

2024 NCAA Women's Volleyball Championship

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Louisville, Kentucky, USA

KFC Yum! Center

Louisville Cardinals

Coach Dani Busboom Kelly

Charitie Luper

Anna DeBeer

Cara Cresse

Semifinal Press Conference

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: Thank you all for being here. We're very excited to make it here. Pretty surreal to be in your hometown in the Final Four, a chance to win a National Championship.

Four really great teams in this Final Four that have had some incredible moments this season. Should be entertaining for everybody.

Q. Talk about the different emotions you guys have felt along this tournament run, excited, relieved, hungry. Can you talk about what the psychology of this week is like in terms of trying to channel that emotion into productive use.

CHARITIE LUPER: I'd say for this week it's all about being grateful. You never know when your last practice will be, you never know when your last game will be. It's just taking in every moment, every second, and just being grateful for the opportunity to be here.

ANNA DeBEER: I think gratitude is great and just enjoying it. There's only four teams that get to be here. So we know how hard it is when we get here. So really coming out with confidence and really enjoying it because at the end of the day, win or lose, it's such an awesome opportunity to be here.

CARA CRESSE: Yeah, I feel like there has been an underlying pressure throughout the year to make it to the Final Four in Louisville. But I think we've learned to ditch that and, just like they said, really enjoy it and take it all in each day.



Q. Anna, can you share with us your most recent moment, since you are local, about your rock star moment here in Louisville?

ANNA DeBEER: Rock star moment, like --

Q. Fans recognizing you on the street?

ANNA DeBEER: I think it's just really cool. Even my parents were talking about it, just how they've gotten a little TV time, as a joke, so people are coming up to them and saying stuff. But it's just super cool how much the sport has grown in Louisville and how much people, little girls, are in support of us. It's just a grateful opportunity every day.

Q. Anna, going off that point, to be in the hometown and to play in front of your fans, you've done it your whole career, but to do it on this stage, how special is this for you to have it all come together?

ANNA DeBEER: It's crazy. It's definitely a full-circle moment. Looking back we really weren't sure if we were going to make it here. Obviously the program really wanted to get here, and the fact that we are, it's just super exciting.

The Yum! is such a great environment. So it's a good way to go out for my career, I guess you could say.

Q. There was no guarantee that you'd get back here. You were not in the top four in the preseason, and you had a decision to make. How much trepidation do you have about doing this? These stories don't always work out when you get there when it's in your hometown. Have you thought about how rare that is?

ANNA DeBEER: Yeah, obviously with it being in Louisville, when I first decided to take my fifth year, I knew I wanted to take it for sure. I couldn't miss out on the opportunity. I was imagining myself watching it and not being there and I was like, there's no way.

It all worked out to be here. And that was one of our goals early on in the year. And we didn't know if we were going



to get there, but we've worked hard and battled through a lot this year. So for it to all work out and to be here, I'm just really grateful.

Q. Obviously there's an inherent pressure that comes with competing in the Final Four, but how much pressure was taken off of you guys, just knowing that you were able to get to this point and get to be able to compete in the place where you play?

CHARITIE LUPER: That's a great question. I would say it started problem after the UNI game. That game gave us a whole lot of confidence. We knew we could come back from being behind and fight and then come back and win the game. I think that game really flipped a switch in all of our minds.

It's just only up from here. We just switched to a whole different gear, and we're just a more powerful, dynamic, and just super-confident team now.

ANNA DeBEER: Yeah, I guess you could say there is a little relief that we finally made it. We're not done yet, but we did make it here.

So it is a good way to get the pressure off in that regard, and now it's time to just play. We've done all the work up to this point. And just to be here, that was one of our things, and now we've got a few more things to take care of.

CARA CRESSE: I think last week was obviously a tougher week playing Purdue. We haven't played them yet this year and a team we've gone 1-1 with this year. So I agree there was a relief and some pressure taken off after last week, but we know there is so much more work to do. So we're excited.

Q. Charitie and Cara, you guys have known about the Final Four being here for maybe five years. Did they use that in the recruiting? Did you hear that? For both of you, did you talk about it preseason, or when did it maybe come to the fore that you really started focusing on, hey, this is the year that it's here?

CARA CRESSE: I actually remember when I was being recruited junior year and the coaches brought up, like, Yeah, actually, your senior year, the Final Four will be in Louisville.

At the time it was like, yeah, that's cool, but we didn't really expect to make it.

This year has just been very surreal and really exciting to know that this is actually a reality, that we're here, and I

just never would have thought that a few years ago. So it's pretty cool.

CHARITIE LUPER: I was late. I didn't figure out until the end of last year because I was a transfer, and I just wasn't really focusing. Going for the tournament wasn't really our main goal. After my first year, we just kind of went downhill.

But I was focusing on being a better athlete and just getting better. So I never was asking where is the Final Four going to be.

Once I transferred to Louisville, then all that came to my mind. I wanted to know everything, where it was, when it was going to be, hoping we were going to be in it. So, yeah, last year.

Q. You guys play Pitt two or three times every year; now you're seeing them here in the Final Four. How do you characterize the rivalry with them?

ANNA DeBEER: We have such a great respect for Pitt. They make us better, and we hopefully make them better because we're pushing each other each year in the conference. It's such a good rivalry. Everyone claims it might be one of the biggest ones. They're just a great team to play. So we're really excited to see how it goes.

CHARITIE LUPER: Yeah, it's always fun playing against them. We're both not, like, aggressive, but we do a lot of talking, but in a good way. At the end of the day, we both have respect for each other. I could never hate on anyone on another team who's just an incredible athlete.

At the end of the day, it's going to be a great game between both of us, and it's going to be a battle, and I can't wait.

Q. Even though this is your home court, it does look a little bit different. Did it feel different stepping out in practice today with the fans watching you practice?

CARA CRESSE: Yeah, kinda. I think, obviously, like the actual court is different. So we were obviously getting used to that. I think it was cool to have an open practice today just to kind of get a good feel of how it's going to feel tomorrow just having a few people there and kind of getting used to it.

Q. Coach Fisher for Pitt was talking about the two things that stand out to him about the matches. Taking big swings, big rips, and each side has probably thought they were going to win a match and then it swung the other way. What have those

meetings taught you about going up against them and what it takes, the margin for error being so thin every time?

CHARITIE LUPER: I'd say you can't give them anything easy because they're a great defensive team. They cover the heck out of their hitters. So we can't go in tipping. We have to go in swinging every ball and just be super aggressive.

CARA CRESSE: Yeah, I think whether we're winning or losing, either team, we're both learning so much about the opponent. And after every time we play them, it's like we always find things we can work on and improve the next time we meet up.

Q. Every team has an identity, and your opponents look at you a certain way. How do you see the identity of this Louisville team and program?

ANNA DeBEER: Good question. I think one thing that I have really taken pride in over the last five years is just how great our team culture is. We get along so well and the coaching staff are just great people and really care about each other, and I feel like that translates to how we do on the court.

If you don't have that chemistry or that bond on the court, you're not going to get anywhere. I think that's been our identity a lot over the last few years, and just how much we care for each other not as players but also people.

Q. Anna, two years ago on this stage you said that your coach is a badass and you said you'd say that again. How much does it mean to you that this badass coach has a chance to be the first woman to be the coach of a champion?

ANNA DeBEER: She is badass. I'll say it again. Just to have a female coach, have a chance. She's just been great. Where she's taken the program over the last four years has been incredible.

To have that opportunity -- I know it was a big thing just for her being a mother and a coach and really just taking the team far. So I'm really excited.

Q. U of L has been to the Final Four a couple times in the last few years. What do you guys think you have to do this year to get over that hump?

CHARITIE LUPER: I don't know, just win. Shoot. I don't know.

CARA CRESSE: I think really trusting our training and our

scout, too. We've worked so hard to be in this moment. And obviously the past few years, not reaching the ultimate goal of winning the National Championship, we haven't reached that yet, but I think just really trusting how the coaches are training us and just continue to push each other each day.

ANNA DeBEER: I think it helps a lot with just being there before, too, with a lot of the experience. I think that's something, these moments are pretty big moments, and just kind of how that feels, it feels really intense at first. The nerves may be there. I think we've had a few people who have been there on the team, which is really going to help us.

Same with everyone else. There's been a lot of players who have been there before, but just to have that, I think that's going to help us a little bit more.

Q. You've played four matches against the other teams here, and your hitting percentage has improved from .091 to .133 to .203 to .289 in those four matches. Is that indicative of improvement or change in approach? Anything you can pinpoint?

CHARITIE LUPER: I'd definitely say improving our ball handling. That's really something we focused on in practice is that first contact is very important. You obviously can't run an offense without having a great first contact.

Just really cleaning up our passing I can say has really helped that because it's given our setters just the free rein to set whoever they want to. And once our offense is like that, there's really no stopping us.

ANNA DeBEER: Yeah, I definitely think we've improved a lot in that regard, but I think over the last few weeks our team has gotten way more comfortable and confident in just going after it, and that could help the hitting percentage a little bit more.

We talked a lot about how we peaked a little bit later than we had thought. Like we had worked really hard all year, and I think we peaked at a really good time. We're continuing to just get better each week. Even in the tournament we've gotten better.

I think that'll help, and that just shows how we've done the past few weeks.

Q. With Dani trying to vie to be the first head coach in D-I volleyball to win a national title, what is your favorite thing about playing for her?

CARA CRESSE: I would just say the balance of goofy and serious. We obviously know when we're in the gym, Dani is like, we're getting to work, focus through the entire practice, entire game, whatever it is. But also she makes it so much fun, and I think we can have fun but also execute what we're trying to execute each day.

ANNA DeBEER: There's a lot of things. Obviously it's hard to come up with one. But just being a student-athlete can be hard, and she just cares about you as a person.

And just random stuff. Like over the past five years, she'll surprise us with going to do something fun like getting our nails done or we're going to go do this and do a team-bonding activity.

She has a balance of if we work hard, it's going to pay off and we'll get some time to enjoy some things that we're not used to. Just the balance between that has really made it special, and it's one of my favorite things.

CHARITIE LUPER: I would say just how Dani is always a woman of her word and she's never fake, if that makes sense. Because I remember how she was when I was on the phone with her when I was in the portal, and everything she said, she stood on that. She never -- what she said on the phone is what she did when I am in her program right now.

She's just an amazing coach overall, and she just doesn't lie about anything.

Q. When it comes to you and Pitt, it almost feels like you two rose at a very similar time. What has that been like from your position to rise in conjunction with a rival and be directly competing with each other?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: I feel like I've been asked this question a lot in the past three years because we've done similar things and every year it comes up.

The same it always has been. Very appreciative that we have each other because I'm not sure one of us could have done it without the other. And the rise of the ACC has also really helped and allowed us to get bigger and more physical athletes.

But the one thing, thinking about our rivalry, that I find interesting, and I don't think people think about, is when we started the rise, both Pitt and us had to have a little extra something. Neither one of us had top 10 recruits. We needed that extra edge.

I think it's rare that both of us have been able to keep that while also getting top recruits. So I think it's what's made

our programs really special is now we're getting top recruits, but we're also playing with that same edge, and I would say swag, that we were before.

Q. Obviously emotion came out for you in the last match. We saw you celebrating with the team. Obviously you have your players out here talking about their connection with you. Just talk about how special this particular group is this year and how you guys have all connected together and how important that has been on and also off the court?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: Yeah, I think this team really took a little work. Whenever you have new pieces, like we brought in Charitie last year, Sofia this year. We have freshmen playing big roles. So it wasn't so seamless.

Then when you accomplish something great, you know that hard work really paid off. I think this team worked together so well and had to be selfless for the entire year for it to work and for us to be here, and that's what made it really special.

But on top of that, just the talk of Louisville hosting the Final Four and them believing in it and whether at the time they thought it was a big deal or not, they've been carrying it with them for four years, and I just was -- it was a special moment that we made it.

I know how hard it is to make a Final Four. They do, too. It's no guarantee whether you're hosting or not. A lot of things have to go right. You have to have a little luck. You have to play great in the right moments. It came together, and we were able to be back here hosting. Just a really big deal, and something very few, if any, coaches and players ever get to experience.

Q. What do you remember as a player getting to experience a Final Four like you did in Omaha?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: It's funny, as a player I don't really remember much. It's like you're in la-la land.

But I just remember really feeling the crowd helped us so much in Omaha and that we were able to feed off that. I remember more about the Final Four there that I wasn't a part of when Nebraska lost to Penn State and I was calling radio or something, and that was crazy with the crowd.

I just remember it's like the hoopla -- it's a little bit extra, and I think that is good because you really realize just how many people are behind you. I think our players are probably feeling that with their families and friends and people have been reaching out and giving them advice telling them they're going to be here.

The Final Four is already a big deal, but it just adds a little bit of extra fun and excitement when there's so many people that have access to see it.

Q. Olivia Babcock has 45 kills in the two matches you've played. Is there anything that you can do to limit her impact on a match?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: It's tough. She's going to get her kills. She's a great player. She's extremely physical. We'll do our best with the game plan, but you can do everything perfectly against Babcock, and she's still going to kill the ball.

We just have to weather that storm and hope offensively that we can match some of that intensity.

I think your plan cannot be to slow her down. You've got to find other ways to win.

Q. Dani, there is a native Nebraskan on every roster. You have two of them on yours. As one yourself, when you hear that, what does that make you think, and what is it about the state -- not the school, the state -- that makes volleyball so special there?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: I just think the impact the Nebraska program has on the youth and the culture of volleyball in the state just makes people want to be a part of it. I think players start playing at a young age and they take a lot of pride in how they're playing.

And on top of that, the club coaches and the high school coaches in the state of Nebraska are excellent. So players are improving and getting better at a faster rate than a lot of states because of that, and a lot of it is because of the coaching.

I didn't know that until I saw probably a tweet that there's a native Nebraskan on every team, and I wonder if that's ever been done before. It's pretty cool.

I'd like to shout out Kentucky a lot, too, now that I'm here, how good the volleyball is in the state of Kentucky. I think it's pretty unique that two states are so well represented.

Q. You have two Louisville natives on your roster. Kentucky continues to put out top programs and top recruits. What do you want the nation to see about Louisville as a volleyball community and Kentucky's place in this sport when you add this kind of an opportunity?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: I think just hosting the Final

Four and seeing the crowd, and not just people that are in the stands, but, like, is there media here. That's one thing that's really important. Are there going to be people out and about enjoying the event throughout the day.

I just want people in the country to know that volleyball is a big deal in this state, and it will continue to be a big deal. And that's how you grow a program and that's how you sustain it is when people care.

I think the chance for the Final Four to be here is a chance for us all to show that we care about the sport and want to be a big part of growing it.

Q. Dani, how many requests for tickets from friends, family, anybody have you gotten this week, and can you speak to how difficult it is for some people -- this is a big event and it's here.

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: Yeah, I've had a lot of people, they're like, oh, your crowd is going to be incredible. I'm like, you forget it was sold out months ago. It was sold out I think in a day or two days. I don't know what the actual stats were.

It's not like Louisville fans just jumped on TicketMaster after we won and were able to get a great seat. Hopefully they've found ways to get in the game through connections.

But, yeah, I've had a lot of requests. And I have no doubt that it's going to be packed. I'm hoping the die-hard Louisville fans found their way in and didn't have to pay too much for a good seat.

Q. What would you cite as the most recent example of that extra edge that you referred to earlier?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: I would say there's maybe a couple -- like the win over UNI just as a whole. When a team is just playing unbelievable -- UNI really was playing unbelievably well, and we couldn't do anything to slow them down.

And we pride ourselves on being a great defensive team, and we couldn't do anything. Just the look in our team's eyes was different. And I felt like Anna DeBeer, she took over some huddles in the locker room and really willed us to win. If you don't have a player like that that feels confident and is able to show that emotion, maybe you don't win that game.

Then we have Sofia new to our team, and against Stanford she played amazing, and you saw some of that edge come out. And I think part of that hopefully is what she's learned

while she's here and learned she can be herself and show some of that, and she's going to need to do that to beat the best teams in the country.

Q. Obviously your connection with Anna is special, and even just what we saw up there, too, the talk between the two of you guys, it goes beyond the court. To have her come back and have the impact on this team she has, how special was that for you to have her come back to this team? And what kind of role across the board has she played this year to get you guys to this point?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: We wouldn't have let her leave, so it was her only option, to come back.

I think with the COVID year and her injury, it really was a no-brainer. Then you throw the icing on the cake that the Final Four is here and we're returning a great team. I think it wasn't much of a conversation for her to come back.

I think without her, we wouldn't be sitting here, obviously, and just the role she's played this year is much more of a leadership role and a maturity role. She's really helped the rest of the team understand that this is a big deal but also helped prepare them for what to expect.

I think it gives everybody a little more confidence when you have somebody like her who's been through it and been through a lot of different things in her career, and she's been through these Final Fours. I just feel like the team is much more prepared than we have been in the past.

Q. Whenever you're out scouting for Pitt, you've played them multiple times, you're very familiar with them, how do you not over-scout for this game since you already know what they're going to do but some things might change?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: Yeah, that's what we do. We try not to over-scout. Again, I got asked about Babcock. We know what she's going to do. It's not a matter of knowing, it's if you can stop it. Maybe we'll get a little break and she'll hit one or two balls out of bounds, I don't know.

I think it's interesting the way we both played in the two games were a little bit different and some of the game plans you can tell were different in the first two games, and we ended up losing both. It's like we've got to change something and really decide what we're going to do.

I think it's more focusing on our side of the net going into Thursday than focusing on what Pitt is doing. The team that executes the best is going to win.

Q. Your team and Pitt are obviously two of the better serving teams in the country. How important will service be tomorrow night?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: Probably one of the most important things.

Q. I know this is not your favorite thing to talk about, but there still hasn't been a female head coach to win a National Championship in D-I women's volleyball. What do you think needs to happen for that to change and for there to be female coaches every year at the Final Four?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: We're getting closer, right? I was just told there's like a 62 percent chance because if us and Penn State win, that goes up to 100. But we're getting there, that there's more. I think there's more female coaches that are staying in the game longer and more female coaches that are getting the opportunity to take over these storied programs.

We're not having to start from the bottom or start at a program, a mid-major and then get -- take a mid-major up and then get a chance at a Power Five. I think that will help with just more opportunities.

Hopefully it starts this week. I don't know. I don't know if there's anything I can do or Katie can do at Penn State. It's more just being consistent and really encouraging other women to stay in the sport and to go for it and showing them that they can do it, too.

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