

Big Ten Volleyball Media Days

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Chicago, Illinois, USA

Indiana Hoosiers

Coach Steve Aird

Jaidyn Jager

Sade Ilawole

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Indiana. Coach, the mic is yours.

STEVE AIRD: Thank you, thank you, thank you for having us. Excited to be here. Certainly want to start by thanking Commissioner Petitti, the Big Ten staff, for the opportunity. We've been half a day, but it's been amazing, we're having a blast.

I want to thank President Whitten, Scott Dolson, the administration at Indiana to continue supporting the program and these young women as we continue to improve, chip away, get a little bit better every year.

Certainly administrations are a huge part of a program's success, and we've got a great one at Indiana. Super proud of them.

Coming off a fantastic year. Certainly I've joked earlier that it's taken me a little bit longer than Coach Cignetti to get good fast. But it's been a labor of love. We've been working really hard over the last few years to develop elite-level athletes. Now we have a whole bunch of kids going on and playing professionally. Doing pretty well in the conference, pretty well nationally. Turning into what we hope to be a perennial top-20 program in the country.

Very daunting slate of matches to start the year. We've gone up a weight class we think in quality and caliber of opponent. We're not afraid to go and test the waters, so to speak.

Incredibly excited to host the Big Ten tournament the first year in the state of Indiana. Lots of just really positive things happening at the school for the program, for volleyball in the state of Indiana. Especially proud and excited to be here representing them today.

With that, we will pass it out and take some questions.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the Hoosiers.

Q. (No microphone.)

STEVE AIRD: Well, I guess the best way I could describe it, it's kind of like the pinwheel in business. I spent a lot of time studying business, CEOs and GMs. You find some athletes who buy into the vision of, hey, we're going to be okay. When I took the job, they had one conference win. It was an uphill battle; we knew it was going to take some time.

Then you get some kids who are tough, play hard, and you have a little bit of success. The community and the volleyball community gets excited. You're able to recruit on that. You have more success. Just like businesses with products and marketing. Then it's 2.0 and 3.0. The pinwheel starts to kind of fire.

So right now I just feel like the staff has done a great job. We've got really good student-athletes. We've got some traction. Recruiting classes over the next few years are exceptional. I just think the pinwheel is starting to spin. Pushing the rock up the hill is the hardest part, and getting people to buy into you from the beginning is the hardest part.

At this point now we feel like it's starting to spin pretty good.

Q. (No microphone.)

JAIDYN JAGER: Yeah, I think it definitely affects the school in a positive way. It can bring in new people for every sport, majors and that stuff.

I think in the whole, it affected everyone positively.

SADE ILAWOLE: I agree. I would say that football, having an undefeated season, just pushing especially all the other athletes to continue winning for the school. We saw what football winning the national championship did for the university and the state of Indiana. I think we aspire to continue winning like they did.

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Q. (No microphone.)

STEVE AIRD: Yeah, there's always a pretty good story if there's a bottle involved.

First time I met Cig, one of my favorite guys, I learned a lot from him, have a ton of respect for him. It's 10:00 in the morning, it's his third day at work, and I brought a bottle of bourbon as a gift and slid it across the table and said are we doing this now or are we doing this later.

He stares at it for about 10 seconds. Slides it back, says, I don't drink bourbon. He pulls out a legal notepad and he starts taking notes on me: You married? Yeah. Children? Yeah. He's building a dossier on me three days into the job.

Five minutes into it, he slides it into a drawer, gets up and says, I got to go watch film, and he leaves the office. So it's me at 10:15 in the morning with a bottle of bourbon in his office with a notepad and a dossier on me. That was how we met.

He's been so awesome for the university, so awesome for the state. I've told people it's taken him a while. He's in his mid-60s. If God is good, I'm doing this for 20-odd more years, hopefully I can find the same level of success.

Q. (No microphone.)

STEVE AIRD: No idea (smiling).

Q. (No microphone.)

SADE ILAWOLE: I think the international trip we got really close to each other. We had different roommates in every city we went to. I think it was an opportunity to get outside of our bubbles and hang out with people that we don't usually hang out with on the team. I think that helped grow our connection.

JAIDYN JAGER: To further that, I think all of our connections have gotten so complex with every single person on the team. I think that's a very unique thing to have. It helped all of our personalities grow, grow for the team.

So hopefully that plays through with the season, too.

Q. (No microphone.)

JAIDYN JAGER: I loved playing in such a big arena. It was so much fun just to be with, like, my best friends on the court, even off the court. Yeah, having the crowd on

top of you and over you is such an amazing and interesting feeling.

SADE ILAWOLE: Yeah, I think our team loves playing in big arenas. I think we're excited to go back there for the Big Ten tournament and hopefully have a little bit of a home-court advantage with some of our Bloomington fans coming to watch.

Q. (No microphone.)

STEVE AIRD: Yeah, I think there's a lot of coaches that are in the profession that don't love this new era where you kind of wake up every day and there's a new curve ball about how things are going to work.

I try to stay ahead of it a lot, try to read and consult. Even going into last season, I talked to GMs in the NHL and NFL and pro basketball how they build rosters, how they manage caps.

What I'm most impressed with currently is the leadership in our conference because I just think Tony is an incredibly bright guy, he really cares about the conference and the teams in the conference. You really can't control a lot of stuff that's happening. I think when the rules get established and filtered and they kind of funnel down, you make the best decisions you have in the time that you have it. And you don't kick yourself for not being able to predict the future.

I'm a big proponent of people being able to play. I'm a big proponent of kids being able to make money. I'm also old school enough to know that the college environment that I played in and grew up and coached in, I loved. I think the degree still matters.

I think you can become a pro volleyball player, get a great degree, make good money, have a hell of a time doing it all across the board. I truly think that's what the players believe I'm doing every day, is trying to give them as much as I possibly can so they can have success in all those different silos.

It's an incredibly challenging time, fast time. One of my favorite sayings is the typewriter repair guy is mad at the computer guy. The taxi guy is mad at Uber. The world keeps pushing and changing. Your ability to evolve as a coach and handle the new structure I think is paramount, and it's something I hope we're doing a pretty good job at it.

Q. (No microphone.)

STEVE AIRD: I don't think about Dave and Purdue much.



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I'm worried about Louisville. They're the first team we play. I mean, I appreciate the rivalry, and he's done a fantastic job building a program for a lot of years.

I was at Penn State for a decade, and I didn't think anything about the next match. Then I was a head coach at Maryland. It's the next match. Now I'm here, it's the next match. I don't need to be convinced of anything except preparation for the next opponent and serving these guys and doing the best job I can every day for them.

Q. What are some of your interests? How does television production interest you and fueling your interests outside of volleyball?

SADE ILAWOLE: I'm very interested in working in production and film and TV. Always something that's kind of been a passion of mine. So being able to work at CBS with the Final Four and work at the BET Awards this past summer, I learned so much, met so many people, made so many important connections.

I am grateful for the coaches allowing me to continue to get these opportunities.

Q. (No microphone.)

STEVE AIRD: I think it's the same for all the players. I talked earlier that kind of the windshield is way bigger than the rearview mirror. I don't spend a lot of time thinking about last year either. It's about what's next and what's going to happen.

T wants to be an Olympian. She just won a silver medal with Serbia this summer in the European Championships. But we've got some real Big Ten talent. We have a lot of kids that will wind up playing professionally after. I think the goal always is to tell them the truth and say, If we work really hard and stay connected, you guys do what you said you came here to do, you have a chance to win matches.

I don't think there's anyone in the organization top down that's thought that last year was the Super Bowl. I think it's the next step. Just because you beat people last year doesn't mean you're going to do it this year.

There's obviously a fear you don't want to fall off, go backwards, but fear can be a tailwind. It gets you out of bed and gets you working. I think everyone in the organization is more hungry. As much as we've gotten better, we're still not there. There's no one in the organization that thinks we've arrived. We're still trying to hunt. We're excited to do that.

Q. (No microphone.)

STEVE AIRD: We were a young team last year, although we lost some really elite talent. We still started and had young players. Five and six freshmen that were playing. We were just talking about Ellie and Sara and some of the young players. They're just happy humans. I burn pretty hot, and I'm pretty intense. Having those kids that every single day they're grateful and happy and bouncing around.

Clearly they can play. We've got good balance, good depth. I feel it's the -- the will-over-skill thing for us is really important. That's something I've always taken from Coach Rose. I don't know if we have the top-end talent, I'm not sure if I'm the best coach in the conference, but we want to fight you from the beginning to the end. We don't care where and how. I think that's something the locker room is really locked into.

We want to compete and compete hard. If you win, great. If you don't, it's not that you didn't empty it. So a lot of the kids coming in I think are adding pieces. But the core and the foundation of the group I think is really strong. The returning team is pretty excited.

Q. (No microphone.)

JAIDYN JAGER: Yeah, their leadership was tremendous and it did wonders for our team. They did an extremely good job with that, especially with the connections they made on the team that made us feel, every single one of us, so comfortable and not afraid to mess up sometimes (smiling).

I think I still have so much to learn. I definitely have learned, like, so much from them. But I still talk to them to this day and ask them questions, especially with me taking on a bigger leadership role this year. So yeah...

Q. (No microphone.)

SADE ILAWOLE: Yeah, so Kona Bear, she's associate head coach Rachel's dog. She lives in Bloomington. She is such a rock for us. She really I would say, like, takes care of the whole team on our worst days, good days. She's always such a light in the gym. Getting to come into the gym every day and see Kona is such a great.

JAIDYN JAGER: If we're in a bad mood, grumpy, if we walk into the gym and see her, we have a smile on our face instantly.

STEVE AIRD: I have a dog at home called Murphy. He is not the jealous type. So it's cool. He is not like, Hey, dad, why don't I get the shine on Instagram like Kona does? Hey, man, not everyone is built for the limelight.

Q. (No microphone.)

STEVE AIRD: I just think as a coach you want to be at a place where it's valued. I just have a lot of love and respect for the administration. Not to overdo talking about Cig, but when he talks about how from top to bottom they're in lockstep about stuff, I feel the same way with how they feel about volleyball.

I think they care about it. I think they understand how important it is in a conference. I think every single year we've been getting better and better and better.

So when I took the job, I said that I thought that Indiana volleyball had a rightful place in the nation's elite. I just thought it could get there. It's taken a lot of time. I don't think we're all the way there. I do think the state has so many great coaches and great players, and the surrounding states, and volleyball is so good in the Midwest, we could build a program that people could be proud of.

The administration, the AD, the president are incredibly proud of what we're building. We're incredibly proud to represent 'em.

The chemistry there I think is really good. My wife loves the town, my kids love the town. I think the players are having a great experience, and we're having fun every day. For now it's a pretty good deal.

THE MODERATOR: Hoosiers, thank you so much.

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