

2024 NCAA Women's Volleyball Championship

Friday, December 20, 2024

Louisville, Kentucky, USA

KFC Yum! Center

Louisville Cardinals

Coach Dani Busboom Kelly

Elena Scott

Phekran Kong

Championship Press Conference



and come to matches and support them.

So they not only did a lot just in their wins and losses, but just a lot for the whole city.

Then this year in particular is, I think, a little bit more unique. We had a lot more questions early on in the season. We had players kind of in and out of the lineup. We were trying to figure things out, and the five seniors just were so solid mentally with their trust and their day-to-day communication and interaction, it always made it feel like we were going to keep getting better, and we haven't peaked yet.

It's a big part because of the way they handled every single day and came in ready to work and just trusted the staff. It's amazing when that all comes together what can happen.

Q. This is for the players and the coaches. At what part of the game you knew, okay, we're going to win this. At what part were you saying that?

ELENA SCOTT: I think, even though we were down from the start, we've been put in that position many times before in previous games. So I think we just had a calm demeanor the whole time, and we were pretty confident going into the second set.

PHEKRAN KONG: I was going to say we prepare pretty well for all of our matches, I would say, so shout out to our coaching staff. A lot of us just have confidence within ourselves and within one another.

I guess during the match the point that solidified it for me was we were down late in the third or the second, and then one of our girls who doesn't get a lot of playing time, she's down on one knee during a timeout, just speaking so much life and positivity into every single one of us. For her to be that invested knowing she's not really going to see the court all that much just shows how much this team really wants this. So I was like we've got to go, and we've got to go now.

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: I never really felt like it. I

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: Just very thankful to be practicing today. Still in awe of this team and what we did last night and just kind of soaking that in.

Took a live practice today, and we'll get after it a little bit more tomorrow. Used today as kind of a mental reset and organizational day. I think our team's in great spirits. What we did do today was fantastic.

Yes, just still really proud. Just haven't even had time to re-watch the whole game. So excited to do that here when we get back to the hotel.

Q. Dani, I wonder if you could give us an update on Anna and whether you expect her to play, and if she does play, is 80 percent of her better than 100 percent of Payton?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: It's an ankle injury, so I think it's kind of day to day. We'll see. We're going to do everything we can to get her on the court, but we do have a great team behind her. If she can't go, we have some options.

Q. Coach, you talked a lot about this senior class over the course of the tournament, the impact they've had here. Leading up to the championship game, can you just talk about their legacy and then also, I guess, how this particular tournament run, the way that it's gone, has cemented that?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: Yeah, this is their third Final Four, the second National Championship match. Beyond that, just really coming to Louisville and believing in the vision and making it a reality and grabbing this community and making this community not only a place where people love to play volleyball, but people love to watch volleyball



... when all is said, we're done.®

thought this is an eternity. I think we were up 12-6. I was like this feels like an eternity before we can win this match.

Q. Dani, you've had a chance, in terms of building this program, to really kind of see the growth around here, the popularity. But when you look at the bigger picture of the sport, how do you feel like volleyball has become so appealing for the masses in terms of watching on TV, in terms of packing the arena last night? Is there one thing you feel like the game has offered that now people are starting to pay attention to?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: I think the athletes are bigger and stronger and more fun to watch. So I think that puts a better product on the court. I also think we've been given a platform and taken advantage of it.

We said this earlier this year. Two years ago the first game was played on ESPN, it was us versus Kentucky. That was two years ago. Now you see games on NBC and ABC and all of the ESPN networks. So we're finally getting the platform where people can watch, and it's showing that people want to watch it and enjoy it.

It's a really fun sport. I think it's great for kids to come to games. I have a lot of friends and families with young children because it's fast paced. There's cheering after every point. There's a lot of great things about our sport that make it fun to attend and watch on TV.

Q. Elena and PK, the Penn State match in September was probably the low point statistically for this team. You hit .091, scored 47 points in three sets. When did the light come on? When did you start to feel as if this was a really elite team or could be an elite team?

PHEKRAN KONG: I knew this was going to be an elite team because every single girl on this roster decided to come and play here for this amazing coaching staff, and despite some of our ugly losses early in the season, I would say this team definitely started to solidify its identity in the postseason with that win versus the University of Northern Iowa.

Other than that, like we've all just had it in us, and I still think there's another level that this team can take itself to. So it's really cool we have another opportunity to show that.

ELENA SCOTT: I think the early losses in the season helped us grow and kind of just like understand who we are. And even though those were hard times, they made us grow even stronger and just come together as a team.

Q. Dani, you mentioned day-to-day with Anna. How big is it to have an extra day? I think, when you played in the Final Four two years ago, you only had one day in between. How big is that? Second thing, is there much difference in preparation if you're going to have her or if you're not going to have her on the floor?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: It's huge. The extra day gives us hope. I think, if we were playing tomorrow, there would be no hope. I think it's also just much better for our sport when today we have the All-American banquet, we have interviews, we have practice. It's a busy day. It would feel very rushed and crazy to be playing tomorrow.

So I think just for the whole team that's so much better for our sport.

No, there's not much difference in preparation. I'm thankful, looking back, how we run our practices, we have mixed teams every single day. We make sure we do drills where it's not starters versus non-starters the whole time. So all these players are used to playing with each other. This is one time I'm very thankful for that. Sometimes I think maybe we shouldn't do it as much as we do. Now that's paying off. The comfort should be no problem.

Q. It was clear the home court advantage just last night, and I'm curious, was there a moment or maybe something that felt almost surreal in terms of the engagement with the crowd and especially you women on the floor?

ELENA SCOTT: I think one moment that really stuck out to me was when Anna did go down and Payton came in and she had some huge aces and the crowd went crazy. I just had chills, and it was just a surreal moment.

PHEKRAN KONG: To piggy-back off of that, just hearing the crowd during the rallies was super cool because we've had the opportunity to play here at the KFC Yum! Center throughout the season, but it's like an NCAA turf, so it's not really home court advantage. But just being in our city that we love and all of our people can come see us conveniently really helps.

The crowd was rocking, so just feeding off of their fire was huge.

Q. PK, I've read comments from you in the past talking about your coach's toughness. Can you speak to that, to Dani's toughness and how that shows up in a moment like you faced or several moments like you faced last night against Pitt?

PHEKRAN KONG: So we talked a lot about just the power

of the unit this year, how it's going to take every single one of us and who's that charged base within our program, and that would be our coaching staff, Miss Dani Busboom Kelly.

There's not a day where she puts us through a crazy drill or a ridiculous practice or she's just talking about whatever, and I never walk away from a conversation with her thinking like what did she just say? What's going on? We all do a really good job of just taking each other for who we are, and we're very clear about our values and our goals. So we're just all on the same page often and always.

And just playing for somebody who has that kind of openness and knowledge and skill level, I don't know, it's just like she's such an easy person to play for. I think the last time I was out here on the mic talking about Dani, I called her a bad ass, so I'm going to double down on that one because she's legit, she's the truth.

Q. When Anna returned from the locker room from her injury, I saw that you had a conversation with her. As a competitor, was she trying to convince you to let her back in the game?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: A little bit. She was like, I think I can go. I think I can go. Then she jumped a little bit, and she was like, I'm not sure, but I'm here.

I was like, I don't think we're going to need you, thank gosh. So there wasn't that much conversation after that.

Q. A question for the bad ass. Have you as a mom ever had times where it's been difficult for you to coach because of being tugged in different directions or just the demands?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: For sure. I think this whole tournament has been a little bit of a challenge. It's like such a blessing to be home and there's so many amazing things about it. But last night I wanted to get home so I could wake up and see my son this morning. It's just like the balancing act is a little bit tougher where you want to be in both places, and maybe I should be more focused on volleyball.

I also want to take advantage -- like this is rare. So the next postseason run, we're not going to be in Louisville, so I won't get these opportunities. I want to take advantage of the opportunities that I do have to be a mom and make that a priority.

I'm lucky like our whole staff has young kids. So we can kind of balance it out between each other. I think that really helps and makes it not feel like somebody's missing

this or somebody's missing that. It's like, okay, you have this tonight, you have this, and we do a good job of that.

Q. Since last night, have you spoken to Bobbi Petersen and/or before that? Have you ever compared mom coaching notes?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: I have not. We have not compared mom coaching notes. I just texted her congrats, and I'm sure she wasn't expecting that last night. I was asking Payton, I wonder how your mom feels. They totally could have knocked us out, but if they hadn't, you wouldn't have had that moment. Who knows what would have happened?

My husband said he looked down at Bobbi, and Bobbi was like buckle up, when Payton went in the game. I think it was a pretty cool coaching moment for her.

Q. Coach, I know we asked you about this back in 2022, but this will be a historic final with you and Katie, and Coach Cook said last night that the silver lining, even though he was disappointed, was that the two of you would be squaring off and that a woman would win a championship. What does this mean to you as a coach? And what do you think it means to today's players?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: It's hard to really just put that in words. I think it's more of a feeling. It's more like just being really proud that we can be the role models and hopefully blaze a new trail and show ADs that women can do it. We can be moms, and we can be high-level coaches.

Then not only show ADs that women can do it, but our players that they can do both. Then we can be examples day-to-day of how to do that. Whether they want to be full-time moms or have a career, we want to be a good example for that.

It's going to be awesome for the sport, I think, to get this monkey off its back and move on from this, where it's not historic that a woman wins, it's just a regular thing. It will be great when every Final Four there's a chance for a woman to win it.

Q. For both players, recognizing that you don't probably have medical degrees, what is your expectation from Anna on Sunday? Do you think she'll give it a go, and what do you expect from her?

PHEKRAN KONG: My only expectation from Anna is to keep being her. She is one of our captains, has been for years while being here, and whether she's on the court or

not, she is just always going to speak life into people. She's going to stay engaged, and she's going to make sure that we get the job done regardless.

ELENA SCOTT: Whether she's on the court or not, she's going to fulfill her role as a leader.

Q. Follow up on that, can you walk us through exactly what has been going on with her treatment? What are they doing? How are they prepping her for Sunday in the hopes that she'll play?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: It's trying everything and anything. We certainly don't know specifics. I don't know specifics. I trust our team of docs and trainers to do what they can, and they're going to throw everything they possibly can to get her ready and give her a chance.

It's not just being herself, it's a chance to be on the court as a hometown player playing in a National Championship Game on her hometown court. It's a pretty special moment.

Q. Dani, what's your perspective and your viewpoint on Katie Schumacher-Cawley and her season, what she's endured this year?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: Incredible. I cannot imagine going through a season going through chemotherapy and what that must have been like. I heard in a recent article or interview that she hasn't missed a practice all year, and that's like -- that makes it even more incredible to me that she's been able to do that.

I also think -- I haven't listened to her press conferences, but following Russ Rose, who's one of the most legendary coaches ever in our sport and to take a team back to the Final Four in just three years, like take being a man or a woman out of it, that's an amazing accomplishment.

Then what she's done this year despite the breast cancer. She has a new team. It's really, really impressive, and I think another just great moment for the sport of volleyball.

Q. This is for the players. When you watch a game film, how do you approach it? Do you listen to the broadcast? Are you muted? How do you watch game film on television?

ELENA SCOTT: On other teams?

Q. For your matches.

ELENA SCOTT: A little bit of both maybe. You don't want to listen to everything that the commentators say, but we

like to watch film on our own sometimes too just to self-reflect on what we did as a team. So a little bit of both.

PHEKRAN KONG: What she said.

Q. Sort of another history question. The ACC, this would be the first title for an ACC team. Obviously Stanford came in, but their titles were with the Pac-12. When you came into this program, nobody maybe would have expected it to happen as quickly for this team, but it has. What do you think has been the big key, and what does this mean to represent your conference the way that you guys have?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: The players, we've got some great players that believed in the vision. The rise of Pitt volleyball, I think, just put the ACC on the map, so more players wanted to come into the conference.

Eight years ago, it felt like I was always fighting the battle of, well, I want to play in the Big Ten. I'll go to this school just because they're in the Big Ten. Now we don't hear that anymore, which is great.

So I think it's just all the ACC schools have really stepped up, and I think the ACC has some of the best young coaches in volleyball right now, which is exciting, and just expect it to get better and better each year.

Q. For either player, when you look back on those two aces by Payton last night, which one was more impressive? I think there was one that was down the line and just got it inside the corner. That seemed to freeze them. That's the one that kind of stood out. When you reflect back on that, was that another gear you didn't see in her, or was that pretty typical?

ELENA SCOTT: I'd say that's pretty typical for her. She's competing every single day in practice. The consistency of her serve is insane. Both of those serves were insane to do.

PHEKRAN KONG: I was going to say the first one was cool because like nobody touched it. It just fell on that back line. It's like your worst nightmare as a serve receiver. I don't do any of that, so kudos to you guys.

The second one, she put that ball on the seam against some of the two best outside hitters in the conference, in the country, and like that's hard to do. Yeah, just the work she puts in day in and day out showed off, and I love that for her.

Q. Dani, you're always so composed and kind of stoic out there, but you mentioned last night you were trying

to get back and see your son this morning. Did you ever for a moment think, okay, we're playing on the last day with a team that we kind of built for this in our home arena and just what tomorrow is going to be like when you walk out there?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: I honestly haven't really thought about it. I think that's the beauty of having two days. Okay, we're going to reset.

It's going to be surreal. I've been saying this a lot, that we were telling recruits -- Elena probably and Cara Cresse, before they were committed -- the Final Four is going to be here in 2024. They were, oh, great. But to actually be doing it is really incredible.

Just to see the support of the city, I mean, everybody's so excited. It just means a lot to -- like for this senior class to go out on that, the highest you could possibly go out on is an incredible accomplishment. I think that's going to feel a little bit different on Sunday.

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