

Big Ten Volleyball Media Days

Monday, July 28, 2025

Chicago, Illinois, USA

Minnesota Golden Gophers

Coach Keegan Cook

Julia Hanson

Stella Swenson

Press Conference



KEEGAN COOK: Nice turnout in the fourth iteration of this, my third. Just a lot of gratitude walking back into this space. I don't think the season felt real until about right now, that it's here, it's upon us.

Excited to get back in the gym with my group. It's got that mix of young and old talent, but most of all it's a group that is on the same page in terms of values in volleyball.

First two years at Minnesota were special. Transitions are challenging as we know in this day and age in college sports, and I think it says a lot about the University of Minnesota and the athletes, the fact that the program has been to two NCAA tournaments and won matches.

But we hope to remember it as the good before the great and we're looking to make a jump into those later weekends of the tournament.

This is a dynamic group, a group whose potential we'll be trying to meet for the entirety of the season. We've been known as a serving blocking grind you out kind of team, but hopefully you're going to see a much more dynamic offensive group, much more skilled receiving group and a group with plenty of personality and character.

Thanks for being here. Looking forward to talking with you guys.

Q. You added Lourdes Myers from the transfer portal. What does she bring to your team and how does she fit our roster?

KEEGAN COOK: Yeah, really special opportunity to add a really dynamic athlete, one we had competed against a number of times unsuccessfully so looking forward to having her on our side of the net. A long athlete, really dynamic, well coached in her time at Purdue, can score the ball in front and behind the setter.

Gives you an added level of physicality that we lost. Phoebe Awolaye was a big loss for us in terms of being one of the best blockers in the country, and Lourdes helps us mitigate some of that, while also adding a little more offense in the middle third of the net, which is something we have been aspiring to be better at for some time.

Thankful to have her and all the work she did at Purdue. Again, she speaks highly of her time there, and we're looking forward to giving her the best year of her career.

Q. Julia, how do you explain the quantum leap you made last year? What were the keys?

JULIA HANSON: Yeah, I think spring of 2024, I think Keegan kind of told me, hey, this is your moment. If you want it, take it. I can't help you with everything, but I can coach you, and if it translates to the court, it translates.

I just had a lot of trust in Keegan and also my teammates. It just translated. I have, like I said, a lot of trust. So I can listen to him all the time on the court and just get all of the feedback possible.

Q. What are you looking forward to about starting the season in Sioux Falls and that environment?

KEEGAN COOK: Scheduling is such a beast, and people think you just get the matches you want, where and when you want them. One of our big principles this year was we always like to start the season with a team that can be playing the last weekend. We played Stanford and Texas last year and we thought Texas A&M was one of the schools we identified as being one of those teams.

We're playing in a part of the country that is pretty important, the upper Midwest. Some talented players coming out of that region. It's close to us. Lots of Gopher fans. I wanted to give them a championship match early to let them know, hey, this is what's possible.

Last year we had two great matches, obviously against Stanford and Texas, and we're hoping to have a similar performance against Texas A&M.



But you want to put your team in those spaces and see where you are at early. Gives you something to build towards. After that, the rest of the non-conference is against winning programs, which is one of our principles of this non-conference schedule.

Certainly we're starting off right at the top in that week.

Q. You talked about that jump from good to great. For all of you, what is required to make that jump?

JULIA HANSON: I think Keegan talks a lot about the little things matter, and I think that's really important because you can be good at some skills, but if you really dig deep into the little things and the little tiny things that you're not going to see, that's what's going to get you from good to great.

ZEYNEP PALABIYIK: I was going to say showing up every day on the court, playing for your teammates, and try to change the habits that you are doing wrong when you are playing volleyball. I think that's what makes you great.

KEEGAN COOK: We lost six matches by two points last year, Baylor TCU, Wisconsin at Wisconsin. Margins are thin. Offensively we went from 230 to 255, around there, but we need to be close to hitting in the high 300s if you're really going to talk about being at the top of the Big Ten.

That's been our focus, receiving and siding out and getting across the net one time in a dynamic way, and we think that's going to be a good place to help build this team from.

Q. Keegan, how was your summer? Talk about what it's like to coach Jordan Taylor, what the experience was like being together, how that will translate to Minnesota?

KEEGAN COOK: Yeah, I had the opportunity to coach the U-19 national team this summer in world championships with two of our Gophers in Kelly Kinney and Jordan Taylor. When you travel with someone for 20 days, you know everything you want to know and everything you don't want to know by the end of that trip.

I think what was fun to watch was just the growth at rapid speed. When you're in those environments against that quality of opponent, you really find out what the athlete has intangibly, and Jordan especially showed quite a bit.

Our travel home was about 30 hours, and I think when she got home, she was locked out of her room, had to sleep on the couch. I asked her the next day how she was doing, and she said, I'm doing great. Just learned a lot about her

in that moment. A really durable athlete, really has a great mindset, and it was great to see her representing her country.

Q. Stella Swenson couldn't be here today, just winning a gold with the U-21 national team. After having a setter for five straight years, what has that transition been like, and I'll ask these two as well about this new chapter in her taking on that role.

KEEGAN COOK: Yeah, she's setting you.

JULIA HANSON: I'm excited for Stella. I think in the gym she's already a great leader and in the gym really competitive, probably one of the most competitive kids in the gym which that's hard because we're all competitive. I love competing with her. Me and her have a great bond of what I need from her, what she needs from me, so I'm really excited to see this season going and see her full potential.

ZEYNEP PALABIYIK: Yeah, I agree. She's young, she's just starting, but she's a great leader, as Julia said, from the beginning, and it's so fun to play with her. She's so competitive. She makes me better every day. I make her better every day. Yeah, I'm excited to play with her this year.

KEEGAN COOK: Pretty well said. Sorry Stella couldn't be here today. She was doing some new and exciting stuff for her. It means a lot for her to be with that USA team and congratulation on them getting the gold medal.

Yeah, Stella has been patient in a day and age when college sports athletes and fans aren't too patient. Stella I think made the most of her redshirt year, and to all our benefit and her benefit, we're looking forward to seeing her step foot on the path officially here pretty soon.

Q. The Big Ten has had a number of greatly liberos over the years. How do you go about trying to live that legacy and lead the next generation of greatly liberos in the Big Ten?

ZEYNEP PALABIYIK: I mean, I'm just trying to work hard every day, trying to get good reps, pushing myself every day.

It's not going to be great every match, every game, but it's just -- I try to be with my teammates, trying to help them, trying to get help from them and trying to make each other better.

Yeah, there was some bad moments that I was like, okay, what am I going to do now. For example, last year



Stanford game, it was personally a bad game for me, but then we had to play a Texas game, which is No. 1 of that time, and yeah, I just -- I was just like, okay, if I'm going to be a good libero I have to be there for my teammates, I'm going to give up right now and just go back to my country.

So I was like, yeah, I'm just -- I just want to be a good teammate, and then I think with the help of my team, I think I'm going to be a good libero like that.

Q. Zeynep, when you enter this 2025 season and think about where you started here at Minnesota, the cultural transition, learning the American game, serving, and just where you've come and just the confidence you have heading into this year.

ZEYNEP PALABIYIK: Yeah, my first year was tough because it was a whole different country, a whole different culture, a whole different language, and like everything was different, so I was trying to get used to. And I had a good role model in front of me, Kylie Murr. She helped me a lot about this transition as a libero, as a leader, as a teammate, as a friend.

So it was a big difference, but last year I got the spot to play as a libero, which I was lucky. But yeah, I think I'm just trying to do my best, every game, every practice with my teammates and my coaches.

Q. Big news in the college athletics landscape with the House settlement, revenue sharing. Is that on your radar? Is that something you're concerned about, or does that just blend into the NIL landscape?

JULIA HANSON: Yeah, I had a conversation with revenue sharing back in January, and I know it's coming and stuff like that, but that's not why I play college sports.

I play college sports to represent Minnesota and represent my home state and wear that M across my chest all the time. It's awesome. It helps us a lot.

But at the end of the day, I'm still an athlete and I'm still a human being. It's not really on my radar.

Q. Keegan, I imagine it's on your radar. How much time do you spend thinking about revenue sharing, roster building, this new world we're living in?

KEEGAN COOK: Yeah, I've heard some coaches say upwards of 50 percent of our time. It first hit us in the fall. We had some great communication from the Big Ten and from Mark Coyle and started planning then for this transition.

Julia knows the season ended and I visiting her for breakfast the next morning. That's how much it was on our radar to talk to her about the future and what it could look like for her.

What we really came to is we're still coaching these athletes and advocating for them. We are still trying to give them skills in volleyball and professionally that they will be successful with professionally and in the future.

But they're just now being rewarded for that a little bit sooner. So the job hasn't changed as much. We've had to maybe make new hires or reorganize our staff, but it's still at its heart the same job. We're still advocating for these guys the same as we always have been and telling different entities why they should value our student-athletes now and in the future.

It's been a fun thing to learn. It was exciting to hire Nellie Coleman as our first general manager to help me get off of excel and back on to film. I'm thankful for where we're landed. I'm thankful for the Big Ten and for Minnesota and for them giving us the communication to get organized and make sure we are doing the absolute most that we can for our athletes.

We're in a good position. It doesn't dominate our thoughts like it used to now that we are organized and we can get back to doing what we love, which is coach and mentor.

Q. Speaking of giving our female athletes the respect that they deserve, you guys play Vanderbilt; we don't often get to see inaugural seasons at this level. Can you talk a little bit about what that means, that we get a first-year team like that, and how you prepare for a team like that?

KEEGAN COOK: Yeah, not with film, right?

No, it's special. Anders' sister Meredith played for Minnesota. Anders is from Minnesota. Their family has a relationship with the program and we thought, hey, here is an opportunity to have our athletes be part of something special and to support him, and Meredith has been a wonderful supporter of the program.

Again, you want to put your athletes in spaces that are memorable, and this I think is going to be one for sure.

So yeah, huge props to Vanderbilt University for starting their program. They've been building it for a while. We can't wait to get down there and be part of that. I'm sure it's going to be a rocking environment.

But yeah, you don't get a whole lot of chances to be part of



firsts anymore, and anytime you do, you jump at it for sure. You guys excited?

JULIA HANSON: I'm really excited. It just kind of shows that women's sports and women's volleyball is growing so much, which is really cool to see.

Q. Coach Cook, maybe a bittersweet thing that happened in the off-season is one of your assistants. Kristen Kelsay, moving to her alma mater. Just your thoughts about her moving into that role and especially at a place that means a lot to her?

KEEGAN COOK: Boo! No, I'm just kidding.

Just a lot of joy, just for someone who you shared -- two years felt like 10 at the pace that we were operating at. You can see it in that first press conference how meaningful it was for her.

We always say you have two teams when you're a coach. You have your players and you have your staff. Anytime one of your staff members gets to go on and do something professionally that they aspire to do, you feel a tremendous amount of pride and joy.

Yeah, we're very happy to be her first Big Ten match and share that memory with her as well inside the path. But yeah, it's meaningful. Again, we play a lot of matches that we forget, but we have a chance to play some memorable ones, so we're looking forward to competing against Kristen after having her on our side for a few years.

Q. You talked about scheduling, so I'm curious a lot of teams are going into -- Purdue played a games in Gainbridge Fieldhouse, Nebraska played at Memorial Stadium. When you get those type of calls, do you have to evaluate those situations or do you want to play in those environments? Do you jump at the chance? What's the thought process if you're going to be the opposing team?

KEEGAN COOK: Yeah, you'd better have a good reason not to say yes. I think we have an obligation to be part of things bigger than ourselves. We have an obligation to grow the sport and that really gets tested in those moments. Are you going to play in one of those venues, are you going to send this athlete to the USA team. That's really where your commitment to the conference or to USA Volleyball are tested.

Yeah, when we get those invites, we usually pretty quickly say yes. We're not the only decision maker now when it comes to playing in some of those venues or in those preseason events. But yeah, the fact that we're playing

matches in front of crowds of 10,000 plus and filling those venues with ease is awesome.

Q. I wanted to ask about going into year three. I think we've had some conversations. The difference between one and two. You've set that foundation and it's full steam ahead, or what is still within the works when you are putting your stamp on this program?

KEEGAN COOK: Yeah, again, I just keep saying from good to great. I think things were stable for two years. We got some cultural things in place. We played some decent volleyball and had some moments.

But I think the 12 weeks we had in the spring, the amount of progress our players made was the greatest indication of where we're at as a program, right, that we could teach at the level we were teaching at, that the learning was happening, it was measurable, so I just have confidence that you'll see that this fall, that the relationships were developed enough.

We knew who we were and who we needed to become, and we just put in the kind of lonely work to get it done. I'm excited for these guys to come out, and again, there will be some new faces, there will be some old faces, there will be some similar traits that you've seen with our team. There should hopefully be some new wrinkles that show off the new talent that we've brought into the program.

But yeah, it's been a fast and long three years. But it feels like home, and this is my team, and I love them, and I'm excited to coach them.

Q. We talked earlier about hiring Nellie as a GM. Why did you want to add that, and what did Nellie bring to that position?

KEEGAN COOK: It's just important for these athletes -- we're the last place for them before they become professional athletes. So again, they're going to leave us, and when they leave us they enter a whole new world where we can't really help them. But we want to give them skills to be successful professionals, and part of that includes conversations with representatives who then advocate for you to get you the best possible situation as a professional athlete, and I think Nelly to me, someone who was a former professional player, who's been in the national team gym, who's held other places in business that involve negotiating, she's just such a great mentor for that space. She's not scared to be in any room or to advocate courageously for what she believes in or who she believes in.

So I just wanted our athletes to be in front of her mostly,

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

and the rest of it will work itself out in terms of revenue sharing, NIL. But I was most excited about -- anytime you get to bring somebody like Nellie back into volleyball when they've left it is a victory. We have so many great people leaving volleyball for different professional athletes that it felt like a chance to win one back in our direction for college volleyball. So I think that's what I'm most excited about.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports.

