

Big Ten Volleyball Media Days

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Chicago, Illinois, USA

UCLA Bruins

Coach Amir

Lugo-Rodriguez

Anna Dodson

Audrey Pak

Press Conference



AMIR LUGO-RODRIGUEZ: Thanks, everyone, for being here. We're thrilled to participate in Big Ten media days. I know Alfee wishes he could be here but he's got to handle some business against Poland right now. He just wanted me to communicate how thrilled he is to be bringing the UCLA brand of volleyball to the best conference in the country.

We're really excited to compete. We're excited to show everyone what we've got this year. We have big postseason aspirations. And we're thrilled to be here with Anna and Audrey who are two great leaders for our team, and let them talk about volleyball with me up here as well.

Q. August 2nd hits. Is it business as usual? Is there a certain energy in the air as you're officially Big Ten members?

AUDREY PAK: I think we're just really excited to be here, for everything that's going to happen. And we're just ready to attack it.

ANNA DODSON: I think this summer we put in a lot of work. And at the forefront of our mind has been how are we going to show up this year and who do we want to be and what's our image and what's our goals.

I think this conference is going to be a great opportunity for us to showcase that.

Q. Your first Big Ten game is in Lincoln, and I was wondering for the players, is that something you're actively thinking or preparing for? Or do you take a more one-game-at-a-time approach and worrying about the next opponent? And for Coach, having coached in the Big Ten and Pac-12, is there a discernible difference between style of play or competition or

atmosphere between the two conferences?

ANNA DODSON: We emphasized treating each team the same. Each is an opportunity to show our style of volleyball. So I think Nebraska is a great opponent. I think we're really looking forward to playing there, especially with our first Big Ten game. But truly I think we take every game and treat it the same.

AMIR LUGO-RODRIGUEZ: Obviously the competition in the Big Ten speaks for itself. Venue-wise, we're excited for our players to play in more kind of, like, sold-out arenas. It's kind of like the vision that when you are a young athlete, that you picture yourself playing at Nebraska. Purdue gets packed, Wisconsin, so on and so forth. So I think that environment creates a really cool experience for our student-athletes.

Like I said, we're excited to walk into those places and compete and show everyone what UCLA volleyball is all about.

Q. Anna, you followed the path of Desiree. Did you talk to her during the transfer process? Is it a Northwestern-UCLA pipeline? What did you learn from her and what did you learn at UCLA?

ANNA DODSON: Desiree and I are close friends. I was so grateful she could come to UCLA for her last season. We've definitely talked about Northwestern, and just the Big Ten Conference overall and how pivotal it has been for volleyball. And being able to be a part of that and represent UCLA is just truly an honor.

I think that it's something that we're really preparing for as well. It's going to be a competitive environment, and we're taking the steps we need to in order to show up as our best and attack.

Q. It is not even 8:00 a.m. on the West Coast yet. What is it like getting acclimated? And how can you use this or prepare for this when you're traveling east to play in the Big Ten?

AUDREY PAK: It hasn't been too bad. I think we're



running on a lot of adrenaline and excitement, which I think will probably be how it is on the road. I think we're just going to have a lot of gratitude for having such cool opportunities like this, that we might feel a little bit tired but I think the excitement overcomes that.

ANNA DODSON: I think another thing that we're really emphasizing right now is to front load our preparation and front load what is to come. Obviously the travel, it's not going to be as grueling. We're truly excited just because it's an opportunity for us to build our culture even more, spend more time with teammates.

But truly I think we're doing a great job of front loading and just getting ready to adapt and adjust to whatever adversity we have to face.

Q. Anna, you almost left UCLA at one point, but now you're here for your fifth season. What keeps bringing you back to the program?

ANNA DODSON: Going into my sixth year, it's simple. Alfee and this amazing coach staff, Amir as well, it's been such an honor to be at UCLA for these six years, we're going on six years. I truly wouldn't want to be anywhere else in the state.

I think we have the best coaching staff in the nation. I think we are working our butts off every day and I think we're going to make a big statement. And I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. I think there are so many other great programs out there, but this was the best for me. And I'm just lucky to have another year.

Q. One of the themes we heard earlier is that there's an unknown from a lot of the teams from the west coming into the Big Ten. Could you explain what does UCLA bring to the Big Ten and what kind of identity do you have as a volleyball team?

AMIR LUGO-RODRIGUEZ: We want to be creative. We want to be dynamic. A great word that Alfee uses is fierce. You watch our style of play and we play for arguably one of the best coaches in the world.

And so what we get is a little international flare for how we're going to play. You'll see the back row attack utilized more, more different routes out of the middles, our pins being creative, Audrey attacking the block in different ways.

I think you'll see a very complete product in terms of the game of volleyball. And I think that's what we're really priding ourselves on this year is we're training the game; we're just not training pieces to fit into a puzzle and it's a

one-size-fits-all.

Q. I believe you're both part of the '21 team that was the last UCLA team to make the NCAA Tournament. Coming back as graduate students, what do you think this team needs to accomplish or build on in order to make it back to that tournament?

AUDREY PAK: I think that's definitely one of our main goals, but kind of like Anna answered earlier, we like to view one game at a time. So I'd say the first step is just attacking our preseason because we have a really good schedule playing good teams like Georgia Tech and Tennessee.

So seeing how we can do there and what we can learn from that and then building off of that as we move into conference.

Q. What other sport have you been doing since you've been growing up?

ANNA DODSON: I've done a lot of sports. I've done Tae Kwon Do. I've done tennis. I've done basketball. I've done pretty much every sport known to man. But volleyball ended up being my passion and my deep love and desire.

AUDREY PAK: Pretty similar. I really liked soccer. I did tennis and golf also. But I just ended up liking volleyball the best out of all of them.

Q. Anna, does Tae Kwon Do help you in volleyball at all?

ANNA DODSON: You know, I have not seen the benefits of it yet. But we'll see. Maybe this year I'll bust out a move or two. Just kidding. (Laughter.)

Q. Did you guys grow up always playing the same position? If not, what did you all suspect that you all were going to be able to play growing up?

AUDREY PAK: That's a really good question. When I was 12 I played right side but I also set. I'm a setter right now. I think it was clear pretty early I couldn't have a great career as a hitter as fun as it is. So I just ended up sticking to setting.

ANNA DODSON: I have pretty much been a middle my whole life. I dabbled in outside and oop in high school, but mainly just middle just because of my height.

Q. Have you ever thought about quitting?

ANNA DODSON: Quitting? No. I haven't. I think when

you're surrounded by people who love the sport and are also great humans, it makes what you do so much more enjoyable and so much more fun.

It gets taxing and grueling and you get tired, of course, but it's those people that you're surrounded by every day that truly want you to be your best and give 100 percent of what you have every day.

AUDREY PAK: I would say there's definitely been a lot of challenges and times when it's really hard, but I've never fully contemplated quitting. Like Anna said, just the people around you, and everyone has a different why and motivation, but leaning on that when it gets hard is really important.

Q. Amir, you all were very close to making the tournament last year, but you finished 3-7 at home. Some losses you'd like to have back. Have you thought about how to improve that performance at home and maybe mess up the routine change things around? Have you addressed that going into year two?

AMIR LUGO-RODRIGUEZ: Going into this year we're really prepped on, I think, embracing the moment, being better with our feet on the ground, going into a lot of those home matches, hopefully, that we're going to learn from last year, we're going to be able to adjust to some things.

And I think that the competition in the Big Ten, it's only going to get better from last year and every year. This conference continues to rise. New teams emerge. For right now we're just excited to compete against every team and hopefully the end product will be how we trained all this summer, how we trained leading into the preseason, and good things will happen.

Q. What do you and your teammates have in common besides playing volleyball?

AUDREY PAK: I'd say a lot of different things. We all like to hang out, go to the beach. We like to shop. We just like doing different fun activities in our off time.

ANNA DODSON: I think that's what's great about volleyball as well. We are brought to the same school for volleyball and academics, but it's so great to get to know everybody and what everybody has in terms of their own personal hobbies and traits and characteristics. I think everybody brings such a unique passion outside of volleyball. So it's great to have such diversity on our team.

Q. Going back to the question about training in different positions, or practicing. Have those

experiences, even at the high school level, impacted how you play your position group now, or does it feel very far removed at this point?

AUDREY PAK: I think it makes a difference. Personally, for me, even though I was pretty young, being able to be a hitter I think just helped with understanding how the offense works and has helped me with setting. And also has just helped encourage me to be aggressive with dumping and blocking at the net, which are things that I really enjoy.

ANNA DODSON: Yeah, I think having variety in your game, especially when you're young, is super important. I was lucky to be coached by Jim Stone who does not believe in training middles only as middles. I was in practice two hours before getting defense reps, getting serve/receive and doing things that normal training for middles didn't consist of. And it's definitely reaped its benefits now, and I'm very lucky to have that.

It's just given me different vision and perspective as well as I can try to understand and relate what other positions are going through on the court.

Q. Is there a venue that you most like to play in away? And is there a venue that you look forward to that you've not played in the Big Ten Conference?

AUDREY PAK: I would say I enjoy playing at SC just because in LA there's a lot of volleyball fans that come out. So it's really cool to see everyone coming out for the rivalry to watch, and it's just really exciting.

And I'm excited for our conference opener at Nebraska, just to put to test everything we learned in our preseason and also just to see the volleyball culture there that they're really known for.

ANNA DODSON: I'm excited to play in Purdue. I'm excited to have a lot of the Big Ten teams come to us, which is going to be super exciting just to have everybody in Poly and get a different fan base coming and pack Poly more than just SC. So I'm excited.

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