

2025 NCAA Women's Volleyball Championship

Friday, December 19, 2025

Kansas City, Missouri, USA

T-Mobile Center

Texas A&M Aggies

Coach Jamie Morrison

Emily Hellmuth

Ava Underwood

Maddie Waak

Championship Press Conference



knew it had the potential to reach the level that we have.

The university is just amazing. The 12th man is unmatched. We're just so blessed that we get to go to the greatest university in the nation.

This journey has just been so special, just such a dream come true. I wouldn't have wanted it any other way. Super blessed and grateful.

Q. Ava, I was watching a clip last night where you were explaining this 'why not us'. Then it came from some boyfriends who wanted credit. I need the breakdown of how did this actually start. Was it a conversation? Why do they need credit?

AVA UNDERWOOD: No, for sure. They kept talking about it. I was like, All right, boys, I will give you credit. So it's my boyfriend and Logan's boyfriend.

It was during the Louisville game, we were down 0-2. They walked up to the concourse and they just started saying, Why not us. We can do this, why not us. They told us the story after. They're like, We take credit for it turning around. I was like, Guys, don't give yourself too much credit.

My boyfriend, he plays baseball at Tennessee. He gets the whole collegiate athlete experience. That's where it kind of came from.

Funny story. Had to give them a little bit of credit.

Q. Your last match against Kentucky was in October. That seems like forever ago. What are some of your biggest takeaways from that match? What are you going to continue to hold onto?

EMILY HELLMUTH: Yeah, that feels like a really long time ago. It's hard to honestly remember so much has happened since then.

I do remember after the fourth set everyone, including like all the fans and us, feeling so, I don't know, it was a

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Texas A&M.

We'll start with an opening statement by coach.

JAMIE MORRISON: Yeah, we started off this season, and I had an idea of how good we could be. I had a vision of us being here, but we'd have to do a lot of things right.

This group of human beings that's up here, the group of human beings that's on the bus ready to go back, did just that. I'm proud of the accomplishment. I'm not surprised by it because of the people that we have, because of the work that was put in by our athletes, staff, everybody. I'm proud to be in this spot.

I'm going to tell everybody this later. I just had a moment after the match sitting around watching people celebrate. This group has been so fun to coach. It's not just the last five matches, but I just had a moment afterwards where I'm really grateful we get to do it one more time.

We get to go out there, enjoy ourselves, have fun, we get to be together, we get to be a team one last time in the season, play the last match of the year. That's an awesome thing.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Ava, growing up around A&M and the program, what has this journey been like for you?

AVA UNDERWOOD: Oh, my gosh. It's just meant the world to me. Me committing to A&M as a sophomore in high school, it's just what I dreamed this place could be. I

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confusing feeling of we knew that we were about to go to the fifth. I think we left feeling like there was a lot of unfinished business there.

I think, one, just super excited for the opportunity to be able to get back at it. Two, I also think, like, we've changed so much as a team since then. We've grown so much as a team since then. I think we've learned from every loss we've had this season. We've only gotten better for it. I'm really excited to see how that shows on Sunday.

AVA UNDERWOOD: I second that. That was very well-said.

MADDIE WAAK: I third that. We just had so much more left to give. I think we worked so hard, like Emily said. We're excited to show everyone that.

Q. You're heading into your last game of the season. For nine of your seniors, it's the last game of their collegiate careers. What is your mindset going into this last game?

AVA UNDERWOOD: I want to end my collegiate career as a winner.

There's been so much put into this by every person involved in this program. We've worked so hard and given so much. I feel like we deserve it.

We go into the gym every single day with the mindset that we're going to be the grittiest team out there. Mindset going in, like, we all want to play for each other. We just want to win for each other. I think that's a really cool thing. I think that's where you find a lot of success.

EMILY HELLMUTH: Yeah, we talk a lot about being true to who we are. Jamie uses the term 'living in alignment'. I think that doesn't change going into Sunday's match.

My mindset going in is to go out and be Emily Hellmuth, just like I've been all season. I think everyone else is on the same page because we ultimately know that's more than enough.

I think going in with a sense of confidence, not cockiness, but we know the work we've put in, we know the training that has gotten us to this point. I think everyone's in a really good position to trust themselves.

Also my last college game. I think all of us are feeling extra grateful just for this to be the opportunity that we have.

MADDIE WAAK: Yeah, I mean, we've already made

history with this team, which is amazing. But we're not going to be, like, content with that. I think we all want to push. I also want to go out as a winner. It's also my last collegiate game. So yeah.

Q. What kind of role has the middle blocker played in this postseason run?

AVA UNDERWOOD: They make my life so much easier, I can say that. They're just phenomenal. Phenomenal athletes. Such hard workers. Just blessed to play with them.

I mean, they are the elite of the elite. We've seen that time and time again. They get their hands up all the time. They just perform at a very high level, which makes our team so successful.

EMILY HELLMUTH: Yeah, I think both of our middles have the ability to take over a match. I think that's really unique.

I think I know what it feels like to be blocked a ton. That doesn't feel great. So I think they're able to really do a lot of damage both just like getting us points, but also getting in the other team's head.

I think, yeah, I'm so grateful to be on their side 'cause I have to play against them in practice. They're really good blockers, so...

MADDIE WAAK: I mean, I'm just thankful that I get to set athletes like that. They're unreal. They make my job easy. They make everyone's job just a little bit easier on this team. They're incredible.

Q. This sport has grown so much this season. You have really been I think one of the most fun teams to watch all year. New fans have tuned into the sport. Social media cited how much joy you play with. How much does it mean to you to know you are playing with this joy for yourselves but also that fans of the sport look at you and say, Man, that team is so much fun to watch?

MADDIE WAAK: I mean, it's true. We all love playing together. I'm glad people are seeing that and recognizing our program for what it is.

I have so much fun playing with this team. I wouldn't trade it for anything. It's awesome to see that.

EMILY HELLMUTH: Yeah, I think since the moment I stepped foot in this program, we talked about putting on a show. We obviously get to play in front of a great fan base



all the time, the 12th man. But it's bigger than that, too.

I think we've been able to see a lot of chatter on social media about, I never watched volleyball, but I turned the TV on, that game was incredible, and you have a new fan. Just seeing comments like that is awesome because we have so much love for this sport, whether it's us or just volleyball, we want to see people supporting it and watching it.

I think it's been really cool to get the affirmation from people that they enjoy watching us do what we do, what we love so much. So it's extra sweet to see people start to fall in love with it, as well.

AVA UNDERWOOD: That's so nice to hear. This guy always talks about putting on a show. There's so many times where we do something and I have, like, a flashback to the movie 'Gladiator'. I'm like, Are you not entertained, people? There's just so much fun stuff to watch. The emotion we preach about being uniquely yourself, not trying to be a carbon copy of the same person. I think that's what makes it so entertaining.

It's been so fun to watch. Going to two five-setters last weekend. C'mon now. We have a lot in store and just a lot of spunk, fire, and fight. That's what people want to see. It's been really awesome people are recognizing that. Thank you.

Q. After yesterday's match, Logan was complimentary of your performance. What has it been like going through this run with this senior class?

MADDIE WAAK: I mean, it's amazing. I can't do anything without them, like without Ava and Emily's passing, them putting balls down, Logan, everyone. It's just amazing.

I second. I'd give it back to them if anyone asked me. I genuinely can't do what I do without them.

Q. To the middle's question, how do they get into your head?

EMILY HELLMUTH: Well... (Laughter.)

I've had a lot of practice, so I'd like to think that they don't get in my head anymore.

I think they're quiet killers. They're not going to get in your face every time. They'll turn around and celebrate with us. If you feel like you try and go up and rip sharp cross, they get you, go to the line, get you. Then you try to find seam, they'll get you. You start to feel like you're running out of options. Then you try to do too much. That's when you

start making errors.

I think that's how they can get in your head 'cause they force you to feel like you're running out of things to do. They're very skilled blockers. They're really good at what they do, yeah.

AVA UNDERWOOD: I think the confidence they play with, too, that can be very intimidating for people. They're just really good.

EMILY HELLMUTH: I mean, they push me to be a better setter. The less I can get them to read me, the better. They're so good at it. I feel like I push them and they push me every single day with that aspect of it, too.

THE MODERATOR: Ava, Emily, Maddie, thanks for your time.

We'll continue with questions for coach.

Q. At moments you've taken out the setter and put in another blocker. What is your mentality behind that?

JAMIE MORRISON: We have a lot of good volleyball players on the court. One of the things we teach in our program is how to be good at everything. We're okay without a setter on the floor. It upgrades kind of our blocking in that instance. We've scored a lot of points.

The rotation we usually do it in is Tatum Thomas goes back and serves. She's scoring over 50% of the time she goes back there. She's been the unsung hero amongst this team because she comes in for half a rotation.

I try to tell her every single day that what she's doing is really, really ridiculously good, both from a service, a defensive standpoint, a non-setting setting standpoint. She's added a lot to what we do. We try to upgrade that rotation a little bit.

Q. You added a huge power hitter this year with Kyndal. On the other side with Kentucky we have Eva and Brooklyn. How is your team preparing for those two?

JAMIE MORRISON: They're a handful. Actually tested Craig earlier. I think those commitments happened within 30 minutes of each other. I literally am an ultimate competitor. I don't want somebody to get hurt, for example, and beat somebody not at their best. I want it to be a fun, exciting, firework-y match, if that's a verb.

As soon as that happened, I'm like, This is going to be fun. I just meant the SEC at the time. I didn't mean a national



championship game.

Again, I want people at their best. I think this is going to be an amazing national championship. I'll get a little bit more. I decided to actually go to sleep last night. Today's practice was a little bit more about us. I'll really dive deep as we get into tonight and tomorrow morning. Obviously we played this team. It's a little bit easier from a scouting standpoint.

We'll have a plan. I'm going to say this. I think everyone is going to get theirs a little bit in this match. It's really, really hard to shut down really good volleyball players. I think it's going to be about executing. When we can get touches, this is the same thing we talked about last night, Olivia Babcock is a really good opposite, and she's going to get some kills. But whenever we get a touch off the top of the block, we've got to take advantage of it and turn it. We did just that. I think this will be similar.

Q. Looking technically at teams, Wisconsin didn't make it, but it kind of proves that having a truly elite middle sets you apart in a different way. When you're scouting and looking for players, how much do you look into that to get a truly established middle?

JAMIE MORRISON: Huge. What do you mean by 'established'? Let me ask a follow-up question to your question.

Q. Just established as in like it's kind of just heads above the rest.

JAMIE MORRISON: I think it's huge. Again, it's one of those things, too, that's developed. Ifenna has gotten better every single year she's been here. Morgan has gotten better every single year that she's been here. You want to look for the tools that can go into being elite.

Again, there's certain things that are overlooked in this sport. I would love to go back and change our box scores and do some stuff. I think one of the things I think is silly is, why do we give block assists? Internationally we give it to the person that touched the ball. If you look at that stat for Ifenna, she is so far above everybody else in this country.

That's one of the pieces that I think needs to be added. We can get into passing stats and a bunch of things there.

I think when you're looking at that skill, I worked with a guy named Giovanni Guidetti when I was in Turkey. He said this to me and he said this to our middles: A lot of middle can go get kills, but the ones that can block are the ones that become elite.

I don't think we value that piece of it as much with that position. I kid you not, we came back in the first three practices, maybe the first practice, it was like the first five plays that happened, Ifenna stuffed. I don't know if I've ever coached a better middle blocker. I've coached a lot of Olympians.

Again, I think that skill needs to be looked at and weighed a little bit more. We do a lot of analytics on value. She's off the charts. Then again, we're going to teach how to play the whole game. Her serve as a weapon is also off the charts.

Again, when you're going out and scouting, it's more who has the potential to do this. I really do believe in our ability to develop. We're a growth mindset, not a fixed mindset of people come in with this thing and it's the only thing they're going to have. Everyone that's come into our program has developed. Every outside has learned how to pass. Every opposite is learning to play six rotations. We're going to train the entire game. Every middles going to learn how to serve and play defense.

I think you want to look for the tools you can build around. Then the other thing I look for is people that have superpowers. Something that's unique that makes them something special that I can build around.

I value that position. I was a middle. I know how thankless it is at times. I know how important it is also in terms of setting up and Block-D. I value it a lot.

Q. It's one last ride for this senior class. What have they and this group meant to you over the years?

JAMIE MORRISON: It's not just them. What I said earlier I mean. I'm super thankful to get one more opportunity to go into battle with them. I was smiling with a giant smile on my face when you guys were saying we play with joy. We've talked a lot about that. Making sure we don't get lost in this. Don't forget, it's not a game, we take it seriously.

This is what we work for, is to be in these matches and these moments. Again, we've talked at the beginning of the season, I started off with every team I've had just the idea that this is awesome. This is why we get to do it. The fact that, I don't know, we're living in alignment with that, she brought up that, too, is the coolest thing in the world to me.

The senior class, I told them when we broke things down at read on the last one, I said, We built this. Again, not just a team that can go to the Final Four and play for a national



championship this year, but I think something that is going to last. That's what I came to Texas A&M to do, is to build something that is going to last. This group has helped us do that.

Different things. There's four of them that have been here from the very beginning. Then five of them that transferred in and believed in a vision of what this would be about, we can get to this spot right here. Or, for some of them, it was just, I want to help build this so they can get to that spot and I don't even need to live it.

But to have this group be able to live through it and get these experiences and enjoy it, it means the world.

Q. Really like to hear your answer on this specifically because of your international experience. How much have you already seen the emergence of pro volleyball in the United States impact the growth of the sport at the younger level, then moving with those athletes who maybe would not have been volleyball players impacting the college level as well?

JAMIE MORRISON: That's a great question. I'm going to think about it for a second.

There's layers to this. So having coached international volleyball, one of the things that I always said that other countries had an advantage of is they got to witness what this game should look like at the highest level during the offseason from high school. If you go look at high school, they saw college as the highest level.

I think the fact that we're seeing some of the best players in the world play in the United States, and be able to see that on TV or on ESPN+, or on all these other streaming networks, I think they're getting to see a model of what that's looking like. Modeling is one of the biggest things you can do from a coaching standpoint, of being able to see it done instead of coaches speaking. So to be able to see it, I think that's impacting this at the younger level.

The other thing that is starting to happen, if you rewind three years ago, maybe even two years ago, having a conversation with, I don't know, a 17-year-old, asking them what they want to do post college. You might get one person out of a hundred that would say I want to play professionally. Now it's seen as a viable thing that can happen. That's amazing.

Coming from the international world, I was living in a world when you were talking to people coming into the national team, you had to have a real conversation about how hard this is going to be. Five months of the year you're with the national team, spending time away from your families. For

seven months a year you are overseas thousands of miles away from your family.

I can tell you when I was helping put together League One, just having conversations with these athletes in those moments that were almost in tears that they would be able to stay at home and have their family come to their matches. I think it's impacting that.

From a college standpoint, yeah, I think the thing that has to happen, this is me being a fan of the sport, a lot of fandom around volleyball comes from school pride right now. I think we as coaches, I spoke when I was getting my Coach of the Year award, we have to put this sport first and share the fandom of our school with the fandom of a pro team nearby.

It has to be getting people not to fall in love with Texas A&M volleyball, but to fall in love with volleyball so they will go follow it somewhere else and use our channels to help promote those.

If that blows up, all of a sudden we have the NBA of international volleyball here, our sport just explodes. I think we're at the tipping point of that happening. Again, I had an impassioned plea when I gave that speech to do whatever we can at this moment because I think it's a really, really important time for our sport.

Thank for the great question, too.

Q. You've only been in the SEC as a head coach for three years. Can you talk about the fact that so many years ago this sport was dominated by the Big Ten and the Pac-12. It's felt like so much of the physicality, teams that play with the most joy, you're meeting in the national championship, how have you seen the league turn into one of the best leagues in the country? How do you think it prepared you in league play to come in and take on and defeat some of the best teams in the country?

JAMIE MORRISON: Yeah, when I took this job, whenever I was telling people they had eyebrows raised of a little bit questioning.

It's funny because a year in, when all of the changes in college athletics started happening, they all of a sudden realized resources were important. That was the first thing that happened.

The other thing I knew was going to happen was the conference was going to explode. I knew it for a few reasons. I saw Texas coming in. They had a brand that was really, really good in volleyball that was going to bring



some more, I don't know, firepower both from a competitive standpoint and brand standpoint.

I probably shouldn't say that considering I'm an Aggie.

Then the second piece was coaching. I really respect what Craig did at Kentucky. I said at the time, I had a feeling of I could do what I believed I could do at this program. I said in the same hiring cycle, whoever gets hired at Missouri was really important being able to bring that program back up. Dawn has done an amazing job. Again, I saw where this was going to go. I saw the SEC building into a volleyball powerhouse.

To the second part of your question, it prepared us amazingly. Again, I'll speak in this, we need to abolish RPI as a selection criteria for the NCAA tournament. It's ruining our ability to put marquee matches on TV. Doesn't make any sense for the 15th best team in the country to play the 16th based on math. That needs to go away. We need to push as many of these challenge as we can.

The only reason we only had five teams in was RPI. I can tell you this conference was a grind this year. There was no match off the entire season. It prepared us amazingly.

Then we had an SEC tournament, which I was a little bit iffy on. Commissioner Sankey begged and pleaded us. They wanted something to build, and this is a bad word, but commercialization around, which is not a bad word anymore, because it has to go that way in order for our sport to be viable and in order for a lot of things to happen.

I think they did an amazing job with that. All of a sudden we got really good volleyball against really good teams in pressure situations.

I've said it the more you do that, the better off you are. For us, I don't think we could have had a harder path for the last, I don't know, six matches of playing Texas. Literally (indiscernible) to Jason from TCU, You helped push us. I think it made us better and got us through this.

With all of that, we're one of the most prepared teams in the country. Again, Kentucky is the same way because they had the same path. I think it's really good for our conference. I'm proud also.

Q. We hear pretty much every day now this idea of there's not enough money to go around for everyone. Not enough celebration, fandom, to go around for every team on a campus. Your football program is beginning its Playoff journey this weekend. It's not just a football school. It's a volleyball school. Also a meat judging school. What do you say to people who

say it can only kind of be one thing?

JAMIE MORRISON: Don't forget we also won The Voice. Just throwing that out there (smiling).

I think it's about excellence. That's the biggest thing. I think that's what athletic departments are looking for. I was on SEC Now this morning. I said this. Football is doing amazing things. I'm wishing the best of luck to Mike as they go out and battle tomorrow.

But I think one of the things that really drew me to this place and this job is the dedication to women's athletics also. There is a balance. I think they do an amazing job of making sure that everyone can be excellent, giving us the resources within our sports, doing their due diligence on what that's going to take within each sport to make sure we can be competitive.

I'm grateful every single day that I chose to come to this amazing place, that I have the support I have from my athletic director Trev, to my SWA Kristi, to the entire athletic department that has our back, that's willing to fly people out here the next two days to make sure they see us compete for a national championship on Sunday.

They have done an amazing job, and they're going to continue to do it across all sports.

Q. In terms of preparing for Sunday, what is the balance of scouting them and then making sure that y'all are fine-tuned?

JAMIE MORRISON: That's the art of coaching. I can't give that away in one press conference (smiling).

It's a balance of the two. Again, at this point there's small things we need to adjust to. They're a really good volleyball team. It's not like we do this one thing, we're going to do well. Like I said, they're going to get theirs, we have to get ours. We've responded every single time somebody has gone on a run this season.

That mental piece is going to be really important. What you are hearing about alignment, joy, all these things, that's equally as important as what we're going to do from a game plan standpoint.

Again, I said this last night. We'll pick apart, I don't know, Kentucky, then we'll really dial it into we have two and a half hours of work that we get to do. We don't want to fatigue our team. What is the most important thing that's going to balance that, what is the biggest return on investment from the time we're going to spend in practice, can we spend 10 minutes on this and get better. There's a

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couple things we threw into practice today. We'll really kind of dive in tomorrow and balance those two things.

Again, it's enjoying the two practices that we have left as a team. We've talked the entire season. I said it today. I'm pretty sure it's 35 athletes had the right to practice today. I think they have 18, we have 17. We're one of those. Each one of our athletes is one of those. It's enjoying that piece of it, too, which I think we did.

Q. When a certain team within proximity of here was knocked out of the regional finals last week, there was concern that it might affect attendance, atmosphere, when Nebraska wasn't here. What have you sensed the atmosphere is like?

JAMIE MORRISON: It's been great. Let me go twofold. One of the things I really respect about Nebraska fans is a lot of them have showed up. I know there was some stuff on social media, disappointment and that. I mean this. If we can do what I believe we can do at Texas A&M, I believe the 12th man can become that, too, where it's passionate about volleyball, might show up to the Final Four, regardless of if we're in it or not.

I think that's what we need. Going back to what I said to grow our sport, we need to grow volleyball fans, and take a card from Nebraska in that and go.

I think the crowd has been amazing. I have a bunch of thumbs up. I couldn't tell if it was 'Good job' or 'Gig 'em' from Nebraska fans as I was walking out last night. I think it's been amazing.

Whenever you go to the Final Four, it's an interesting vibe because you play at The Bob, and all of a sudden there's 7,000 people screaming as loud as they can at you. You come here, you kind of have this section that's for our fans, and this section is for another person's fans. Then you have people that are just here for convention.

So one of the things we talked about in each one of these rounds is talking about the energy that's going to be in the building. I could feel it last night. I think they had, I don't know, probably a good time. After the first set I looked at our team to what you guys said, I was like, We must be really fun to watch on TV, was really what I said coming into the timeout. That's why I was laughing when you guys were over here. Like we are enjoyable to watch and people are having fun. Music to my ears.

Yeah, I think the vibe has been amazing. I think the more and more we can grow the sport, the more we're just going to get people to come in from all over the place.

Q. Brooke and Molly told me three years ago one of your first days you came in and asked what the goal was. Someone said to win a national title. Now you're in a position to do that. What does that mean to you?

JAMIE MORRISON: A lot. One of the things I said last night when we got back into the locker room was, I said, What are we playing for? I looked at the person that said that. I don't know if she wants me to point out who she is. She screamed it out loud. We've also said our goal this season is to make her look like a genius.

It means a lot. It means a lot. Again, I said it from the beginning of the season. We can win a national championship, but we have to work in the right way every single day. We have to play catch-up to some of these teams, learn from every single mistake, all the things you heard them saying. As a coach, it's music to your ears as a coach when.

We've done all of that. It's rewarding. It's rewarding, like I said, they've put in the work and they're getting to see the fruits of that labor. We're going to go out, we're going to do everything we can on Sunday against a really good volleyball team.

But I got full confidence in our group to be themselves, to play like themselves, and we're going to put on a show.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks for your time, coach.

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