private school, so it was a little smaller. Everyone was always behind me.

I would have to leave for weeks at a time for USA stuff. My teachers worked with me. My principal was there for me. My coaches were all so understanding of what I was going through. So that helped me immensely throughout my high school career.

It's kind of the same as Nebraska is. Nebraska is one big family, and having that support behind you, it helps in those big moments and just almost kind of calms you down a little bit.

So that was really nice. I love my high school. Yeah, their support has just helped me through so much.

Q. Another question about Sunday. Texas' slide attack last night was pretty good, and then the left side attack got going. Can you talk about some of the difficulties defending an offense like that and what you hope to see kind of what's a successful defense against a really good offense come Sunday?

JOHN COOK: O'Neal's playing on the national team this year, so, yeah, she's going to be a handful to stop. What

we try to do is slow her down. Try to touch it, dig it, or serve it so it's hard to set her. That's what you've got to do. If everything's perfect, she's going to kill it, and we've got to side out. That's the bottom line.

Skinner is one of the premier players in the country, and she's going to make also some big kills. We've got to take advantage of the opportunities we can when we can dig her or block her again.

You try to control those guys and not let them have huge nights.

Q. Lexi, just from the last time that you made it to the championship match, is there anything on the court, off the court that you learned or took away from that that you're kind of actively applying to this week?

LEXI RODRIGUEZ: I think just getting to the Final Four. I kind of tried to remind everyone to take it all in and enjoy it. There's going to be nerves, and there's going to be pressure, but just having fun, playing for each other, I think, is something that was my big focus and just, I think as a team, was our big focus too.

Just play for one another, leave it all on the court, and just play fearless.

Q. John, no matter what happens on Saturday, a freshman setter is going to win the national title. How big of deal is that?

JOHN COOK: I don't know. I look back, Foecke was freshman of the year when we won it in '15. Was it '15? Anna from Wisconsin was MVP of the Final Four as a freshman. Again, whatever year -- that was '21, yeah.

You guys have all been talking about it, but these freshmen can come in, and they can play. So I don't think it's that big a deal. I think it's just the way college volleyball is going now.

I think you look at basketball, there's freshmen playing in the Final Four. Of course, those guys are going in the NBA. And there's football players that are standing out as well, freshmen quarterbacks. I'd have to go back, I think Alabama had a freshman quarterback that won. I just think it's where we are in sports now. These guys come in, and they're ready to play.

Q. Coaches like to sit down and talk to coaches in other sports who are successful. Have you had a chance to maybe break bread with Coach Devaney or Coach Osborne while you've been in Nebraska?

JOHN COOK: Coach Osborne has been a big mentor to me. I've spent many hours with him. He was the AD. They said I made him the most mad they've ever seen him. That's a whole nother story.

So, I study the other coaches. I study other leaders. I just think there's a lot to learn. There's some great people in Nebraska that I have admired and tried to learn from in all walks of life. So I just think that's part of that growth mindset you've got to have as a coach if you want to keep getting better.

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