

2023 NCAA Women's Volleyball Championship

Thursday, December 14, 2023

Tampa, Florida, USA

Amalie Arena

Nebraska Cornhuskers

Coach John Cook

Harper Murray

Bekka Allick

Ally Batenhorst

Semifinal Press Conference



service pressure on them. Sometimes when you get in a match like that, things aren't going, you can get a little tentative, and I just kept reminding them.

Pittsburgh is a great serving team, as well, and I don't know what our aces to errors were, but there was some really tough serving going on out there on both sides. We kept talking about we got to keep serving them tough because they've got great hitters.

Q. Bekka, can you talk about the block tonight? How did it set the tone and what was working well for you against Pitt with the block?

BEKKA ALLICK: Yeah, for sure. I think just kind of what we always talk about is just using the scouting report. Coaches work really hard on that. The boys work really hard on putting that together.

So just the biggest thing as a blocker is trusting what they've taught us and taking away their tendencies. When the opponent gets stressed they're going to try and hit their comfortable shot as hard as they can and usually that works out, so being able to take that away early on is something that pays off in the long run, and just staying disciplined and not trying to do too much.

Q. Harper, with a group of freshmen earlier in the year, some people may have questioned or doubted the abilities of this team and how far it could go with this number of freshmen. What message would you have for the doubters at this point reaching the title?

HARPER MURRAY: I feel like that's understandable. Five freshmen coming in and more than half of us contributing every single day. I think that's understandable that people would feel that way, but I think that that's what drives all of us. We want to prove people wrong.

We talked about that at the beginning of the season, just because we're a young team, that should hold nothing against us. I think that is what motivates us. We want to prove people wrong and tell them it doesn't matter how old we are.

Nebraska 3, Pitt 0

JOHN COOK: I thought it was a great effort on our part. Pittsburgh is a very good team. Just watching video on them, they had our respect. I thought this would be a really, really tough match, and I knew we'd have to play great to win.

But I thought our team -- we talked about winning some close points. There were some ugly volleyball. We found a couple ways to win a couple points out of that, and I just thought our serving and blocking and defense really put some pressure on Pittsburgh.

A lot of credit to them. They've had a great year. They've got a great team. They're very well-coached. I love the system that they run.

It's a great effort for the Huskers.

Q. Harper, you took some big out-of-system swings in that match. Where did the confidence come to do that in a match of this caliber?

HARPER MURRAY: Yeah, we work on that in practice every day. Lexi obviously gives me great sets, but we work on that every day in practice, so just trusting my training and I know my team has my back.

Q. Coach, you're up in the third set 10-9; you scored 9 of the next 10 points, four on-service aces. Did you see something or did that just happen?

JOHN COOK: I just kept encouraging them to keep the



Q. Coach Cook, you said yesterday with these two teams being so good defensively that that could play out that way or it could play out the exact opposite way. How did you feel about the way the match played out today?

JOHN COOK: You look at the first game, either team did not hit well. As the match went on, it got more and more offensive and the numbers came up.

But defense takes a lot of energy and emotion, and eventually that starts tapering off as the match goes on. But I'm looking here, we have 400 in Game 3 against the first or second best team in the country, but their numbers came up, too.

But overall we did a really good job of holding them down and containing them. We never let them get really hot. Babcock in game two got a couple nice we call big kills, but again, we made some great adjustments and shut them down.

Q. Playing off what Harper said, could you speak about the contributions of the freshmen and Harper specifically throughout the season and how they've reached their maturation point at this point in the season?

JOHN COOK: You know, I think they're all super competitors. That's their super power. They're competitors. They love to compete. The bigger the stage, the bigger the match, the harder they compete.

That's the bottom line, is they're competitors, and they love to compete.

Q. Ally, we watched the journey, and when you first got to Nebraska you talked about why you chose Nebraska Volleyball, and hopefully it would end in what would appear to be Sunday. Tell me about this journey of yours and how it feels tonight to reach this championship moment.

ALLY BATENHORST: Yeah, I mean, it means everything to me and this team, and I think freshman year making it to the National Championship was just insane and unreal to me, and I was a baby, I was the freshman on the team, and last year wasn't a great season for us.

We didn't make it as far as we wanted to. But we came back stronger this year, and I think making it all the way to the National Championship again as one of the older players is just really incredible, and we've worked really hard to get to this point. It's not easy to get to this point, and a lot of people don't see the work we do on and off the

court.

We're excited to be here and pumped for Sunday.

Q. Coach, you mentioned some adjustments and the hitting percentage getting better and the plus-400 hitting percentage in the third set. What were some of those adjustments you made and that resulted in just a higher hitting percentage each set as the match went on?

JOHN COOK: Well, when Pittsburgh started out, we were on their tendencies, and a couple hitters started changing up what they were doing and we were just able to adjust right there with them, and we kind of kept -- it's like a prize fight. Somebody is hitting one shot and then all of a sudden they'll go to another and you've got to be able to counter that.

I just think playing in the conference in the Big Ten, we have to do this every night. It's constant adjusting because the hitters are so good and they figure out what you're doing. It's just part of how we train and how we approach things. It's why we're one of the top defensive teams every year in the country. It's a big theme in our gym.

The other key here is I'm looking at their side out percentage. They were in the 50s all three games, and that's -- a team as tough as that, to hold them down, that's a great effort on our part. Great effort.

Q. Bekka, looks like you guys were having so much fun out there tonight. Can you talk about the energy and competitiveness that you all were able to maintain throughout all three sets?

BEKKA ALLICK: Yeah, you used the word "maintain," and that's not something that's really forced for us. That's just kind of who we are as a people. Being able to celebrate as hard and as ridiculously as we do, it's because we've invested so much into each other, and so to see each other succeed, it's just watching your friends go do their thing.

And so when we're acting that way, that's just pure love, and that's just having a good time.

Q. Harper, still unfinished business. You've got to come back Sunday. How long do you allow yourself to celebrate this one before you start thinking about Wisconsin or Texas?

HARPER MURRAY: I think we all know that we still have one goal that we want. So yeah, tonight is a great win for us, but at the end of the day, Sunday is our goal.

We just have to stay focused on that and do everything we can to prepare for that match.

Q. Bekka, sometimes fans call this a block party. It's one thing to do that in the non-conference, but on this national stage what's it like to do that and what did it feel like to block like your team did tonight?

BEKKA ALLICK: Yeah, man. That's hard to put into words because you always talk about just, oh, you know, like when you're in-conference you always think there is next weekend if you want to do better.

But you're at a point right now where you've got to have the clutch factor and you have to make it happen. I'm just blessed. I can tell you right now there were tons of prayers before this game just wanting to show up for my team because I'm aware of what I've done in previous games, and you always kind of wonder if you're able to do it again.

So just giving myself the grace to do that and for it to actually happen, I'm happy that I can do it with them and for them.

Q. Bekka, I know sometimes it's hard to remember individual points in a match, but there were three or four points out there where you guys had huge saves and were able to win the point, sort of those real emotional type points. Did you sense you were able to get the better of those points and that kind of helps with keeping the momentum the whole match?

BEKKA ALLICK: Yeah, oh, my goodness, yes, long rallies, the ugly rallies, the stuff where's it's like you didn't really deserve it kind of point. Those things really frustrating as an opponent when you don't win them, and that was something that actually hurt us when we last played Wisconsin.

I could tell you right now it wouldn't have been a sweep if we would've won those long rallies. So that was be a point we've been hammering ever since that game.

So yeah, when we were being scrappy and it was paying off and we were actually getting the point, it's a huge momentum shift because it takes down the confidence of the other team because it becomes a point of desperation, wanting to get ball up and just over, and so when you actually win them, it's huge.

Q. Coach, you've beaten Pitt in two of the last three Final Fours. How have you seen them progress in that time, and do you see them as one of the top teams in the country in the future?

JOHN COOK: Hey, they just went to three straight Final Fours. Tell me how many programs are doing that. They're an elite program now. That's going to continue with them. Coach Fisher has done a heck of a job, and they should be really -- Pittsburgh should be really proud of what they're doing. There's three straight Final Fours; that's not easy.

Q. Harper, you spoke earlier about the skepticism early on about the freshmen, how good you could be in that role. Were there times when you felt like, I'm a freshman, and you battled through some things not only for you, but all the freshmen, the ebbs and flows that got you here? Has it been a roller coaster in a way?

HARPER MURRAY: Yeah, but I think Lexi and Merritt are our two captains, and they've been in this position before. And Ally, Bekka all the upperclassmen, the girls older than us have been -- they've felt how we've felt before.

I think our team does a great job of leaning on each other. No one on our team has ever made us feel like we're just freshmen. When we're struggling, it's not like, oh, they're a freshman, cut them some slack. Like it's never been like that.

I think all the girls who are older than us do an amazing job of just keeping us on track. I was just telling Coach about it, like all the captains and all the girls, we just trust each other and we're there for each other.

I think at the end of the day that's what keeps us going, because we want to play for each other like Bekka said, and it's just pure love.

Q. Ally, in that third set you kind of whiffed on an out-of-system attack. Then you went kill, kill, block. Did that kind of loosen you up?

ALLY BATENHORST: Yeah, I honestly was not expecting that from myself. Coach said all week or today, he was like, we're going to go for it, and we need to unleash if we're going to win this match. I took it to heart. I really went for it. No matter what set I got, I was going to go for it. When I did that, I was like, all right, that's embarrassing, and I'm going to move on.

We talk about FRS, which is Failure Recovery System, and I took that to heart and I moved on and I came back stronger, and that's the mindset you've got to have in these matches, especially when it's so close.

HARPER MURRAY: I feel like it kind of lit a fire in you.

ALLY BATENHORST: Yeah, it did. I was like, no this was not going to be the last -- nope, I was going to go for it. Not going to be tipping anything.

Q. Bekka, you're in Tampa, but how much did it feel like The Bob?

BEKKA ALLICK: That's actually a good question. A lot like it. I mean, Nebraska fans are no joke. They'll show out, whether we're at Rutgers or California, Hawai'i, even Brazil I think we even had some fans.

Yeah, it was nice to be in an environment where you're supported, you see family and friends. It's a good team. It was a lot like Bob.

Q. Coach Cook, we were talking before the season at an airport, and you used two words about this team, and you said, I want you to pay attention. We're tough and we're different. Does that define this group?

JOHN COOK: I remember talking in the airport. I don't remember that. But these guys are tough.

I think what I was trying to tell you is that they're different than the teams we've had in the last few years.

These guys are, like we talked about, they're great competitors. They love the big matches. They love the big points. We found a way to win a lot of really close matches, and they've got something special in them.

Everybody is seeing that, and that's why we won the Big Ten, to be able to go ten weeks and survive that, you've got to be something special.

Q. You've been in quite a few of these preparing for a National Championship match. Is there anything you've learned about that over the years and does it change with the extra day you have now?

JOHN COOK: Well, this is new, the extra day. I've got to think about how we're going to manage that. I really don't know our schedule tomorrow yet. I just know the All-American banquet is in the morning and I'm supposed to be on some panel thing in the morning which I'm going to bail on.

We'll do what we've done all year, but with the extra day here it'll be interesting, and of course Sunday is historic.

Q. John, a sweep in the national semifinals, what's the most impressive thing to you about that?

JOHN COOK: What you just said, winning 3-0. I want to

ask Nate when is the last time that happened, that we won a semifinal match 3-0. I mean, you're just trying to survive anyway when you get to this point, and to win 3-0 is, again, a testament to our team. They stayed with it.

It was close there in Game 3, and we just found a way to pull away and kind of wear them down a little bit.

Q. What are days like this as a coach to win Coach of the Year earlier today and then come out just a few hours later in the national semifinal, just put that into perspective?

JOHN COOK: Yeah, usually winning the Coach of the Year, it's not good. Whoever wins Coach of the Year usually loses in the semifinals.

You know, but I think the Coach of the Year this year wasn't that I was better than any other coach. Pittsburgh, all these teams, there's so many great coaches, and every time we play teams and I watch them, I'm thinking, God, these guys are really well-coached.

But I think the Coach of the Year deal was more about what we did with the sport of volleyball and how we inspired maybe a generation of volleyball and this rebirth of volleyball and this growth, and I think that was more what that was all about.

I'll leave it at that. But it's pretty cool, and I haven't thought much about it since the banquet, and I'm really excited about the All-American Banquet tomorrow because we've got some players that are going to be honored, and well deserved.

Q. You played Pittsburgh and they've been here three straight years. No matter who you're playing, you're either playing a defending champion or you're playing the champion from two years ago. Nobody is going to accuse you of backing into this one, are they?

JOHN COOK: No, but 2021 we were in the Finals there in game five. We're going to have to play a great match Sunday no matter who we play. When you get to the final two teams, you've got to bring out your best. I know these guys are going to do it.

Q. Seems like a lot of out of system kills. If you agree with that, what was it like to watch the players do that?

JOHN COOK: Well, either team was not playing great volleyball to start with, and you think about the nerves, the arena was about 35 degrees, and it's hard to get in a good rhythm to start off with.

We know you're going to have to win some ugly volleyball, and we talk about that all the time, and we train it, and we talk about when we're out of system, we're in system, it doesn't matter to us. I thought we did a really good job of that tonight.

Q. When is the last time you had to worry about getting sunburned between one game to the next?

HARPER MURRAY: I don't think it's hot enough to get burned right now. It doesn't take me and Bekka a lot to tan.

BEKKA ALLICK: No, it really doesn't, for obvious reasons.

Yeah, I don't know. We made it so far, we're not going to blow it to get a tan. I'll stay inside.

Q. John, the blocked touches seemed to be a big impact. What impact do you think your blocked touches had on the match?

JOHN COOK: Well, you guys talk about the stuffed blocks, but every time we get a controlled touch it's a chance to score a point, and you try to get as many of those as you can, but again, that's great discipline by our block, and Pittsburgh goes fast, so if you can't stuff it, we're trying to slow it down for the diggers. Again, our block was really disciplined tonight.

Q. Did you stay on the bus during the red carpet arrival, and what did you hear and what did you see?

JOHN COOK: I didn't want to leave our bus driver -- I was on the bus, yeah. I didn't want to leave him alone, and I wanted to make sure nobody forgot something because typically somebody forgets something on the bus. So I kind of hang back there because if that guy locks it up, then we're done.

Anyway, I heard it was amazing, long. Husker Nation showed up. There's no place like Nebraska. You guys can put that in the headline.

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