

NCAA Women's Volleyball

Championship

Saturday, December 16, 2017

John Cook

Briana Holman

Kelly Hunter

Mikaela Foecke

Nebraska Cornhuskers



sharing it with Kelly?

MIKAELA FOECKE: Yeah, the first time I thought was extra special, and winning a National Championship seems like kind of a once-in-a-lifetime experience, so to be here a second time is something that I'm super grateful for. I wouldn't want anyone else to be the most outstanding player other than Kelly. She's the most deserving person on our team. She works so hard every single day, and she's such a great leader and mentor to all of us. We definitely wouldn't be here without her.

Q. Kelly, you've talked all year about how this group is special and this is your favorite year you've had here. How do you feel to share this National Championship with this group?

KELLY HUNTER: Yeah, only one group of players gets to go out on top, and fortunate enough for us, that's us this year. Yeah, like you mentioned, this is my favorite group since I've been here. We proved a lot of people wrong. We grinded all season long, and it was a long season. But we worked every single day and that made us so close. I'm going to remember this group for a really long time.

Q. Mikaela, what helped you all hit quite a bit better in that second set after the first one?

MIKAELA FOECKE: I think we just kind of settled in. It's the first set of the National Championship. You're obviously going to have some jitters and you're going to want to pound every single ball, but obviously, they had a huge block, and Florida sets up a great block every single time. So the second set, I think Kelly was just putting us in great spots and we were using the block more and using more shots.

Q. Kelly and Briana, in 2014 you guys had lost in the Elite Eight for the third straight year. Now you've had this incredible three-year run. What do you think got Nebraska kind of over the hump, so to speak, these last three years?

KELLY HUNTER: I think being so close every year made us hungry. We've always been a great team, but we hadn't been to the Final Four in a while. We always say we dream big, and that's what we've been doing the last couple years, we've been dreaming big and accomplishing those dreams. We've worked our butts off to get here three times in a row, and it's great for our program, and everyone's pumped up about it.

THE MODERATOR: At this time we welcome the Nebraska Cornhuskers under the direction of head coach John Cook. This is the fifth National Championship for the Cornhuskers. Joining Coach Cook, we have student-athletes Briana Holman, Kelly Hunter, and Mikaela Foecke. We'd like to congratulate Mikaela Foecke and Kelly Hunter for being named to the all-tournament team, as well as being named co-most outstanding players. Coach, an opening comment?

JOHN COOK: I feel very honored and privileged to be around a team and a staff that's had an unbelievable belief in what we could do. As head coach, sometimes you don't think -- I don't think we're very good, but these guys gave everybody an example in the sport of volleyball that you don't have to have five All-Americans. We started two walk-ons today, Anni and Sydney.

But you saw a team play great team volleyball. I saw coach Pettit had an article called "old-school volleyball." It was serve, block, dig, and try not to make errors on offense and get a few sideouts. And you saw our serve-blocking defense really frustrated Florida today. That's what this team has been built on all year. They've embraced it, and they've had unbelievable leadership from the senior class.

The other thing I want to say is how cool is this for volleyball? 18,000, sold out, happened to be close to Nebraska, which was a big help. But those fans still traveled down here to fill this place, and what a great statement for the sport of volleyball and how it's growing. It's pretty cool.

Q. Mikaela, can you talk about winning this the second time, the most outstanding player, and also

immediate family to graduate from college, so.

THE MODERATOR: Great question, Coach.

Q. Coach, could you talk about Mikaela tonight and her development this season as a full-rotation player?

JOHN COOK: Well, Mikaela used to be a middle blocker, and her senior year in high school -- well, high school she had to do everything, but in a club she ended up playing outside hitter. I told her that we wanted to play her as an outside hitter. The goal was her first two years she would just be a front row player, and by her junior year with our graduation and roster management she had to be ready to be a six rotation player.

So we've been training her for two years. We take a lot of pride in how we train outside hitters. I want to make a point that I think we're the only team in the country that had both left side hitters be All-Americans and be six-rotation players.

Mikaela is a special talent. She rises to the occasion and she has become a really good six-rotation player. One of the reasons we had her do that is to have her hit out of the back row, but you have to be able to play defense and pass as well. She's worked really hard to get to that point. It's very rewarding to see when players blossom like that.

But that's been our plan since we recruited her from wherever she lives in Iowa. I can't remember the name of the town. It's like about 50 people.

Q. Going back to 2014, you made a list. It was a pretty comprehensive list, like 29 things or more --

JOHN COOK: It ended up being about 32 because I added a couple.

Q. You felt like you needed the program to go to another level. Can you share a little about that list, maybe a couple things that were on it?

JOHN COOK: Oh, you had me go back and think about that. You know, to be honest with you what started the list was I saw what Penn State did and the run they had, and pretty much every decision we made was how are we going to beat Penn State? That's who set the bar in the Big Ten Conference, and that's how we look at things. So that list reflected the thing that's we would have to do to be able to beat Penn State.

One thing we decided was serve, block, and defense had to be a priority. If you look at the stats of Penn State over the years, they were the best defensive team. So if you look at the last two years we won the Big Ten, we've been the number one defensive team in

Q. Kelly, can you elaborate a little more on how ticked off you guys are that people said this is a rebuilding year?

KELLY HUNTER: Yeah, at the beginning of the year, we thought that about ourselves too. But we just grinded and had a lot of stuff to work out with new coaches, new players. You know what, let's reinvent the culture, let's reinvent what we have here at Nebraska volleyball. We worked super hard at that during the summer. All throughout the preseason we were figuring out who we are, and opening up the Big Ten, I think we saw who we could be. We just kept working on our side of the court the entire season.

When we're playing our good volleyball, no one can beat us, so we were just focused on our side no matter what happened, and no matter what the seeds were or anything like that, we played Nebraska volleyball, and it took us all the way to the National Championship and to a win.

Q. Briana, two years ago you were in street clothes for that National Championship match. Last year fell to Texas. How did it feel to get out there and play this match tonight after the journey it took to get here to Nebraska and this night?

BRIANA HOLMAN: It felt amazing. In 2015, I was really excited, especially because I had just gotten here. But it definitely was special this year just because we'd worked so hard this past couple years, and we got so close last year. Kind of like she said, we really rebuild our culture, yeah.

Q. Kelly, in a four-set match, all of your teammates except for one, was held under double-digit kills. I know you really like to be a balanced team. But how special is what Mikaela did tonight from your point of view?

KELLY HUNTER: Yeah, just looking at the paper, we walked in here, and I said, 20 kills? Oh, my God, I didn't realize it was that many. We normally don't have a go-to. And I think it's Foecke stepping up in this tournament. She did that again, and she was just hot.

I remember Thursday, I was talking to Lauren, and I was like yeah, I'll push it to you. She's like feed the beast, and she was like, 'Foecke.' And so, yeah, she sets up when we need her, and she was kind of our go-to tonight.

JOHN COOK: I want to know what it feels like to graduate from college and win a National Championship on the same day?

BRIANA HOLMAN: It feels amazing. I don't know. It's a long journey to get to this point, and I'm the first in my

the conference.

The other things were -- I didn't know I was going to lose a whole coaching staff and all that, but I think building a culture, we already had a good culture, but how would we take it to another level. I built this performance team that I've surrounded our team with, myself and our players. You saw the hug at the end, and they all came down there. But we have a performance team that helps us be the best we can be in every aspect of our program. You hear a lot of coaches say the details, the small things matter. Every little thing matters in our program.

The great thing about Nebraska, you have the support to do that, and they give you the support to get those people on board, and they deserve a lot of credit for what we've accomplished the last three years.

Q. You use a lot of freshmen in a lot of different positions this year. Specifically with Lauren and Jazz, talk about the growth you saw from those two from the first Florida match back in August to what happened tonight?

JOHN COOK: Yeah, I've been telling Lauren, she could be a huge difference on this team. She had to replace Amber Rolfzen who was one of the greatest middles I've ever coached. Tyler has watched her. From the first time he watched her on video he was like, oh, my gosh, we've got to study this girl and how good a blocker she is. So Lauren had big shoes to fill. She's really embraced it. She's a great competitor. So she's done an awesome job for us.

Jazz was the one player we knew we had to get. Because I had to replace Kadie Rolfzen on right side, and Jazz also had big shoes to fill. I know stat-wise she didn't have a great night tonight, but she had a lot of really tough sets she had to deal with. But she got some huge kills in the fourth game that we needed. She got huge kills in Kentucky. She got huge kills against Penn State.

I think Jazz is one of the keys to helping Mikaela get those kills and Anni be effective, because people have got to deal with her back there. And I don't know if you saw our Kentucky match, but it was a very, very competitive-type match, and she had a solo block that I thought was the play of the match, and probably won the match for us.

Q. I know this group has brought you a lot of joy to coach for this group. To become the first group of Huskers to ever win more than one national title, how gratifying is it for you to see it be them?

JOHN COOK: I've had so much fun coaching this year, and you follow us, and I know I keep talking about that.

But it's such a fun group to be around. It's way different than what I'm used to. They're loose, they're fun. You saw in the end, they're trying to dump the Powerade thing on me, and it's like this all the time.

Our staff, our new staff has just really gelled. First thing they said, because Danny told them, if we win, I've got to take them to Cabo like I did Danny and Chris. So Tyler's like we're going to Cabo. That's Cabo San Lucas for you guys.

So the tradition continues. I don't know. I'm going to think about how rewarding it is, but this has been an unbelievable, fun season to coach. I really appreciate it, and I'm very thankful.

When you have teams like this, you've got to enjoy every moment. That's what everybody I surround myself with kept telling me. You've got to enjoy this team every moment. Their quirks, they're fun, they mess around, they play practical jokes, but they know how to win and they play great together. It's just been, like I said, really fun and rewarding.

I don't know how to put it in words. I will at some point.

Q. John, what impressed you most about your setter tonight?

JOHN COOK: Well, when you get to this match, the setters on both sides weren't perfect. The great thing about Kelly is she has a very short memory. She had a couple really tough sets in the first game. She had a couple tough sets in the third game, to start the third game. But Kelly forgets it and goes on to the next point. She's really learned how to embrace that. In that fourth game, she was really, really good and made really good decisions. I think that's what impresses me most.

Then she serves tough, she plays defense, and she blocks. So to get a player that's a true 6'5" skill player that can do all those things and run the offense. The other thing Kelly, we weren't so balanced tonight, but Kelly just has a gift of how to run a team. I don't know how to coach it. It's just something that she has, and that's what the great ones have. That's why she's won two Big Tens and two National Championships.

Q. (Inaudible).

JOHN COOK: No. We work on it, and we actually, for Kentucky, we worked really hard on that and Penn State because they really suck you in on defense. So I don't know where that came from. I mean, that's Kelly. It's just the great ones have it. You can't tell them or train that. It's just the great ones have it.

She put that thing literally on a dime in that corner. There is nobody that can get to that ball. I think

Florida's just like -- are you kidding me? Saw that thing going.

Q. You mentioned old-school volleyball, thinking about Maloney's dig at 15-10 in the fourth. A lot of nice touches tonight from everybody. People stepped in and they set passes, digs from everybody. How do you train that? How are you getting that much complete volleyball out of some of your people?

JOHN COOK: I can't share secrets. We told them in the beginning of the year, the first goal we wrote on our white board was if we want to win the Big Ten, that's where we start. We have to be the best defensive team in the conference. So we have to develop this mindset of how we're going to play.

Anni is a six-foot outside hitter. Jazz is a freshman. So it's not like we've got All-Americans and we're going to be set and we don't have to worry about it. So I knew that was our only chance. These guys really embraced it.

Defense is a mindset, you know. In any sport, it's a mindset. These guys have a really strong mindset.

Q. Coach, you said you had a team meditation after the semis. Is meditation something you've done all year and where did that come from?

JOHN COOK: Well, we have a sports psychologist Brett Haskell, who works at the university. She started teaching me about mindfulness in 2015. We talked about it, mindfulness training, meditation. Last year we did it, and this year we took it to another level because we were able to get her more time with us. So it's something that's cutting edge in sports now. So we've worked really hard at it and we've developed skills to allow them not to get stressed out, to play in the moment, and how to deal with it when they do get stressed out. And that's what you saw tonight.

It was a very stressful match, but we really held our composure even when we weren't playing well. The other thing is we know sleep is really important, and after Thursday night everybody is so wound up. Their adrenaline is just pumping through the roof. They've got to get a good night's sleep to be able to play well tonight. So that was one way we helped calm them down. When you practice it and do it, it really works, and I'm a believer.

Q. What is Briana's journey on the court, academically, with the honors she's earned and being the first person to graduate in her family, what's that say about college athletics in general?

JOHN COOK: Briana, when she left LSU and transferred to Nebraska, and she documented this, she

transferred mid year. Penn State had a scholarship and we did not at the mid year. So Briana took out a loan to pay her way to come to Nebraska. I didn't think we'd be able to get her. But she saw something and her family saw something in Nebraska of what she needed and the support that she would need.

She had to sit a year, which was really hard for her, and she has worked to become a great student. She's had a very tough major, criminal justice, which is not an easy major at Nebraska. To see her graduate today, she's got a very good grade point average, and for her to be able to win this National Championship --

The other thing, we can say it's not a big deal, but she was an honorable mention All-American, and she didn't even make all-conference. You look at her stats against the best middles and you look at her stats in this NCAA tournament, and she had a heck of a tournament. So it's very rewarding to see what she's accomplished.

Our chancellor and president were here today, I don't know if they're giving her her diploma in the locker room or not, but we piped in the graduation ceremony and they announced her name. You guys ought to see it on Twitter. It was a very emotional moment for our team today and her.

Q. Can you compare and contrast the 2015 team to this team, and how difficult is that going into the off-season having to kind of reset and approach everything differently and redo it with a completely different team?

JOHN COOK: Well, that 2015 team they actually had similar journeys. We lost early this year. We lost to Northern Iowa, and that team lost to Minnesota and Wisconsin back-to-back at Nebraska, which hadn't happened since 1988, I think. And then we had a meltdown as a team, a staff, the whole thing, and 24 hours later, we regrouped. We went on and won 32 straight matches over the next '15, and '16, and won a National Championship.

So that team -- but that team had a lot more talent than this team. But this team had, like I said, an amazing ability to play hard for each other and make everybody else better. Kelly got to run the show, and I think we had a lot of the great players on that '15 team that Kelly was the setter.

Q. When you write your next book and you have a chapter on this team year's team, what is going to be the prevailing team on the 2017 season?

JOHN COOK: Dang, you know, what this team taught me is that the power of the belief of a group when they all bought in, and they came up with, "with each other,

for each other." I think it's the most powerful thing. I told you guys this, the day they presented that, it was one of the greatest coaching moments of my life and coaching career seeing what they came up with. What they wanted to be about. It was a reinvent of our program, and then, why not us?

The way they did it, the way they presented it, they have shirts and the way it's really coolly designed. But just embracing what they wanted to do as a group, and they lived it every day. So it's just the power of belief and commitment and really wanting to do something and maxing out their talent.

This team maxed out everything they have, everything.