

2025 NCAA Women's Volleyball Championship

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T-Mobile Center

Kentucky Wildcats

Coach Craig Skinner

Brooklyn DeLeye

Eva Hudson

Semifinal Press Conference



Q. Brooklyn, Topeka not too far away. I'm sure you have a bunch of family coming down. What is it like being down close to home?

BROOKLYN DeLEYE: Yeah, it's just surreal. I just know, like, when we were busing over here, it's like someplace that I go to very often, even growing up. It's just really cool to be back. Super excited for this opportunity.

Q. You guys are on a roll now. You've been playing well. You're going up against a Wisconsin team that's also playing really well. What do you see from them, Eva?

EVA HUDSON: They're just a really physical team. I mean, coming from the Big Ten, I've played against them a few times. That block is absolutely massive.

Just having the confidence that people are going to cover us so we can take big swings. That's not a problem with this team at all.

Yeah, super excited for some good volleyball.

Q. Brooklyn, this morning it was announced that there are four All-American selections on this Kentucky roster. We've heard all season about the versatility of this group. What does that type of recognition and the success you've had this season say about what this team is capable of?

BROOKLYN DeLEYE: Yeah, I think we were just so happy for each other. I mean, it truly is just a team sport. None of us would have gotten that award without every one of our teammates. We were truly 14 strong.

Yes, some girls got it and some did not unfortunately. I mean, we seriously would not have done it without any of those girls. I think it just shows that everybody is in it for each other. Every day in practice we are just working to make each other better.

I think it just shows that, yeah, we just love each other and have a great time playing together.

THE MODERATOR: We'd like to welcome Kentucky to the stage here.

Coach, feel free to open us up with your opening statement.

CRAIG SKINNER: First of all, I'd like to thank the NCAA for hosting the event and getting us organized to this point, putting on a special event for our student-athletes and university. Thank the city of Kansas City for welcoming not only Kentucky but Wisconsin, Texas A&M and Pittsburgh. Our sport is growing immensely. I can't thank enough people for making this a big deal for us and our players and the other programs.

Kentucky is looking forward to great competition this weekend. It's an exciting time in our sport. We can't wait to be a part of it.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, coach.

Questions for the student-athletes, please.

Q. Eva, I wanted to just ask if you could describe the season that you've had up to this point in one word, what would you use and why?

EVA HUDSON: Oh, goodness. I would just say grit. We've had a few amazing wins, a few sad losses. But we've just learned so much through the ups and downs of the season.

Just to see no matter a win or a loss the team come in the next day at practice wanting to get better, I think it just shows how much grit we have.



Q. Eva and Brooklyn, at what part of the season did you know you had a chance to be here? Is there a certain game?

EVA HUDSON: Honestly, I feel like I knew since January. As soon as we got into season and, like, immediately we clicked. We had three new transfers, three new freshmen. The girls that had been on the team prior were so welcoming.

Literally our first practice together. We all just started clicking. Honestly, it was so, so fun. I knew right off the bat we had something special. It was just now it's down to the execution.

Q. Your offense gets a lot of attention. The defense has been so good this year. Touch on that.

BROOKLYN DeLEYE: Yeah, us offensive players, we couldn't do it without the people surrounding us. Like, Molly Tuozzo, Molly Berezowitz, Trinity Ward, all the DSs. I mean, they're just so good with their craft.

We wouldn't be able to put the ball away if they don't get it up. It truly makes us want to work harder for them, make those plays for them because, I mean, they're behind us every single point. They're even telling us what shots to hit.

Truly they may go unnoticed, but not to us.

Q. We were talking to one of the broadcasters about superlatives, who would be the class clowns. She said you two have the closest relationship as the dynamic duo. Do you want to respond to that? What makes you so powerful as a duo?

EVA HUDSON: Class clown (smiling)? There's some very, very funny people on our team.

I guess, yeah, our relationship is really fun. We both have a very dry, sarcastic humor. It really bounces off of one another. Also being able to relate to one another, both being in like a big role on a team.

Yeah, we immediately clicked. I'm using 'clicked' so much (smiling). I don't know if we're class clowns.

BROOKLYN DeLEYE: Yeah.

EVA HUDSON: I appreciate it.

BROOKLYN DeLEYE: Yeah.

CRAIG SKINNER: We have several clowns.

EVA HUDSON: Big personalities on our team.

BROOKLYN DeLEYE: We don't take a lot of things too seriously. I think that goes to a lot of our teammates. It's just fun (smiling).

Q. Kassie O'Brien, a freshman setter, is a big part of guiding your offense. What sets her apart and why is she as special as she is?

BROOKLYN DeLEYE: I think just the person and player that she is. She truly is one of the hardest workers out there. She's just so easy to work with.

If you tell her something that you need, like, she will immediately make that change. You know she's working so hard to get you the right ball. I mean, that's just truly what you need in a setter. I think she's adapted to the game so well.

She got on here and just had swag right away. That's cool to see from a freshman. We've all been in that position. It's really tough changing from high school to college.

I think she's just done a great job. All the awards she's got have been so deserved. Like, she truly deserves it all. She's just a great person, too.

Q. You've come out in the biggest matches starting with Nebraska at the beginning of the year, Texas at Texas. What is it about your team that makes you play the best in the biggest matches and be so loose as a group?

BROOKLYN DeLEYE: I think just the trust that we have in each other. I mean, we all have been talking all year-round about our why: Why we continue to play, why we just love what we're doing. I think that just has carried out through those big matches because, I mean, there is so much pressure in those matches.

I think just bouncing off one another has truly helped. I mean, it's just fun. There is a lot of pressure in volleyball, but you just kind of have to go back to it's just a game. The next day will come no matter what happens. You're still going to continue on.

I mean, it's just like, yes, there's a lot of big pressure in those moments. It's not the end of the world. We're out there to have fun and play with one another and just carry those memories throughout our life.

EVA HUDSON: And one of those things we remind



ourselves is we recently, in the last few games, have drawn smiley faces on our hands or somewhere where we can see it to remind us to play with joy. Some of the best times in volleyball and when we're really playing well is when we're all playing with joy and bouncing off one another.

Kind of have those reminders in those pressure situations, too, is a really good thing.

Q. What is the view of volleyball and recruits, the volleyball community, what is the view of that in the Kansas City area? How do people see volleyball?

CRAIG SKINNER: Well, it's massive. It's one of the epicenters of volleyball in the country. We spent a lot of time recruiting here. We were reminiscing with these guys on the way over in the bus, the tournaments they played in the Triple Crown, in the convention center. We recruited Shelby Workman from the Kansas City area, Madison Lilley from the Kansas City area. Probably forget one.

You have to give a lot of credit to club coaches and high school coaches in the area because they've done a heck of a job of selling the sport and making it a big deal in this area.

Q. Eva, you mentioned in your opening comments that there were some sad moments this season. How would you summarize the loss against Pitt and the team's bounce-back from that?

EVA HUDSON: Yeah, I think going into one of those tournaments that had a lot of hype around it, then getting swept, not really knowing what to do. We had different pieces going different places. We were down for about a day, then right back to work. It was immediately what can we get better, this part of our game didn't get the job done.

Kind of just figuring out those pieces, and then not really dwelling. That's when one loss turns to two. Yeah, we really did a great job of coming in that practice with a lot of energy and a lot of joy.

THE MODERATOR: Brooklyn, Eva, thank you for your time.

We'll continue with questions for Coach Skinner.

Q. Craig, how have you evolved in terms of rolling the punches when really good players leave you, then embracing new players?

CRAIG SKINNER: I think every coach in America is having to absorb different things, whether it's a player

leaving or coming in. It's part of our coaching makeup now.

It's hard at first, but at the same time I've always felt like, as a coach, if you're not adapting, you're going to get passed up. My job as a coach is to adapt to the times and moments and weeks and seasons and people.

Can't get caught up too much in what's happened. How about let's take advantage of what we do have.

Q. I think this is the fifth time since 2020 either you or Louisville have been in the Final Four. Can you talk about what that says about the state of Kentucky and its place in volleyball nationally.

CRAIG SKINNER: Man, there's been such an immense amount of pride in our game in Kentucky since I was in college. I was coaching club in Muncie, Indiana. We had battles with NKJV, KIVA, all of those clubs back in the day.

The population and the interest in the sport and the coaching in our state has grown tremendously. I think sports in Kentucky is massive because there's no pro sports. When you see the spotlight on the University of Kentucky and Louisville and all the sports that they do, that people want to be a part of special things like that.

But it started a long time ago. Both universities invested a lot of money and resources into the sport, coaches, people. We've seen the benefits over the last 10 years.

Q. You obviously know Kelly for a long time. What do you respect or what impresses you most about what he's done in Madison? Is there a favorite early memory with him?

CRAIG SKINNER: Oh, ones that I can share publicly (smiling)? I'm just kidding.

Kelly has earned everything he's gotten. He's come from humble beginnings, both in school and in coaching. He's been on -- coached, I don't know, probably 15-3 team and 16-2's team and packed his car in an evening, had to be in Houston 20 hours later to start his first coaching job probably making about \$10,000 a year. I have a lot of respect for someone that earned their way to this point in time.

I always tell people that if you're going to get into coaching, don't get in it because you like it and you can make some money. Get into it because you have a passion for helping people go above and beyond where they are. Kelly has demonstrated that for a long time.



Q. This question is not very serious. Have you heard or do you have thoughts around there being three bald coaches here at the Final Four?

CRAIG SKINNER: I've heard that my whole career. Why are there so many good bald coaches (smiling)?

I have no idea, to be honest with you. Hopefully, yeah, I hear it all the time from my players. They're very good at making me aware of what's happening in the coaching hair department. It is funny, though (smiling). There's a few bald guys out there right now, too.

Q. With Kelly, there's a strong Muncie connection here. It's been around forever as a volleyball hotbed. What was the atmosphere, the culture that has created such a volleyball world out of Muncie?

CRAIG SKINNER: Well, I mean, you have to give a lot of credit to the Shondell family and Don Shondell for starting the Ball State program that Pete Waite, next to you, played in. Steve Shondell, the oldest Shondell son, played in and started the Muncie Burriss program and Munciana Volleyball Club. When I started coming through Ball State, yeah, I'll try this coaching thing. I just fell in love with what they were about.

Ball State University started as a teacher's college. Coaching is teaching. I think everybody -- Wes Lyon that started the program with Steve Shondell, then Dave Shondell, then carried on with Jim Craig, and currently Mike Lingenfelter and Wes still part of the deal, you just -- the joy and passion and interest in helping players do something better than they have ever have before. You really felt the essence of what coaching is.

I tried to get away from coaching for a while. I had an accounting degree, got into banking. It sucked me back in because I love the competition and the teaching aspect. That started in Muncie, Indiana, in 1988 or '9 for me.

Q. You talked about the growth of the sport. How important is this weekend for the growth of the sport? Both you and Wisconsin won titles in the last five years, but you're missing Texas, Nebraska, Penn State, aren't here. How important is this weekend to show the growth of the sport? Do you have any grand gestures planned to shout about the importance of what's going on here?

CRAIG SKINNER: I think they're always important. I think you're probably going to miss some fans of Nebraska that would be here since it's three hours away. We're also going to gain new fans, people that have never watched it.

In the last few weeks, we've had people in Lexington that were doing the routine of sporting events and things like that. All of a sudden they're like, Let's try this volleyball thing. Now we have hundreds and thousands of new fans in Kentucky.

Our job is to continue to find people that don't know what they're missing, educate them and show them something exciting. It's important in that aspect. It's not important necessarily for the ratings because the ratings have been there for the last five years. It's how we continue to get new people involved in the game so more resources, more people, more coverage and viewership continues to grow.

I do not have anything specifically planned, but you never know, so...

Q. Obviously the focus never wavers, especially once you get into the meat of the season. What is the scouting process like when you get to this point of the season? Is it extra focus or try to keep the same mentality?

CRAIG SKINNER: I don't know if it's extra. It's probably heightened in your attention. You got to start early because, once you start getting into the week of the Final Four, there's a lot of things that start happening with the travel and the hoopla, the red carpet, the bands, gear, all of those things. You got to kind of get started early in the week.

Because the margins are so thin at the Final Four, every team is really good, you got to find nooks and crannies of things that maybe we can exploit with Wisconsin. Are we doing extra or way more than we have before? No, because I think that would just put undue pressure on us and our team.

But we have to perform and execute. I think it's more about how can we be in a good frame of mind when the match starts tomorrow night.

Q. Coach, obviously it's been some time since you were coaching the Huskers. With Nebraska not here, there still being a decent contingency of Nebraska fans, what would be your message to some of the Nebraska fans to back the Wildcats this weekend?

CRAIG SKINNER: Well, first of all, I certainly have an appreciation for the Nebraska fans. Ever since I left, they've said hello and wished us luck. When we weren't playing the Huskers, they were always supporting myself and Kentucky, whatever team that we were coaching that particular year.

The thing I appreciate about those fans is that they love the game and they appreciate the artistry of our sport, how well it's performed and how dynamic it's performed.

Those fans, I think one thing I would challenge them to do is bring new fans along with you that maybe aren't just the ordinary Nebraska fans that go everywhere. Bringing more people on board, sell out the football stadium again at some point in time down the road.

Appreciate all they've done for the sport. Our fans are trying to nip at their heels to get to where they are.

Q. We always unfairly want to compare teams, things in sports. Let me unfairly ask you, the spring 2021 team was a fantastic team with so many great players. Very different than this team. How does this one compare? Seems like there are things that this one does that's very different than that team. Is that fair?

CRAIG SKINNER: Sure, no question. I think it's our job as a staff to figure out what were the things that we can be elite at as a group and take advantage of those.

This team's way of playing is different than that team's. We found ways to win offensively. We found ways to win defensively. We found ways to win with our serve. If we only had to rely on one of those aspects, it would be tough to get to where we are. We have to be adaptable, tough, resilient.

The fighting spirit that that team had in 2021 was very evident with the people in that team. I think you've seen that with this group, too. You have a group of individuals that will do anything and everything to be successful. They will let go of how they're doing personally and focus on what they can do for the people next to them.

Q. Knowing that you would have a fairly talented team this year, the way recruiting is projecting years out, what did you see in Kassie O'Brien as we talk about rankings and all that, because she wasn't talked about as much as others? What did you see, knowing she could come in, lead this team the way she has a couple years ago that other schools didn't see?

CRAIG SKINNER: I think it's really important in recruiting to sometimes you have to say no. What I mean by that is there's a lot of really talented players that other people think are really talented. If they're saying yes, we got to go after this kid, it's okay to differ in your opinion.

That's the first fact.

The reason we really appreciated Kassie O'Brien is

because whenever you watched her play, it was all in all the time for her club and her high school. There was never anything about her that said I want to be really good, it's about me, I'm going to get all these accolades. When she was on the court, she was fighting like hell for her team, whatever team that was, to win this point, not the match, but the point at hand.

All setters, all players at that level have things they need to get better at, improve on. She was no different in that area. Psychologically she was who we are as a team and our program.

Q. How do you sum up the impact that Molly has made since transferring from Marquette? Having familiarity here...

CRAIG SKINNER: Molly in particular, we're very familiar with the Berezowitz family, the history of sports in that family, Maddie being part of our program.

There was never a day that went by in Maddie's career that she wasn't all about Kentucky. Never been a day since Molly has been here that she hasn't been all about Kentucky.

The family is all excited for the people around them as they are themselves. The determination that that family has and Molly has, in particular, to improve and be better and to do whatever she can to win us a particular point is off the charts.

I don't remember the second part of your question.

Q. The familiarity with having transfers.

CRAIG SKINNER: It's the way of the world right now. It's what we're going to have to do as programs and teams. Again, kind of very important as coaches, there's a lot of good players that come and go, but who are you and what are you about as a person, what are you about as a team, as a program.

Hopefully you choose the people that want it, they want to choose Kentucky because they're in it for the big picture, not just for themselves. But there's two parts to that, so...

Q. Another new feature this year was you had to play the SEC tournament. Now that we're a couple weeks removed, how did that impact the trajectory of this team, the postseason afterwards?

CRAIG SKINNER: Yeah, I mean, I think there's a little trepidation going into it because you didn't know what to expect, you didn't know what the league's investment was

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going to be. You didn't necessarily know how it would be received Thanksgiving week on a Tuesday evening for the championship.

Looking back afterwards, highly recommend every top league or whoever invest big-time because everybody was paying attention to that tournament. The SEC did a phenomenal job of making our players feel like it was special, making it feel like a championship environment. ESPN and their crew did an amazing job of making it a massive event.

I have no idea what the ratings were, but I can't tell you how many people were paying attention that I've received emails, texts, phone calls from.

You have to change, you have to adapt. There's some things you wish you had about the old schedule, things you wish were different. But overall it was an amazing, I think, event for our sport. There are a lot of people will wonder, What if we did that?

Q. You mentioned earlier the importance of adaptability as a coach, finding the right prospect. All but four teams around the country are looking at next season. How do you navigate trying to do your best this weekend and the transfer portal?

CRAIG SKINNER: Yeah, I mean, you have to have a balance of both. You have to spend the appropriate amount of time on this particular team 'cause we owe it to our team to do that.

But you also have to pay attention to the future. We're no exception to that. At the same time I'm spending very little energy on that currently, and most of my energy is spent on this team, this 2025 team, because we owe them the opportunity to have the best chance to win on Thursday and keep the season going.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thanks for your time.

CRAIG SKINNER: Thanks so much. Appreciate all you guys being here.

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