

2024 NCAA Women's Volleyball Championship

Wednesday, December 18, 2024

Louisville, Kentucky, USA

KFC Yum! Center

Nebraska Cornhuskers

Coach John Cook

Lexi Rodriguez

Merritt Beason

Bergen Reilly

Semifinals Press Conference



But like I said, there's a lot of different opinions on it. I'm personally very grateful to have the portal.

Q. Lexi, I spoke with Justine Wong-Orantes yesterday, and she spoke about how records are meant to be broken and she couldn't be more thrilled that you are the one that's about to. How does that feel coming from her?

LEXI RODRIGUEZ: I think it means everything coming from her. She's just such an amazing libero and such a sweet person, and she's someone that I've always looked up to ever since I was getting recruited by Nebraska. So to even be in the same conversation with her is just insane to me.

But, yeah, she has just been so supportive, and it's truly meant the world.

Q. What is the scariest story you have to share as a libero?

LEXI RODRIGUEZ: Scariest? I'm not sure. I mean, there's some scary moments, obviously. I don't know if I can pinpoint exactly one, but there's always times when there's an open net and a big hitter. Those are always the scariest. But I don't know, you kind of get used to it as you keep playing, too.

Q. How do you prepare for a game like this? What would you do the rest of the day to keep you focused?

BERGEN REILLY: I mean, we have a pretty busy day just with all the media, and we have some team stuff tonight. We have our day pretty booked out.

Just in terms of preparing for the game, we say that we've been preparing for it since January. Not really getting too much in our heads or trying to do too much. We have our routine that we'll stick with tomorrow, our game day routine.

But other than that, just kind of falling back on what we've been doing all season since the beginning of the year and just knowing that it's worked for us, so we're not going to

JOHN COOK: This is our third time this year. Our goal is to get here the third time. It's changed a little bit since the last time we were here. So we're excited. It's a great place to play volleyball, this arena, and I hear it's sold out, so it should be fun.

Q. Lexi, what's most gratifying about being a four-time All-American?

LEXI RODRIGUEZ: I think it's just really cool. I mean, it's something that Coach challenges everyone to come in and be their best and try and be an All-American.

But ultimately I just think it's really cool that everyone kind of believed that I could do it, and my coaches always believed in me and my teammates did. They were just always so supportive of me. I owe it all to them for all that they've done to help me get to where I am today.

Q. Merritt, way back when you transferred, it didn't seem like everybody was, and not you specifically, but what do you make of what's going on right now and especially this past few days in the portal? Seems like there's more people in it than not. Do you have any thoughts about it?

MERRITT BEASON: Yeah, I mean, a lot of people have a lot of different opinions on the portal. I think it's a very beautiful thing as someone who was in a position that really needed it. So I'm grateful for the portal. I know a lot of people have negative things to say about the portal, but as someone who has come out of the portal and been in a much better place than I was before, I'm extremely grateful for it.



try and fix it.

Q. Bergen, what did last year's experience teach you? What was your biggest takeaway, and how much of a benefit is it coming back to the Final Four knowing you've been here before?

BERGEN REILLY: Yeah, it's just a little more comfort knowing that I've been through it before, and obviously this is a huge stage, and this is what we work for all year.

I don't know if you can necessarily ever say that you're fully comfortable, but just having another year of experience, having it under my belt has helped a lot just confidence-wise and comfort-wise, I guess.

We're really excited to be back and hopefully get it done this year.

Q. Merritt, do you feel like it's a benefit to be playing a team in the Final Four that you've already played this season?

MERRITT BEASON: Yeah, I think it's awesome for us. We get another chance. Obviously we didn't come out on top the first time that we played Penn State, so I think we're really excited to just have another chance.

But I think the way we're trying to go about it this year is we get another day, and only four teams are in that position right now.

So I think we're just trying to take it day by day. And one of our mottos has been it's not us versus Penn State or it wasn't us versus Wisconsin or whoever we played, it's us in the Final Four. And no matter who's on the other side of the net, we're going to focus on our side and do whatever it takes to get the job done.

Kind of like Bergen said, obviously we learned a lot from last year, and I think we're going about it a little bit differently this year just because we have that experience. There's pros and cons, just like pretty much everything. I think we're excited just to get another opportunity.

Q. Lexi, people are going to make it like you guys are out for revenge because they beat you the first time. Give me the company line that it's just another game.

LEXI RODRIGUEZ: I mean, at the end of the day, it really is. We're in the Final Four, it's the semifinals, and at the end of the day, honestly, we have to play Nebraska volleyball and play our best game. It doesn't really matter who it would be against. We know that we have to play our best game of volleyball tomorrow night to be able to

advance to the National Championship.

Q. Bergen, Lexi is finalist for National Player of the Year. If you were making the case for her to win it, what would it be?

BERGEN REILLY: I mean, she's the best libero that I've ever watched play volleyball, and it's just an honor to get to play with her and to set her passes. A lot of days in practice are pretty easy for me because she passes dimes right on my head.

I can tell people that she passes good literally every single day. That would be my case, is it's great to be a setter off of her.

But it's just so cool that she's even in the position that she is. I know that a lot of times liberos get looked over, and she's made a name for herself and made a case to not get looked over. I'm really happy for her, and I'm really proud of her.

Q. John, for all the talk of parity and for how competitive the season was, there's four No. 1 seeds here. There's this overwhelming feeling that the rich are just getting richer and this is a perfect example of it. I know for you personally that's a good thing because you're the richest, but what are your thoughts about the imbalance that seems to be being created?

JOHN COOK: Well, first of all, I think this year was the most competitive year we've had, and there's so many good teams. And you saw all the upsets, all across the country. Even though the top four seeds got here, there's a reason that we're top four seeds because we had to earn it over a lot of tough competition.

Tomorrow night we've got to win the Big Ten again to get to the National Championship, and literally the last two matches we have to win the Big Ten again. They're the top two teams in the Big Ten along with us.

But where you're going with that is there's super conferences now, and I think that's one of the things that can separate us. So the conferences that have the money for revenue share are definitely going to have an advantage; and the conferences that don't, it's going to be tough.

You're right, it's probably heading where we're going to have the haves and have nots, and it's going to be in volleyball, in football, in basketball. But that's way above my pay grade on how we got there and why it's happening.

But if you want to compete -- I've already seen it this week



in the portal what's going on. It's nuts. Of course we've seen it in football and basketball, as well. Now it's here for volleyball.

Q. You have the highest pay grade --

JOHN COOK: Still ain't that high.

Q. What I asked Merritt about, your ill-timed comment at this time last year notwithstanding, you've taken transfers. The odds are you're going to take another one this year because you've got a big opening, and it seems like there's more people than ever. But just your general thoughts about what's happening right now?

JOHN COOK: I agree with you, I think we're sending the wrong messages to developing young people. Is there loyalty anymore? Is there anything about commitment? Do those words mean anything?

Again, I'm coming from the old-school background. I heard Geno talk about it. I've heard Nick Saban talk about it and several other coaches, the basketball coach, Tony at Virginia. I used to play pickup games with him, by the way, at Wisconsin.

It's kind of what we really never thought we would sign up for this, and it kind of defeats one of the things that motivates coaches, is you want to develop young people. And now I'm not sure we're doing that. It's more about what's in it for me and where can I get the best deal.

I see what's going on with some of these programs and these players leaving, and we had four players leave last year. It's heartbreaking because you invest so much in these players emotionally, time-wise, in training them and trying to fulfill their dreams and helping them accomplish their dreams, and then they can walk out like it's nothing. I think there's a lot of negativity to it for big-picture stuff, as well.

But if you want to survive, you're going to have to figure out how to play along in the system. That's what I'm trying to figure out.

Q. Can you talk about your coaching staff, how much they mean to you and your players, as well, throughout the season?

JOHN COOK: Well, having a great coaching staff is a huge advantage to try to perform at the level we're performing at. I feel very lucky because I've got Kelly Hunter, who's won two National Championships, played in our program.

Jordan Larson has done everything, played in our program.

Jaylen has been actually the longest assistant coach that has worked with me for the longest period of time of any assistant coach I've had.

I've got two former assistant coaches and a player out there practicing right now in this thing.

So hiring good people and letting them develop and letting them do their thing -- but it's not easy to keep everybody happy and work together. There's a lot of work that goes into that, just like having a great family and having a great culture with our team.

We're constantly working at it and trying to get better and challenge each other and then trying to be on the same page with our players.

Q. I know you talked about the two kids that transferred from your program to Penn State earlier this year, but if you could touch on their development and how they've kind of made a next step in their playing.

JOHN COOK: Well, obviously they both had a great year, and we had great plans for them. We knew they were good.

Maggie, once she went full-time volleyball, we knew she would really make a jump. We also had a great plan for Caroline.

But again, for whatever reason, those guys chose to leave, and they obviously went to another great program, and it's worked out really well for them.

But we miss them. A year ago they were right there in our locker room. It's kind of bizarre when you think about it. I'm seeing the pictures and stuff from last year. They're in all the pictures, Big Ten Championship stuff.

Here we are playing them to try to get to the National Championship. Like Lee pointed out, it's just nuts.

Q. Having been through this countless times for you and having a team that was so young last year, how beneficial was that experience last year? I know you didn't get the result you wanted, but how much will that serve you this time around?

JOHN COOK: Merritt nailed it; we're in a whole different place than we were last year. Last year we were happy to be here, wow, this is great. But today the amount of things

going on and the distractions, it's unreal. Then parents coming in -- the whole goal is you've got to remember why you're here is to try to win a volleyball match tomorrow, and you can get so distracted very easily.

So I think our team now understands what -- we only have three players that haven't been through this right now, so I think they understand why we're here and what needs to happen and how we've got to focus. It's a challenge.

Q. Caroline for Penn State, what are all the reasons you think she was able to have one of her better matches of the year against you earlier this year?

JOHN COOK: You'd have to ask her that.

Q. What do you need to do a better job against defending her tomorrow?

JOHN COOK: We've got to stick with our game plan. We have to play a lot better than we did at Penn State. Our team knows that.

Q. The libero position typically doesn't get a lot of recognition. What do you think is different about Lexi to be a finalist for National Player of the Year?

JOHN COOK: Well, I'm going to put this in perspective. I remember in 2004 -- well, let's go to before that. When the libero came in, we didn't even have a libero because we had outside hitters we played all the way around. So I didn't think libero was that important a position. I think our first libero was in 2004. So in 2003 we played without a libero. 2005 we played without a libero.

As a coach, I'm like, it's just some little kid that can't do anything else so you make them a libero. Now we're learning how important the libero position is. And the fact that a libero is considered for National Player of the Year, one of the four finalists, I think is epic for the sport because you don't know how many little girls want to be Lexi Rodriguez right now.

Again, we always look at how tall and how physical volleyball players are and evaluate that, but here's somebody who is a huge difference maker.

Here's another stat I'll give you. This is the 50th year of Nebraska volleyball. There's only been three four-time All-Americans: Sarah Pavan, who's one of the greatest players ever; Kadie Rolfzen; and now Lexi. In 50 years of Nebraska volleyball.

It's a pretty major accomplishment right there, and again, from that libero position -- again, I always thought she was

too short. I didn't want to recruit her. But Kayla Banwarth, who was my assistant at the time, basically overruled me. You ask about assistant coaches, there you go. Head coaches usually don't know much.

Anyway, she's continued the tradition of great liberos in our program.

Q. What was the first year you gave a scholarship to a libero?

JOHN COOK: Wow, that's a really good question. Well, the first one would have been probably Dani Busboom because she was a setter. I just read a thing, she had over 3,000 assists, so she actually set quite a bit for us, five one and six two. So she was probably the first one on scholarship.

Kayla was actually a walk-on, and we put her on scholarship her second year. So she was probably the first one. But she started as a walk-on.

Q. Merritt is obviously grinding on offense right now. What's going on?

JOHN COOK: Hey, it's a tough game. But she'll be fine.

Q. I was looking at the last time you guys won the National Championship, an old video clip, and you mentioned a story about Kelly Hunter, that when she was a freshman, you had questions whether she would even make it on the team. Can you expand on that? I can't remember what the situation was there. And how did she develop not only on the court but off maturity-wise?

JOHN COOK: So Kelly was a hitter, and they made her a setter in high school, so she was pretty inexperienced. Then when she got to Nebraska, I think she had other priorities than volleyball, and she wasn't that great a setter to begin with. It wasn't pretty.

I'm like, she can't locate the ball, and I don't know if she's ever going to play here. It's one of the reasons we went out and got a transfer setter.

Then her second year we redshirted her, and that was a tough decision. She didn't really want to do that. But it ended up working out pretty good for us, and she developed into a great setter. She still is a great setter.

Jordan is trying to talk her into going to the national team all the time. She's set in practice or she'll set Jordan when she's working out, and she became a really talented setter.

But I think her playing -- she was a middle blocker at one point, outside hitter. All those things helped her develop into a really good volleyball player.

Q. You said Kayla overruled your decision not to -- with Lexi. What did she say that made you feel like she has a point and we should listen to her?

JOHN COOK: I can remember it like it was yesterday. We were in Dream Team Camp. We finished camp, we talked to her, just to say, hey, we're interested in recruiting you, great job.

Kayla is like, We've got to offer her, we've got to offer her. She's going into ninth grade.

I'm like, She's too small. I want taller liberos. We've got to cover the court. I was using some examples of some liberos in other programs at that time that were six-foot liberos that people were using.

She goes, Coach, we are offering.

She's, like, in my face, pounding on my chest: We are offering her. We are not letting her leave without offering her.

So I did.

Lexi walked from my office to the elevator, which is about 40 feet, hit the button with her mom, they were getting ready to go down. She stopped, walked back in my office and committed. That's the story. And here we are. Time goes by fast.

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