

2023 NCAA Women's Volleyball Championship

Sunday, December 17, 2023

Tampa, Florida, USA

Amalie Arena

Texas Longhorns

Coach Jerritt Elliott

Madisen Skinner

Emma Halter

Ella Swindle

Asjia O'Neal

Championship Press Conference

Texas d. Nebraska 25-22, 25-14, 25-11

COACH ELLIOTT: Well, first, I would like to congratulate Nebraska. Incredible year for them. They have a lot of young talent. We're going to see a lot of them in the future here.

But to my team and to my staff, who put in so much time, they don't get a lot of the credit, but they do a lot of the work, super lucky to have our staff that care so much about these players.

And we were really on the struggle bus at 5-3 earlier in the season. Just asked our kids to stay with the process, trust one another, work hard. And when you have good, quality kids that have good values that are very humble and vulnerable, we worked through a lot of ups and downs and tears, a lot of things that we were trying to figure out.

But they put the work in to do that. And then magically it came together because they put in that work and they just -- you could just feel it today. They were so prepared. They were on a mission to be able to do this. The confidence they showed from the service line was remarkable on both nights.

We just put a tremendous amount of pressure on both teams in this tournament. And ultimately we were able to get them out of system a ton.

Q. Asjia, I know you've probably served great many times in your life, but have you ever served better than



that stretch, in a big match? I believe you had 10 in a row when you guys went on a 11-0 run. Turned the match around. Could you talk about that?

ASJIA O'NEAL: No, I don't think I've ever had a run like that. But my teammates put a lot of confidence in me. And I remember before the game I said I feel kind of weird with my serving today. I don't know how it's going to feel.

But I think just our energy, the trust we have with one another, there's no doubt in anything that anyone was doing the entire night. It goes back to our team culture and how everyone really uplifts one another and allows us to do kind of crazy things.

Q. Madisen and Asjia, you had a moment on the court after the celebration, I saw it on TV. What did you guys say to each other?

MADISEN SKINNER: I was just telling her how proud I was of her how honored I was to be her teammate. And I'm so sad we won't play together in the near future. But I know one day we'll play pro together or she'll play with my sister. Just how much she's improved and led this team so well. I'm just super excited for everyone, so happy for us. Love you, Asjia.

ASJIA O'NEAL: Love you too, Madi.

Q. Take us back to that first set. Give us a little clarification on the red card.

COACH ELLIOTT: Bad memories. My first red card of the season. I don't know, we're not allowed to speak about the referees, and there was an overlap that was pretty blatant and I was asking her to talk to her about, and got the red card.

And luckily my team stuck together. We shanked a pass and then Madi came up with a big out-of-system kill. I was really regretting that but I was really glad we were able to make that happen.

Q. Two timeouts, you called the first one was after that when they came back and tied it 22-22 in the first set.

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You guys scored three in a row to end the set. In the second set you're down 10-7, you call timeout, and that's when these guys went nuts. Had you had responses to timeouts like that?

COACH ELLIOTT: We have obviously. We were down 24-19. We've had some 24-22s throughout the season. But our conversations, there wasn't anything strategic. It was just trying to clean up our touches a little bit more.

We felt we were winning the serving game, and if we could just clean up our first contacts and get ourselves some swings, and just trying to calm them down a little bit with the anxiousness of being in the national championship match. And they were able to do that.

Q. Ella, kind of new to this national championship stuff, but did it feel like you were setting up batting practice for these guys? Nothing that especially Madisen could do seemed to go wrong, and everyone was just making things happen for you.

ELLA SWINDLE: We talk about it all the time, we go against the best players in the country every single day in practice. So, we don't see a lot of matches that we don't already face in practice. It gives me confidence.

Me as a setter, to set these girls, and they'll put the ball away. But also for them to take big swings. And we talk a lot about coverage. We're going to have their back in coverage. And they just went out there and they hit the ball the way they know how to hit the ball. And it's incredible.

Q. Coach, what did you see from Asjia's serve during that run and overall?

COACH ELLIOTT: I mean, most of the night, you saw we were targeting their outside hitters. We were doing a lot of line-to-line, and Asjia's -- and they were trying to change their formations before we served, and we were serving to some open spaces.

She was just hitting clean balls in that seam. We've been working on it all year long. And that's her best serving. So the lineups in terms of the match-ups we had from our service line was really good in the entire match. And Asjia just hit really clean balls, ball after ball.

Q. Madisen, you've been part of three national championships now. They're really hard to achieve yet you went into this championship match with a tag of defending champions. What was the degree of difficulty of having that tag all year?

MADISEN SKINNER: Honestly, nothing. I mean, we were the underdogs all season. All the pressure was on everybody else that had returning people and had that connection and had a history of playing together. And just coming in, obviously, we wanted to be back-to-back, but that was the last of our worries.

We wanted to play with one another and have so much fun in the process and just try to play clean Texas volley. There wasn't a lot of pressure on us; it was on everybody else. And that was great to feel for once.

Q. Asjia, do you remember exactly a year ago watching Akana serve and win the match? And then did that cross your mind at all as it ended to know that you did that?

ASJIA O'NEAL: I did think about it for a little bit after we won. But it was really cool because I remember telling K-lei, you're going to go down in history forever for doing that. It was so iconic of you. I was trying to emulate my friend K-lei. That was just so fun. There's really no words to explain, but, yeah.

Q. Is this one a little more satisfying coming in as the underdog and you could basically just say "mission accomplished"?

COACH ELLIOTT: When you put on a Texas uniform, you're usually not the underdog. For us to go out and hunt people and put pressure on them and live up to the expectations, it was nice to be able to have. I think internally we knew we were a great team and that we could win this. And that was all that mattered.

Q. The Nebraska coach -- any of you guys can answer this, coach or you guys -- he mentioned there's sometimes a moment with some of past teams where the teams felt they were a team of destiny. He thought maybe you guys had that when you faced match point against Tennessee. Can you kind of explain, just how have you guys just turned it on since that Tennessee match when you dodged that bullet?

MADISEN SKINNER: I feel it just built our confidence and showed us how resilient we could be. We fought off two match points and that's very, very hard to do especially against a great Tennessee team. So just gave us a lot of confidence in knowing we could accomplish great things.

It didn't matter if we were down 10 points or up 10 points, we were still going to be leaning into one another. We had confidence in one another in what we could do. But it's a great feeling, obviously.

Q. Emma, I believe Nebraska had almost as many errors as kills. They said they just could never get into a rhythm. Obviously your guys' serving was a big part of that. Could you talk defensively how it seemed like you were able to keep them from ever getting any momentum?

EMMA HALTER: I think we came into this game with no-balls-hitting-the-floor mindset. Our blocks set up almost perfectly every single play. It made the back-row defense pretty easy. And they were getting great touches as well. We were able to run down balls and we blocked really, really well today.

Q. He asked about the red card a few minutes ago. The play that led up to the yellow card a couple of rallies before that looked to me -- and probably to you also -- that Nebraska had two contacts on a cover. Is that a ball you could challenge, or is that what led to the yellow card?

COACH ELLIOTT: I never knew I got a yellow card. That's news to me. Nobody let me know. Really. I didn't know I got a yellow card. First I've heard of it. First time I've heard of it. Now that makes more sense. Yeah.

Q. Looked like there was a double -- were you wondering about that? Is that a play you could have challenged?

COACH ELLIOTT: I couldn't have challenged it. I was trying to have more communication. I stated it before the match that I would like to have more communication with the R2 on situations.

Yeah. I'm not allowed to speak about it, so -- but that makes more sense now. I wish I would have known.

Q. You mentioned a couple days ago obviously this is before these young women were here but in 2009, one of the most painful losses of your career in this building. This would have been special no matter where it was. But to win back-to-back sweeps and sort of to have it here in Tampa, does it mean something special to you?

COACH ELLIOTT: Yeah, I talked to one of my players that was part of that team. They probably don't know but we were up 2-0 and lost 16-14 in the fifth. Probably one of the most epic volleyball matches of all time.

A lot of sting to that. But I've also had a fond place from Tampa. It felt really good the last time we were here. I stated it here, I would love the national championship to be here every year because it's such a great location. They

put so much love into what they're doing. And I want to thank them for that.

The way we've done it, somebody mentioned to me that the three national championships that we've won, we've been 3-0, 3-0, 3-0. That's a tribute to the team, the players and the alumni. I'm just so happy for everybody that's a part of this Longhorn family.

Q. Asjia, you were in this tournament as the defending national champion. There's a fair amount of pressure that comes along with that. You fight off a match point and then you beat three No. 1 seeds to win the tournament, all full of pressure normally, but it seemed like your team played pressure-free with a lot of joy out there. What was going on to allow you guys to play that way with situations that are usually pretty tense?

ASJIA O'NEAL: Yeah, I think it just goes back to the culture that Jerritt has created here. He puts the right people in this program, whether it's on the staff or the girls. And we've built a culture that everyone loves and supports each other.

And all year, we knew that because we had a rocky start we were the underdogs. And there was no pressure on us. Pressure was on every other team that we played because we were the lower-seeded team.

So there wasn't the pressure of last year where we had to do X, Y and Z because we're number one. We were able to play free and we love each other and support each other.

And throughout the whole year it was just so fun. This is probably the most joyous season I've ever had in my life. It was definitely challenging at times.

But today was an example. Everyone played free and everyone had confidence in one another. And we were able to go out and take down some really incredible teams.

Q. This match offensively felt kind of different than your match a couple nights ago where, against Wisconsin, your middle, slide attack and right-side attack was really hot to start; took the left-side attack a little longer to get going. And tonight it kind of flipped. Could you speak to the importance of sticking with the game plan and sticking with the players you know throughout the course of a match?

COACH ELLIOTT: We had a nice game plan, we felt like coming into this. I think the nerves kind of got ugly on both sides for a while. First contacts and balls were off the net, and we were kind of living and dying by our out-of-assistant

game.

And I said that was one of the keys, that we were going to have to be good. And we took some great swings out of system and managed it at a pretty high level.

And as we started passing better we got the offense a little more involved. We got Asjia going and got Molly going, and it opened everything up for our team. And just had a lot of good balance. And we got some nice bounces a couple times.

Q. Ella, I think you were the first starting freshman center to win a national championship since Jenna Gray did it in 2016 with Stanford. You talked about what you've learned from your older teammates. But now that you're here as a national championship as a freshman, what's the process been like, Jerritt talked about the 5-3 start, but what's it been like to be sitting here as a national champion?

ELLA SWINDLE: This is a full-circle moment. Coming in as a freshman I knew the coaches had a lot of trust in me. It took me a minute to have all the confidence in myself. But relying the girls every single day. They're my teammates, but they're also my best friends.

So the relationships that we build off and on the court, that's what got us here. Even though we had a rocky start, we were able to come through it. And being a freshman is hard, but I just have all the faith and belief in the world in these girls. That's how we got it done.

Q. Ella, it's well noted that you are a freshman and Nebraska has got a whole bunch of them who are pretty good. And they took it pretty hard, as you would imagine in their press conference. Harper Murray said flat out they'll win three championships in the next three years. Want to respond to that?

ELLA SWINDLE: No.

Q. Madisen, your coach talked a couple days ago about the fact you've been able to find the floor against opponents these past couple of matches. And today it looked like your toolbox was really working. You were hitting line. You were hitting corner deep, tips from the back row, from the front row. Could you talk a little bit about that toolbox and what's helped develop it over the years, kind of culminating in a match like this?

MADISEN SKINNER: It takes time, and just kudos to my coaches and how much we train certain shots in practice. And then again in match time situations, just goes back to

Ella and all the people surrounding me.

Asjia does a great job of pulling the block and the slide. They have to respect the slide queen. I'll say it again.

And the same thing with our middles, Bella as well, and our right sides as well. They're giving me a lot of space. Ella has great vision. She trusts her gut all the time and leaves us a lot of space to work with. But also thank you to my parents for great genetics and giving me hops and whatnot and gives me a lot of space to go over them as well, so that's nice.

Q. Madisen, in addition to having the national championship for the team, can you share what it means to you to be the MOP?

MADISEN SKINNER: Yeah, that's great. It's cool. And it's awesome, and I've worked really hard to get to this point. But I told everyone last night at the banquet, I was like, I love celebrating individual awards but I want a national championship for my team. I want every single one of these girls to have a ring because they deserve it. They have put in so much work to get to this point.

And for me, individual stuff means nothing if your team's not coming first and coming out on top. I'm just super proud of this group and so excited that we all get to enjoy this and get a trophy and a ring and it's for everybody. It's great.

Q. Emma, I only gave you one word to describe your emotions. Put your emotions into words now.

EMMA HALTER: I would just say so grateful. These girls are -- like they all said, we're all best friends. These opportunities don't come all the time. Not many people get to do this in their lifetime. So just really taking this in and enjoying every single moment. I'm so grateful for this moment, for all the girls and for everyone who supports us.

ELLA SWINDLE: I would say I'm pretty star struck right now. It hasn't really kicked in that we just won a national championship. But I think in a few days I'll really let it settle in and feel all the emotions. I'm very star struck. Very grateful again.

MADISEN SKINNER: I'd say it's surreal. I was so emotional on the court. I've never been so emotional ever in my life. But just to have the season that we had and it being so rocky but coming out on top, just the confidence that we all had together was just something that I've never been a part of. So it's great to just battle back and be the underdog and have people expect you not to do great and then you just prove them wrong. It's awesome.

ASJIA O'NEAL: I would say blessed. I'm really blessed that I got the sixth year to be here. I'm glad that Jerritt trusted me to have this extra year with him. We have such an incredible team. Our team has really strong faith. We talk about that a lot.

And I just feel like we've been really consistent and strong and trusted the process. And because of that, we were given so many blessings to be able to go out and win the way we did. So I'm just really, really blessed for this.

COACH ELLIOTT: I'm just proud how this team came together. So many pieces that have to happen for that to occur. Thinking about Madi not wanting to transfer to Texas and Asjia not wanting to come back and changing her mind, and just saying, hey, I'm enjoying it so much, it's special. And all of our alumni, I have my alumni sending messages popping champagne bottles, and for the University of Texas. There's so much pride.

The expectations at Texas are to win championships. We did that today and we did it with our backs against the wall all season. This is what sports are about. It's so joyful. I wish I could be like Asjia and retire and just leave on top. But I'm just so proud of these young women, every one of them. The work these two put on the end and everyone else, from people that weren't even starting. We did something really special last night.

Just talked about who we we're fighting for. There was one player that doesn't play much at all, she was the one that everybody was speaking to and tears were coming out, and it was so special to know this is a true team.

And there was just so much gratitude for the people that are part of this, and I'm just super fortunate about -- you talk about having a dream season. This is a dream season for me just because the way the women are, how they grew and then book-ending it with a national championship with a freshman setter. What else can you ask for?

Q. In the big picture, with everything that happened this season, in the sport and this week, with the television coverage and the attendance records, obviously some things that you've been talking about all year, but where does the sport go from here? Is this the place where you catapult to new levels?

COACH ELLIOTT: I mean, it's something that we'll continue to push. I think the coaches that were here in the Final Four and the other coaches know where this sport's headed.

We're talking about all the time. I have my SEC meetings

coming up on the 24th of January. I'll be pushing some things with them, trying to get all the coaches on board.

It's a spectacular sport. I was sending some pictures of Madi in the semifinals versus Smrek, and just the physicality of those pictures is just flat out scary. A lot of them played, UCLA and Stanford, and I think your team could beat our team back in the early '90s, and just the physicality of this game is changing, and it's so fun to be a part of and watch.

Q. Ella, you had five kills, which was third-most on the team. Can you speak about just your offensive mindset and how that opens things up for the rest of your teammates? And Asjia, middle of your big serving round, I looked over at you and you got this kind of smile on your face. I just wondered, what's going through her mind right now. So I'll ask you, what was going through your mind kind of in the middle of that serving run?

ELLA SWINDLE: I think all that goes back to just our incredible passers on the team. I wouldn't be able to run an offense or do anything at all if it wasn't for this girl right here [referring to Emma]. She makes my life so easy.

All the coaches on staff want me to be super offensive. That opens up the big path for Madi. We just have so many options on this team. Thankfully I'm one of them. I like to be offensive. That's something I really like to do. Super fun for me, turn around get hyped with my teammates.

ASJIA O'NEAL: Volleyball is a game of momentum, and during that run, I just could totally feel the momentum completely shift on our side. I just knew we were playing with so much confidence and joy. I knew that we had the game in the bag. Obviously it's a long match, and I knew that they were going to want to fight back. But I was just smiling because I was so happy with how we were feeling. You just feel it. When you're an athlete and you're in a sport, you just feel it. And I felt we were going to win the match.

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