

December 15, 2012



Texas – 3
Oregon – 0

An Interview With:

TEXAS
COACH JERRITT ELLIOTT
HALEY ECKERMAN
SHA'DARE MCNEAL
BAILEY WEBSTER

THE MODERATOR: We're going to do it the same way as we have the last couple of days, beginning with an opening statement from Coach.

COACH ELLIOTT: Congratulations to Jim and the University of Oregon for having a phenomenal year. I've been to this thing a lot of times, and finally we've broken through. But we've broken through because of what this program stood for. I've always believed that we've been doing it the right way and sometimes you need to get lucky.

I said that in the other press conferences. But I want to make sure that the ones that walk before this group are recognized. A lot of people bought into trying to turn this program around, the alumni before them that created such a great legacy, and most importantly the players that bought in and were here from the beginning of the summertime and just continued to get better.

We had a rough stretch in the beginning of the year, and trying to figure out our lineups, but we always believed.

And the great thing about coaching is if you're in it enough, you have enough experience, you can be patient because you know what you'll get in the end.

And this group all year long, this is the best team I've ever had that has shown up to practice on a daily basis. I think we had two or three poor practices the entire year. They were diligent. We

did pretty much the same practice routine every single day.

It can get pretty boring at times, I think, but we got better in the areas we needed to get better in. And they bought in. They believed. They never questioned. And we just had such great leadership with Hannah, Sha'Dare, and Bailey, and there were a lot of times we were starting to kind of get off track and our captains would hold some meetings and figure things out.

Some coaches don't like that, but I have confidence in what my players stand for and I believe in them and I know that it's only going to come back positive.

But this has been a long time coming. And I'm so happy for the University of Texas, for my incredible AD, Chris Plonsky, and people who put time in and believed in me when they hired me and just believed and continued to put their backing into this program.

But to see these girls' faces. Sha'Dare, my only senior, this means so much to her, and I know it does to Eck and Bailey.

It's surreal. And we're just so excited and proud of these young ladies.

THE MODERATOR: Questions to the student-athletes.

Q. Sha'Dare or Bailey or Haley, you all blocked tonight, seemed so intimidating. I think it was 15 to 1 was the block total yours to theirs. What was it that was going so right?

SHA'DARE MCNEAL: I think it was just like timing the hitters and knowing their shots, is what we really focused on. Just relying on our blocking on our side of the net.

Q. Sha'Dare, I know you were a younger player in previous Final Fours, but you guys did go through some heartbreak obviously in 2009 and even in 2010. Can you just talk about experiencing that, even if you weren't playing much, but experiencing that in what Coach was talking about, about how the

older players sort of did set the path for what you guys were able to do tonight?

SHA'DARE MCNEAL: Yeah, I guess it was just like a big learning experience for me and knowing how to face adversity in the times that we needed to overcome it.

So just basically knowing what I had to do to tell the younger players.

Q. Bailey and Haley, can you guys talk about -- I mean, you've hit really well in a lot of matches this season, but to do this in a national championship, there was just no let-up it seemed like this whole match. Could you talk about having that intensity and hitting as well as you did throughout all three sets?

BAILEY WEBSTER: I think honestly all I remember and all I know about this match is that I just felt like we did the whole thing together. I feel like one game someone was on, the next game someone was on. If someone was quiet -- Haley picked me up. Like it was -- passes were perfect. Like Sha'Dare, every ball that was going to her was down.

And I think we really won this because we were such a team out there. I think that was the most important thing, not about how well we were hitting.

Q. Bailey, after the very difficult second set, did you guys talk at all about finishing, how important it was to finish knowing that it had happened once before that you hadn't finished, how important it was to come out in that third set and just put your boot to them and make sure they didn't come back?

BAILEY WEBSTER: We never talked about how we never finished. I think the entire match, even in huddles, halftime, we were positive with each other the entire time. Every game was treated like nothing happened before. We just erased the game we won. We were like: Guys, like we need this win. Act like we're about to get eliminated. We need this win. And we literally took it one point at a time. I think that's what worked for us.

Q. Sha'Dare, the other day Coach said he admitted it's like a gorilla on his back or something for not having won. And you know how long it's been; it's before you were born. What's this mean to Texas and what's this mean to him? And for all you, too, what does it mean to him?

SHA'DARE MCNEAL: I feel like we haven't won in so long, so it means basically the world right now. To me it means everything. Just being a senior and winning my last college game with the national title is really awesome.

Q. What about Coach?

SHA'DARE MCNEAL: I'm pretty sure he's enjoying it (laughter).

BAILEY WEBSTER: I think it means a lot to him, especially the fact that I've been here for four years with Shaw, and he's believed in us every single time. And he never gave up on us. And I think every year we have great girls coming in and out of Texas, and every time he's just like: We have something special, guys. We can do this.

And I've been there for numerous meetings and numerous talks. And the fact that he stuck by us and believed us, I think it means a lot. Because this is -- because in the beginning we were: Oh, you're a young group; oh, you're this. And we proved to everybody that we really were a good team.

And I think it means a lot to him.

Q. Haley, can you talk -- you've been known for that serve for a long time. But it came up big, especially in the second set. You had that service ace and at that point that set could have gone any way. Can you just talk about the confidence you have to serve big even in the biggest moments of matches?

HALEY ECKERMAN: I think the biggest thing that coaches tells us is to just go back, be confident with the serve, whether it's 24-23 or 0-0. I think that was my biggest thing, just focus on getting it in. That's something I've been working on, where I've had ups and downs in games, and I was just focusing on getting it in and deep.

Q. With all the talk about your offense, I mean, that defense in the first set of course kind of set the tone, was that something that you all kind of hoped? You knew that the hitting would come around. Did you feel like it was more important to really set a tempo defensively and take control there? For any of you.

BAILEY WEBSTER: Yes. That was when we were in our team, team huddle, the coaches weren't around. We really think that's one of the most important parts of -- we honestly -- everyone

talks about our offense; we don't really talk about that at all.

We feel like the passing, that gets us started. The defense gets us started. We're like: Guys, you get us started with the passing and everything will work. Like it starts off you guys.

And we have a lot of confidence in them. And also with blocking as well. We focused on those two things the most. And then we let offense come.

But, yeah, that was the most important thing we talked about.

Q. Bailey, the whole season, it seemed, the only talk was of the Pac-12 and the Big Ten, and usually in the polls eight of the top nine slots were those two conferences and maybe Texas was thrown in somewhere. Any vindication for the Big 12 in this case or just any thoughts about people simply looking maybe past your conference for most of the season?

BAILEY WEBSTER: I think every conference -- I mean, I think Pac-12 and Big Ten are really good conferences, and we all owe them respect. But I think this is a good win for us, and hopefully it will gain some respect for the Big 12 teams.

Q. Coach, do you have a comment on that?

COACH ELLIOTT: I think volleyball has become national. You're starting to see with so many good teams here. Obviously Oregon is here and Michigan is in here. Sometimes these things can be a little bit biased. People are saying our conference is not -- we heard it from a lot of media. We've got a great conference, we've got good players, good teams that are challenged, but also we're a smaller conference. We're getting better breaks, getting more training sessions.

I actually love it. I wouldn't change it. I think we've got a great conference, and it prepared us very well for this tournament obviously.

Q. Bailey, you talked a minute ago about the only thing you remember is doing it together from this match. Were you kind of in a zone, or can you just describe your emotions a little bit about the match?

BAILEY WEBSTER: During the match I was really calm. This is just a regular game. Yeah, let's play. We're having a good time. I just was calming myself down, because your anxiety

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can just mess you up because it's the national championship match.

And I think that's what we did so well. But I can't remember anything, because just at this point it's just surreal. So I can't remember what happened in the game.

THE MODERATOR: Ladies, thank you. Questions for Coach.

Q. When the match ended, Bailey went running and jumped on your back. Are you all right?

COACH ELLIOTT: Yeah.

Q. She hit you hard.

COACH ELLIOTT: She's been telling me all year long: Coach, I'm coming for you. We talked about it a little bit when we were up late in Game 3. She looked and kind of got tears and she goes: I'm coming after you, Coach. She made me a promise we were going to win.

We have a special relationship. She's an unbelievable young lady that has grown so much not only on the court but off the court. I love having players like that where you can make a difference in their life.

Q. You know how long it's been and how much pressure that you talked about. Can you talk about with what a volleyball-rich state you're in and with what a great program and all the great players you've had yet it's taken so long to win, talk about maybe how hard it is to win this thing?

COACH ELLIOTT: Yeah. It takes time. It takes the right situations to be able to happen. When I took the job, there wasn't a whole lot of rich talent coming out of there. All of a sudden it got hot. We've done a great job keeping the best kids at home. And we've done a really good job. I've been so pleased with our program.

I don't know, but to me getting to the (national championship) is one of the hardest things to do in sports. And to get there four out of five says a lot about where our program is.

I've talked to so many great coaches, and I said: What's the key? They said: Keep getting back to the (national championship) and give yourself a chance.

In the years we didn't win, in '09, that was an unbelievable set of athletes, and it's not only how good your team is but it's also based on the

rest of the country.

So it means a lot. We always take so much -- the great thing about Texas: There's so much pride in it, and it's going to continue to grow the sport. And I'm sure us winning tonight, we'll get a lot of young ladies out there 10 to 12 years old start bumping the ball back and forth and hopefully have some future Longhorns.

Q. Did it seem even harder to close with three sweeps in your last four matches? Could you have imagined that when you started this run?

COACH ELLIOTT: No. You're expected for everything. You don't go into a match expecting you're going to go 3-0 by any means. I just think there was so much growth on the team. We were very left-side dominant beginning of the season. We didn't have a lot of balance. Our libero was struggling a little bit. Our setting wasn't very good. Our libero we continued to build confidence and put drills, got so much tougher. Hannah grew tremendously. And Molly got better. And Sha'Dare is the most underrated player in the country.

We knew we had the pieces, but we had to build that trust. We had to get better with the servicing and become methodical. The numbers I'm looking at right now are off the charts. The side-out at 91, 75, 85, we haven't done that all year long.

This team got into a zone and there was a lot of confidence. You could start seeing towards the end of the year. And we've got just great balance and great team play and we've got some amazing athletes.

But the great thing about this team and our program is that our athletes continue to get better volleyball IQ. And that's what happened.

Q. Coaches voted Alaina Bergsma the Player of the Year and you shut her down. How?

COACH ELLIOTT: Well, we got the matchup we wanted. We wanted Bailey on her. And we figured they've been in rotation all year long. We were wondering if they were going to switch out of that after Game 1, but they'd only done that against Cal I think earlier in the season, and that was the only time, even when they went down a lot.

It's such a good offense. It's so fast and it's got to be precise. But what happens with that faster offense when you player longer teams like

us, it's slower to the tape, there's a higher risk of blocks. And you saw it against Penn State the other night as well.

If we get our feet in position and we get right touches, our message to our team was get your hands in the right position because we're not going to be able to close all the time.

And when we were getting touches, we were getting good transition swings. In Game 2 we got tooled a little bit too much, and that was our message, is watch approach speeds and do that. And then with Bergsma, we just did a good job kind of getting in front of her.

And I've been in this situation where it's the first time to the Finals -- or first time to the (national championship) and you can get glossy-eyed. When we put that kind of pressure on teams blocking-wise -- young ladies can get dug all night long, but when they start getting blocked, it sends a different message and sends a little bit of panic.

I thought we did a good job and we frustrated them and got to -- our side-out game was just relentless. That's what we talked to our team about, just one point at a time.

And going into the break, I just told the team, I said: Hey, this team is a championship team. They won the Pac-12. They're going to come out screaming. But we've got to do what we did against SC. We believe we'll be methodical, play one point at a time, and good things are going to happen. But don't think anything past the point and compete at that point.

Q. Can you kind of comment on how well Bailey played? I think at one point was she hitting about .800.

COACH ELLIOTT: She was hitting .500. The entire tournament she was phenomenal. She was hitting .519 coming into the Michigan match. Michigan played unbelievable defense. Our set location wasn't quite as good as it was tonight. Hannah did a really nice job problem solving that. We spent time in the practice gym yesterday and not really making her aware of it, but her set location was really good. And Bailey worked the court.

Q. Bailey and then Kat in consecutive years had ACL injuries they had to rehab. Can you just talk about what -- in some ways I think we take for granted that you're going to come

back from those. But that's a lot of work. And Bailey said that one of the things she told Kat was you can come back better than ever from them. Can you maybe talk about how she helped Kat come back from hers?

COACH ELLIOTT: Yeah, you know, I'm so fortunate to be at Texas because we have the best athletic training department in the country. Tina Bonci has done extensive research on knee injuries in terms of prevention, how to go about it.

Tina, our trainer is phenomenal and relentless in terms of making sure that we're doing it the right way and taking methodical steps, understanding what muscle mass we are getting back to, and then getting back to teaching them how to land.

And kind of we spent a lot of time with our team right now, just fourth grade jumping and landing and how to absorb. And nutritionally we do a great job with them and get them to the point where we spend a little bit more time than probably coaches like.

But we do it the right way. And we're patient. Because the success we've had, we are able to be. We are able to be patient. And Kat was ready in six months. She was ready to go in May. And we held her back and held her back. It was absolutely the right thing to do.

Give so much credit to Tina and the athletic training department. They know exactly what they're doing. What's so great is they're giving. They're not just in the training room, they're in the weight room making sure we're working with Coach Donnie. Coach Donnie did a phenomenal job getting her strength.

There's a combination that we have at Texas in terms of the group that we work with that allows us to be successful. We work with each other. We use each other's knowledge and we meet and we don't have attitudes and they work together, and it just shows. And I'm proud of that part of our program.

Q. I think it was Bailey talked about it being such a team effort. Molly had a really nice match tonight, a young player. And how much of that contributed to her play in the middle?

COACH ELLIOTT: We wanted to find good situations. We wanted to run our middle a lot tonight. We wanted to run Sha'Dare a lot. We wanted to really attack that side. We knew they would be all over our left, but we really wanted to create that balance, especially early on.

In Game 2 we got a little bit wild in terms of some good transition. We tried to find Kat, but it wasn't in system kind of where all the stars align, and then we start -- because Bailey was so hot we went back. But we were still finding them in good situations.

But Molly has done such a nice job. She's a competitor. That was the first thing that I liked about her when I saw her. She's got some room for improvement. But she drives every time. I don't know -- I mean, a lot of you may not have played volleyball, but to get to set only five times and drive and jump and believe and be there and be accountable says a lot about who she is and the competitor she is. And she puts four kills out of five, and it puts so much pressure on the block because they've still got to respect her.

Q. Coach, seemed like the second set was a real tipping point in the match. You guys had cruised and done a really good job in the first set. The other night in the second set Michigan came back and they were the ones who grounded out in the second. But tonight it was you guys. So speak to that, what you were telling your team, what they were telling each other on each point.

COACH ELLIOTT: Game 2 was about our blocking. They started moving the ball around. But we were getting tooled, which means it hits the block and kind of goes out of bounds. We didn't do a good job. And we wanted to get touches. When we were getting touches blocking and throwing the ball down, we were getting good transition swings.

And, you know, we told them -- it was 17-13, if my memory serves me right, and I looked down and they were setting it 91 percent, and we were siding out at 74. If we're at 62-63, it's really high. I said: Hey, stick with what we're doing, we'll get a run. Because they've shown in all the films, and showed the other night, they can give up runs at points in time.

The thing if you look at the statistics, the biggest thing that sticks out is how we manage our game. We have four hitting errors to their 23. And we had ten total errors. And this is where our team grew so much. They learned how to take good quality swings, be patient, and put a tremendous amount of pressure on teams and make them be great the entire night. We're okay with kind of keeping the ball in play sometimes, but making them be perfect. It becomes overwhelming with

our block digging the transition and it gives us a lot of opportunities to score and put pressure on teams.

And this is where the team has grown. A lot of people don't know that, but our management of our game has become significantly better because of our girls buying in and the things that we've been teaching them in our gym.

Q. You talked about how much the sport has grown in the state of Texas. Just about how it's grown nationally, playing in the national championship, second largest crowd ever in an area that's not exactly known for volleyball.

COACH ELLIOTT: Actually, it's known for volleyball. They've got the little tough -- the libero that everybody wants. They do a great job with a lot of the clubs up here. We came up here earlier because we knew that this department does a great job and they do it right. It served us well by playing here earlier.

But Louisville did a phenomenal job. I thought the support staff, the organization was perfect. And they were just so excited. You could see them talking about it. The team banquet and what it means.

What's so great about the sport right now people are starting to buy into it. They're starting to see these big crowds and they're starting to see how incredible these athletes are, and it's a high-level game right now.

And the great thing about (national championship) sites is it grows the sport continually. And the sport I believe is just starting to kind of get a little bit of momentum. People are starting to understand. And hopefully we can continue to grow it because we've got a lot of great coaches out here and a lot of great players and it's getting tougher and tougher to get back here.

Q. You talked about the monkey turning into a gorilla and finally getting him off the back. Is it more a sense of relief or a lot of exuberance that we don't see that's bubbling inside you?

COACH ELLIOTT: You know, I did a lot of that just to kind of downplay it for the team. That's all the media wanted to do, and I was joking around with it, talking about how we did it. The more the team hears, the more stressed out they get.

So much of coaching is managing your team, learning how to be in that position. The best

thing that I heard from this weekend is that we had a massage therapist that we were using, and she came back and said: Gosh, the players are saying how relaxed Coach is. For me that was really good, and because I can get pretty intense at times. And my job is to kind of just make sure they're in a good frame of mind and do the things they need to do.

So I don't know. Again, this isn't about me. I believe we've been doing it the right way. I know I've had full support with my athletic department. And I coach, not for the wins and losses -- yes, they're very important -- I coach because I wanted to grow these young women. I just can't wait to celebrate tonight because this is what it's all about, get to see how hard they're working, because this is the only thing that money can't buy.

It's one of the things that you've got to work, you've got to learn how to communicate. You've got to learn how to build and believe in each other. You've got to deal with conflict. There's a lot of things you go through that media and people don't know how hard our team has worked.

But, again, it's been set over the time because we've done such a good job with our culture and the captains that have come before them.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.
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