

NCAA Women's Volleyball Championship

Thursday, December 14, 2017

John Cook
Mikaela Foecke
Annika Albrecht
Kelly Hunter
Nebraska Cornhuskers



THE MODERATOR: We welcome the Nebraska Cornhuskers under the direction of head coach John Cook. Also joining us are student-athletes, Mikaela Foecke, Annika Albrecht, and Kelly Hunter. We'll start with opening comments from Coach Cook.

JOHN COOK: I told you guys all week Penn State-Nebraska bring out the best in each other. I said it was going to be an epic match, it was. Everybody should have gotten their money's worth. Ratings have been up. You guys have great stories to write.

This team never ceases to amaze me with how resilient they are and how much fight they have and how hard they work together. You know, we could have won it 3-0. We could have lost it in four. I mean, it was just a point-by-point battle, and we had the mindset going into this that we knew that's what it is going to be like. I think the Big Ten prepares us for matches like these. There's never any panic on our side, and they just continued to grind through it.

It's a great win, and just really happy for these guys. They just showed what they're all about. That's why they're Big Ten champions.

Q. For any of you all, what advantage do you feel the crowd presents for you in terms of fighting back from some of those close, almost defeats?

MIKAELA FOECKE: Obviously, our crowd is a big, important part of us, and having so many Husker fans here is great, and seeing them representing and cheering us on is something really special because we have such a great following. But I think it kind of comes from within us. We did a really great job tonight coming together as a team, and the crowd kind of brought us up too.

Q. Annika, I know down in Kentucky, you had a rough game three and came up with some big swings in Game 4 they bottled you up tonight too, and you had some big swings in Game 5. What was your mindset going into the fifth?

ANNIKA ALBRECHT: It was to reset and refocus. I talked to Kelly, and we worked on a different tempo first set, and I talked to the DSs, and I told them just to be there and I'm going to take rips. There is nothing to lose in this game. Penn State was supposed to beat us, so just take rips and trust that my teammates are there for me.

Q. Annika, what's it like to play in a sport where you can feel like you almost have won the match, and you can feel like you've almost lost the match, and you can have a great play and you can have a bad play?

ANNIKA ALBRECHT: It's kind of forgiving to know that if you make a bad play, it's fine, it's over and then you can make another play. It goes the same way. If you have a great play, you have to know that that play doesn't matter the next one. So, yeah, I would say it's fine, it's exhausting, but it's a thrill.

Q. Same question to you, Kelly, what's it like to play this sport?

KELLY HUNTER: Basically what she just said. You know, no matter what there is going to be the next point unless you're at the end of the game, so it gives you a chance every single point to feel like you're fighting for something. And that's what we set our mentality to in that last set. We said, every single point of this fifth set is the National Championship point. We need to think like that, we need to play like that. And that fifth set was probably our best set of the whole match. So I think it's a great sport for that reason. You get so many chances to be great and so many chances to show who you are as a player.

Q. Kelly, for you, in those big moments, there were so many close sets and Deuce opportunities. How do you go about your approach to the offense before the play starts when you guys have to have a sideout on your side?

KELLY HUNTER: Yeah, I mean, just with our group that we have, we have great passers, great hitters. My first thought is I can set it anywhere and I trust who is going up. But other things, it depends on who is blocking and

what our game plan is. Who is up in the front row, where we want to go. So that's the second thing is just looking at the block. Third thing is going with the pass, taking that set wherever the pass takes you. So it's just kind of -- it all changes. You can have this plan to set so and so on a perfect pass or whatever, but it's never going to happen that way. So you have to have plan B, C. D.

Q. What was the broad game plan, and how did you execute against that?

KELLY HUNTER: For us, our broad game plan every game is to have a balanced attack, try to run quick in red zone as much as we can, not too outside heavy. Today we wanted to go quick and up the middle to try to get our middles one-on-one. Because sometimes their outsides stand on the pins so we wanted to get one-on-ones anywhere we could. Having a middle attack is great, because it slows down the block. They're thinking about the first attack rather than getting a good move to the pin. So I think for us, middle is just what gets us really going.

Q. For anyone up there, what kind of lift did Kenzie Maloney give you in the service game, and your DSs coming off the Ben?

MIKAELA FOECKE: I think it's great to see her succeed like that and she works on her serve day-in and day-out. She's been super successful for us coming down the scene down the stretch. The way she Yo Yos teams it gives them fits and we're really lucky to have her.

Q. Kelly, last year in this match, you guys did not play your normal game, did some strange things. I remember your Coach saying. How did you guys prepare for this match any different, if you did? And second part, when things were going against you guys out there today in games two and three, did you have any flash backs, anything to say to turn that around?

KELLY HUNTER: Yeah, I mean, we prepared for this game the same way we prepared for every game. We focus on our side. We serve and pass like crazy. We side out, we play defense. So our preparation was the same. But as for any flash backs from last year, there were none. This group this year is just so in the moment.

Normally, we're pretty even and relaxed out there. We got a little excited. That's normal. It's the Final Four. That's totally going to happen every single time. But we came back from it, and we worked a lot on mindfulness and breathing and stuff like that. And I think that really helped us in coming back to the moment. In the end we were saying this one point, this one moment is the only moment that matters. If you

don't win that one, you win the next one. So we were just trying to go point by point. The only thing we were thinking about was the present moment.

Q. Kelly, you guys talk about Penn State with a lot of respect, and yet you have never lost a match against Penn State. Is there a special kind of satisfaction to have a win like this in the Final Four over them?

KELLY HUNTER: Yeah, I mean, we talk about it every single time. Penn State's a great team. To win four National Championships in a row is just ridiculous. So we say they're the team to beat. But Nebraska might be the team to beat too. So it's been really cool to get to play them so many times and have that great Big Ten rivalry and come out on top. Tonight was a great match, and it was just so much fun to play, whether we were losing or nearly up or up by a lot. So they're just always so fun to play, and it's a great match to watch.

Q. Kelly, can you describe and take me through the last play from watching the serve come at you and what happened from there, please?

KELLY HUNTER: What happened? Oh, oh, yeah. I think I honestly was thinking I haven't really dunked in a while, and to try to keep them honest. The pass was tight and it led me there, and I finally got a jump that I won. Honestly, I was a little surprised. It was a great way to win the match. Yeah, it was awesome.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach.

Q. Seemed like Kelly tonight distributed the ball well. Lot of good choices. Lot of times when she got great looks for your hitters and also she stood in unbelievably against some of those Simone Lee rips on the line. Can you talk a little about what she did tonight both setting and defense?

JOHN COOK: Well, at the beginning she wasn't playing a lot of defense, so we reminded her she had to do that. We made an adjustment with what we were doing, so that really helped her. I saw she got 23 digs tonight. But Kelly's a competitor. She's beaten pep state seven straight times. I mean, you tell me anybody ever in the history of volleyball that's done that? I don't know what it is about her when she plays them, but, again, they always bring out the best in us. She's a great competitor.

We knew and she knew she had to play really well tonight for us to be able to beat Penn State. I mean, I think that's -- you look at Penn State, they've got two setters making decisions trying to figure out how to get kills and who to set. And we've got one setter, Kelly, doing it. And I think sometimes with one setter your team can flow a little bit better. She's running the show. She's setting things up, and she did a great job

tonight.

Q. Your freshman, Lauren Stivrins and Jazz Sweet seemed like they played pretty poised for a Final Four match. Did that surprise you at all?

JOHN COOK: No, no. Those guys have been doing that all year. Again, I said the Big Ten, we're in wars like this all the time. It brings them for that. I know Jazz was really excited because this is like her hometown, so it's -- you know, I think she was pumped up. She struggled a little bit for a while, but, man, she turned it on in the end. It was great to see. Those guys compete. And Lauren made some huge plays for us and some long rallies. Got a couple blocks that were just really great, great plays, huge points for us to help us get momentum.

Q. At the end of set four, can you walk us through your thought process in electing not to challenge that call?

JOHN COOK: Where's the question from? Say it again.

Q. The thought process at 24-23 in the fourth, electing not to challenge a close call?

JOHN COOK: I was already 0-fer on two of them, and Russ won all his. So I wasn't feeling the momentum on the green cards. But I looked at my team, and so, couple of them were saying, yeah touch. Of course Jazz was saying it because she hit it. And Kelly's looking at me like I'm not sure. She's the one I trust. So I went with it, because I thought if we got to a fifth game, I may need that thing. I wanted to try to protect it. But it was a very difficult decision because it was a huge point, but the look in their eye, again, I trust Kelly. And Anni too. Anni's looking at me, like I don't think it's a touch. So those are the guys I went with. I didn't go with the other guys.

Q. What did you think of the atmosphere and the players being greeted in this game?

JOHN COOK: It's a record 19,000. This is Kansas City and there are a lot of Husker fans here. For those of you who don't follow our program, there were 1.8 million people watching this thing tonight in the state of Nebraska. They're following this team, and you can see how many Nebraskans came down here. It's what makes it so cool about being a Husker and coaching and playing for Nebraska, because it is such a big deal. Regardless of what happens in the finals, this team will go down as a legendary team in the chronicles of Nebraska volleyball history.

Kelly will go down as one of the greatest setters ever to play at Nebraska. So just those guys have done an amazing job, and, like I said, they'll be legends. They'll be talking about this team for a long time.

Q. What's it like to Coach in a sport where you can be close to winning and then close to losing, and then win?

JOHN COOK: Yeah, I was just trying not to get upset that we could have won it 3-0. We had our chances. I told them, they said, Coach, we're enjoying playing so we kept it going for a while. And that's the sport. That's playing Penn State.

I was having flashbacks of this whole thing to 2008, same thing. We got in a fifth game with them and got to 11-11, and we kind of fumbled it away, and today we finished it. So, just, you know, look at a year ago in the regional final. We're down to our final point and find a way to come back. We're down 0-2, and come back to win.

Just, it's Penn State, so I just mentally prepare. Get ready for a long, drawn-out battle. Again, credit to Penn State. They're a great program and those are some great players they have.

Q. Hunter Atherton, you had her come in on the third set and she played the last three sets. She did have four serve errors, but it seems she was really keeping Penn State out of system in the game. Was that a big effort for you in terms of serving and trying to keep Penn State out of system?

JOHN COOK: We started with Hayley Densberger and nothing was happening. She looked really tentative as a freshman, so we went with Hunter. Hunter goes for it. She brings a mindset. Even though she makes errors, she's going for it. She got us a run to help us win Game 3. I know those Penn State passers are worried about her serve. We see it all the time, and it is high error, but it is a gnarly serve. She doesn't know where it's going, that's one of the reasons she misses a lot. But it's very difficult to pass. It stresses teams and stresses passers.

Q. 90 digs for you and 76 digs for them. Were you surprised at how the sideout game ended up going? In terms of what you thought was going to be, did you think there were going to be that many digs?

JOHN COOK: That's a lot of digs. But we have to win, serve, block and defense. We pride ourselves on that. That's our strength all year. It's our identity that we have for this team. We got some great defensive players back there, and awny and Kenzie, and Sydney lead that. We have to be relentless because we're not the most physical team. We don't have the most physical hitters. And that's just the way we go.

Our goal was to hold Washington and Lee to 250. We

almost did it. Probably would have done and won 3-0.
That was our goal to maintain those guys because
they're Player of the Year in the Big Ten, and
Washington's a first team All-American, so we did a
pretty good job defensively.