

2025 NCAA Women's Volleyball Championship

Friday, December 19, 2025

Kansas City, Missouri, USA

T-Mobile Center

Kentucky Wildcats

Coach Craig Skinner

Kassie O'Brien

Asia Thigpen

Championship Press Conference



It's just so cool seeing so many of our girls step up in big situations.

Q. Kassie, coming in as a freshman, you have basically all upperclassmen hitters. What was the process to get them to buy into you?

KASSIE O'BRIEN: Yeah, obviously it was super cool just being able to come in January and building on that from the beginning of the year till now. Our whole team was here in January. I think we got kind of it early, we got to, like, connect early on the court.

As a freshman setter, it is hard having a lot of other experienced hitters come in. They believed in me from the beginning. I just wanted them to know I'd be able to get them the ball that they wanted. I think it's super cool just being in the situation we are now in. It just shows how special this team is.

Q. Asia, can you talk about your development this year. It felt like it took you a little bit of time to get used to the right side. Talk about your growth.

ASIA THIGPEN: Yeah, I feel like in the beginning of the year I really kind of struggled on the right just with tracking and the blocking aspect.

Again, our coaches do such a good job of instilling confidence in me. Again, Kassie does a really good job of just giving me the ball I need to be successful. That comes with a lot of preparation, watching film, and then just lots of reps in the gym.

Q. Asia, there's this common theme of this run being special. From your lens, what makes this championship run so special to you?

ASIA THIGPEN: It's kind of like a cliché answer, but just the people. Everyone in this program is just so bought into each other. You could feel it from January. I feel like freshmen and the transfers came in, I feel like I had known them for six months. It was super crazy the bonds we had

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Kentucky.

We will start with an opening statement by coach.

CRAIG SKINNER: I'm not sure what revolutionary opening statement I can come up with that we haven't heard before.

We're at the pinnacle of our sport. It's a great opportunity for Kentucky volleyball and our fans to be in this moment. We've been working really hard for a year to put ourselves in this position. Couldn't be more proud of our team, the way they pulled that match out last night against Wisconsin. All the respect that we have for their program, but also the respect that we have for Texas A&M, what they've accomplished to this point.

Kudos to the SEC and the coaches in our league for getting our conference in the position to be an elite league in the sport of volleyball in the NCAA.

Proud to be part of Kentucky and the Southeastern Conference.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Kassie, being a freshman, being in this position, then Trinity also coming in, what does it speak to you all being so young but being able to deliver?

KASSIE O'BRIEN: Yeah, I think just props to our teammates. They're always there to just kind of pull us in and lean on us. Everyone here trusts in us. I think that's a big part of going into these big matches, just knowing we have so many people behind us that are willing to go out there and tell us that we can do it and believe in us. I think that's super huge.



off the court. You can kind of see that on the court.

Yeah, we're just a special group of people. The coaches, the players, every single part of the staff is invested in this program.

Q. Seems like a long time ago, but what do you remember about that October meeting with A&M?

ASIA THIGPEN: Yeah, we beat them, but they had a really good offensive night. That's what we remember. We've seen versus their matches versus Louisville and Nebraska, just like their big block presence. They've grown as a team since then. We have, too. I think just continuing to instill confidence in ourselves that we can do this.

Yeah, just watching a little bit more recent film, I think we played them a couple months ago. We're two totally different teams going to go at it on Sunday.

Q. Kassie, being from Katy, Maddie on the other side is also from Katy. Do you know her at all?

KASSIE O'BRIEN: Yeah, it's super cool. I actually grew up, we both played at Houston Skyline. I kind of grew up watching her, inspired me in ways. I think it's super cool just being able to be from the same district, both be playing here in the national championship. I think it just shows how strong Texas teams are, what a cool opportunity it is to show that both of us are from the same area, being able to play on this big stage.

Q. Regardless of the result on Sunday, it will be the last match of the season for this group of players. What will you take away from this team?

ASIA THIGPEN: I think just the aspect of, like, playing with joy. You can see when we're playing, we all have these smiley faces drawn on our hands. We all play so much better when we play loose and free, playing for joy.

I think just taking that into the next couple years of volleyball, just understanding that I play my best when I'm confident and I'm just having fun.

Q. Now that you've had a chance to settle down and process what happened last night, early in the match were you ever worried about how things were unfolding? How did you process that?

KASSIE O'BRIEN: Yeah, I don't think we were ever worried. We came out in the first set not playing our best. The good thing about that is we knew we could wash it and move on. We could just have so much more to give and

show.

We were never worried. We knew that Wisconsin was a great team, and they are. They were going to play their best. We needed to go out and play our game, as well.

ASIA THIGPEN: Yeah, going off that, they had an awesome first set. They were siding out like 100%. They were hitting like .800. Super hard to stop, but at the same time we weren't really executing on our side. The score kind of reflects that.

Eva Hudson was just talking awesome thing about volleyball is it's 0-0 now. We can start over. It's a fresh start.

Yeah, we just kind of washed it out of our system and knew that we had a couple more sets in us.

Q. Asia, you were named the elite scholar athlete for this regional semifinal. What did that mean to you? Can you connect that at all to the standard of excellence that Kentucky volleyball demands?

ASIA THIGPEN: Yeah, shout-out Ricky, our academic advisor and everyone. They do a really good job at UK just preparing the student-athletes to be successful off and on the court. We have tutors, a lot of academic resources. I think a combination of that. Then just UK pushing us to be excellent both on and off the court.

Q. Because this is the last match, the national championship, how do you balance making sure you're fine-tuned as much as you can be and scouting your opponent and film?

ASIA THIGPEN: I think just taking today and then tomorrow to just clear our minds from the Final Four match. You can see a lot of us crying because it was a five-set thriller, super close, we came back. Taking two days to really clear our minds, have our minds focused for the Finals.

Body-wise, taking time to rest and getting treatment.

Q. Knowing that it's an opponent you've already seen before that you're playing, does it make it easier or do you like it more that you're playing somebody that you see all the time?

KASSIE O'BRIEN: I think it's just super cool. I mean, yes, we've played them in the past. Like we said earlier, I mean, both teams are completely different now. A&M is playing really good volleyball, but so are we. It's just going to be a great match and I'm looking forward to it.



Q. Kassie, a couple months ago you talked about that Penn State game, first got the reins to set, being a favorite memory of the season. Talk about how much growth you've had since then. How do you think you've grown?

KASSIE O'BRIEN: Yeah, I mean, thinking back to that game, it still kind of gives me the chills. That's kind of what started off. Shout-out to Craig and all the teammates just having confidence in me in that match.

Going forward from there, I think I've grown so much more in my IQ and understanding the game. I've had so many film sessions with Kyle, so much more opportunities to grow and learn, knowing, like, the blocking schemes and all that.

It's super cool to reflect back on the beginning of the season and then see where we are now.

THE MODERATOR: Asia and Kassie, thank you for your time.

We'll continue with questions for coach.

Q. Your players have talked about drawing smiley faces on their hands. What do you think about that? Have they encouraged you to draw smiley faces or have they drawn on you?

CRAIG SKINNER: Well, it's a collective effort to understand why we're playing the game. I think the beginning of the season we gave them pictures of themselves, and I said this the other day, playing at an earlier point in time in their career, so as a little girl. Why did that little athlete play volleyball? Because they loved it. They had fun. They wanted to be around their friends and teammates.

It creates an environment where you're playing for something bigger than yourself. Our sports psychologist, Dr. Cormier, when you get to this point in time, you feel the emotions, the pressure, the what-ifs, if this happens, if that happens, the media coverage. It all becomes way bigger than why that little girl was playing the game when she was 10 years old.

It's just a great reminder that we play a sport because it's fun. We cannot lose that perspective, because regardless of outcomes, you're doing something that's fun.

Q. Can you speak to the importance for the SEC of the championship that you won in the spring of '21. Then also in the growth of the sport in this conference, what

it meant to have a conference tournament, what the discussions were with Greg and around the league to make that happen.

CRAIG SKINNER: Yeah, that might be a long-winded answer on some of that.

First of all, the first part of the question, obviously I knew that no SEC team had ever won a national championship. In recruiting, it was, hey, we're going to be the next team or the first team in the SEC to win a national championship, come join us.

Sometimes that's a little, not demanding, but it's not for everybody. To be really good, you've got to invest a lot of time. I'd been a part of a national championship program. I just wanted people to feel what that was like. Not just winning it, but the work and the time and the competitive desire it takes to get to that point because that's the way life is.

So for us to do that I think broke down doors that either Kentucky could do again or someone else in the league can do. We're very proud of doing that.

The SEC Championship, man, 15 years ago, I would have said no way because there's so much going on, so many other leagues that were better than us, that were doing things that we needed to try to catch up with our RPI. Since we've been doing that, and been able to get to the national championship, creating something that other leagues didn't have, could put a spotlight on our league.

The other part of it was that the championship needs to be determined on the court. We had Missouri and Texas A&M join the league. Now we have Texas and Oklahoma. Everyone is going to have an uneven schedule. Yes, there was a champion. We were the champion a lot. We had a different schedule than most of the other leagues.

Having a championship determined it on the court. The SEC is known for putting on championships. We're the only sport in the league that didn't have a championship. There's a lot of different minds and thoughts going into it, culminating in what I thought was a spectacle for volleyball. The league did a tremendous job of putting a spotlight on our athletes.

Q. With the benefit of hindsight, having an all-SEC national championship match, how do you think that run prepped you for this run?

CRAIG SKINNER: I mean, the amount of emotions, the time. You're going to have to play fatigued, play physically and mentally drained a little bit. Obviously both teams are



going in after a long NCAA tournament to a championship. Now that we've put a ton of energy and effort physically and mentally.

Because we've done that before, maybe it gives us a little bit of an advantage. Also A&M has a chance to respond because they didn't quite get the trophy.

But they had to play tough matches; we had to play tough matches. The more you experience, the more types of matches and feelings you have, the more things you can pull from.

Sunday's match is going to be completely different in terms of what we feel. Hopefully at some point during this season we have been there before and we can draw from those situations.

But you never know until 2:30 on Sunday what it's going to go like.

Q. You've had some pretty good success with freshmen setters. What do you do to get them in the right head space to be ready?

CRAIG SKINNER: Well, first of all, I always say that great players make you a better coach. They're pretty damn good players to start with.

I don't know. I felt like as a coach when I was a kid growing up playing sports, I just remember the coaches that believed in me. I think if they know you believe in them, then why can't they do special things. Instill some sort of belief.

I think our staff does a really good job of, I don't care what age you are, I don't care how old you are, why can't you be successful at this? So if they put the effort into it and the work in it that creates the confidence. I can't give them confidence, they have to earn their own confidence, but just show them the path. If they walk down the path themselves, then we're going to believe in them. We definitely have believed in all those setters.

Q. I asked Jamie this yesterday. Because the sport community on these campuses, especially in the SEC, is tight-knit, how much have you heard from other coaches in other sports during this run? How much has the NIL investment impacted Kentucky and the conference as a whole?

CRAIG SKINNER: I mean, I was just texting with Jamie this morning. I've known Jamie for a long time. We both texted congratulations throughout the year. Heard a lot from a lot of coaches at Kentucky. We have a close-knit

group of coaches, our staff, all sports. Other previous coaches I've worked with and have come from our program.

It's an awesome community to be a part of. Very supportive. We all know what it feels like to win big-time. We all know what it feels like to be on the other end of tough losses. You never know how it feels till you've been there before. It's great to hear from people that have experienced that.

NIL, transfer portal affects us all. We have to learn, adapt, figure out what works for us, not what you hear works for somebody else. You adapt. You either adapt or you die in this deal. We're trying to adapt. It feels like we're adapting each and every week, month, year.

But if we're asking our players to do that, we have to do the same as coaches.

Q. I think it was yesterday you brought up accountability partners. I don't think I've heard you talk about that throughout the course of this season. Anything else you can share about what that looks like, maybe specifically two people that you've seen find success with each other.

CRAIG SKINNER: I think that started probably in COVID because we're like, How do we keep our team motivated for all this when we're not around them?

Coach Spurlock, our strength coach, and Katy Poole, came up with small groups that they could be in connection with each other and challenge each other, just, Hey, this is what I'm doing today. What are you doing? This is what I'm doing today. What are you doing? From that point on in the offseason in May and the summer, we've done that.

We've also tried to, Hey, you connect better with this person over that person, whoever on your team. If you're not yourself or you're out of character, that person, they can remind you without saying it in a critical way.

Sometimes I don't even know who they might rely on for that type of support. I think it's really important. Everyone knows when you're kind of having an off day. Who is that person that can remind you it might be a tough day, but we can help each other through this.

I don't necessarily have any specific examples, but they've done a really good job of that for each other.

Q. Last night Brooklyn hit a 160. Multiple digs in the fifth set. She showed up defensively. How important is it for as a player in general to be multi-dimensional?

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

CRAIG SKINNER: We don't have Brooklyn, we don't win last night. I don't really care what the stats say. We don't.

The digs she had, I think she had six digs in the fifth game, if I'm not mistaken. That's ridiculous.

You can take a whole match, what it looks like statistically, or you can take it set by set. It looks very different if you look at it set by set.

She impacted the game immensely. Maybe if she has a tough night, look at Asia hits .300. It balances out in its ways. Brooklyn was as focused in set five as she was in set one. Props to her.

Q. You mentioned a bit ago you had been a part of a championship staff as an assistant. When you first took this job, why was Kentucky the right place for you? Did you envision this consistent high-level success?

CRAIG SKINNER: I interviewed at a couple different places and turned down some opportunities. I'm someone that probably operates a little bit more on feel than others. When I got here, Mr. Barnhart picked me up at the airport, I had a two-hour conversation with him, felt like this is where I belonged.

It was the people of Kentucky, who I am as a person, I thought that was pretty easy to sell. Material things don't motivate me, but people and feelings do. Kentucky was all about that.

I can buy into hard work and effort and earning things. But the other side of that, Kentucky is a flagship institution of the state. There's no pro sports. When you do something special, they will get all in all the time. We're feeling that right now.

Q. When you look at going forward towards this A&M team, without giving too much away, when you're facing a middle blocker as physical as Ifenna --

CRAIG SKINNER: Who (laughter)?

Q. How do you go about attacking a middle blocker like that? How do you go about attacking a middle that is as physical at the net as she is?

CRAIG SKINNER: Have great hitters that can navigate some of that.

She's going to get some blocks. There is no doubt Ifenna is going to get blocks on Sunday. We just have to limit the

number of chances she has. We have to control the ball so Kassie has multiple options, not just one or two.

We have to be able to transition, everybody available in transition, so that she doesn't get a pattern on what we're doing. We have to attack on the left side of the net, the right side of the net, up the middle. Sometimes maybe we'll go up the middle first and then go to the pin. Sometimes we might go to the pin, back to the middle.

You just have to keep them guessing but also understand if she stuffs you straight down, it's like, congratulations, next point. Here is the whistle, let's go.

She's the center of their defense. But they do a really good job behind her. Everyone is a great volleyball player on that team to make an impact. She's very good.

Q. Earlier you said great players make you a better coach. Do you feel there's anything this team has taught you new in your 21st year of coaching?

CRAIG SKINNER: Oh, man. I don't know if 'new'. Because they play with such joy, I want to coach more players like that. I want players that you don't really have to coach body language and enthusiasm. If you do, you're spending all your effort on the wrong things. We can spend our energy on how do we put the pieces together and form a system to go around that.

In the recruiting world, just trying to find those people that are driven internally, and have an enthusiasm, infectious enthusiasm, for life. Those guys, being around them every day, I look forward to that, our staff looks forward to it. Let's get more of those players.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for your time, coach.

CRAIG SKINNER: Thanks, guys. Thanks for being here.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports