

“This Has Never Been Easy For Me.”

Nicole Davis is lying on the ground. She just dove for a missile off the hand of Alex Klineman in the highlight drill of today's practice, the outside hitter's tournament. Nicole has been on and off the floor for the past two hours, taking everything the #1 ranked women's team in the world can cannon at her. She's the last line of defense and despite her thick resume' she occasionally struggles with self doubt. "This has never been easy for me" she says. "I feel like I have to work harder than everyone here."

When practice ends, in a sweat soaked practice shirt, she asks a few of the girls on the team for a favor. She strides under the net and begins passing the bullet serves of the players. Practice is over, but not for Nicole.

Tell us where you have been this quad and what countries you have played for?



“Let's see, our seasons with the National Team typically take us around the world and back again a few times. NORCECA events take us to places like Puerto Rico and Mexico. World Grand Prix (WGP) has taken us to places like Brazil, Hong Kong, Thailand, Japan, Macau, China and Poland. This year we start WGP in the Dominican Republic, followed by Brazil, Thailand and then China. This quad, I've played professionally in Guangzhou, China in 2009-10, Baku, Azerbaijan in 2010 & 2010-11) and Piacenza, Italy this past season.”

Having played now for three different National team coaches, how would you assess this staff in terms of Olympic preparedness and why?

“I think this staff has done everything imaginable to provide us with more resources than any other team in the world. They are also probably the most experienced staff coaching a national team. Karch and Paula are two of the best players to have ever played and are also very good coaches. We've learned a lot from their experiences. Hugh has such a talent for teaching, and obviously knows how to prepare and win an Olympics, and has

guided us down the right path. Jamie is also great at what he does, and helps facilitate our ability to break down information, and figure out how to win the next point.”

“From a technical and analytical standpoint, from a sports psychology and bio feedback standpoint, and also in terms of our recovery and physical preparedness, we have an advantage over most teams in the world. I've learned to really understand and read the game, and to be more repeatable. It also doesn't hurt that our team has so much depth, and everyday we are competing against the best in the world. Our 'B' team could be a top-4 ranked team in the world, and that says a lot in terms of our preparation when we are battling everyday at such a high level/intensity.”

How would you describe the atmosphere or culture in the USA gym at the beginning of the quad and now?

"I think at the beginning of the quad we were still figuring things out: a lot of new faces. We have a mix of players ranging in age between 24 to 39. There are some generation and cultural gaps there. We also were dealing with a staff change. The staff also wanted us to learn their techniques, and to learn how to analyze the game the way they see it. It was almost like having to learn a new language. We actually had 'volleyball school' a few times to figure out how to get on the same page. We were in a period of skill acquisition and adaptation at the beginning of the quad. Individuals were still figuring out what their role on the team would be. We also hadn't yet found our 'voice' as a team. The atmosphere in the gym has always been and is always intense. We come to do work and get better. Now, at the end of the quad, roles have solidified. We're in a moment of fine-tuning as individuals and as a team. We know who we are as a team, and what we stand for. We are also operating under a much higher degree of trust amongst one another. We trust that we are all doing and saying everything we can to accomplish the same goal, and it's allowed for more true competition and camaraderie."

You are one of the elite liberos, if not THE elite libero in the world. How do you take yourself, as an athlete, even further?

"I just feel like this is an endless journey for me. As long as I am playing, I am trying to learn as much as I can about the game and about myself as a player. I am always working on finding ways to get better. For example, I spent a lot of time this professional season in Italy watching the men's matches. The men's league in Italy is probably the best in the world. The men take most of the float serves they face overhand. Obviously, the trajectory and speed is a little different in the women's game, with our net being lower, and the float serve also being more prominent. But, I've tried to incorporate more overhand passing in my serve receive game. I watch a ton of video of myself, as well. It's always good to see what you are doing. Often what I see on video, and how it felt, differs. I also know I have certain habits, and it's good to see myself doing things right and wrong. I'm a very visual person, and watching video resonates with me a lot more than someone telling me what I am doing well or not so well."

What other things are you doing to become the best athlete you can be?

I work with a sports psych consultant, whom I've known and worked with since my days at USC. His name is Mike Voight. This game is actually a profession for me now, and it's a grind at times. We are our own best and worst enemy. I think playing with confidence and in the 'zone', or at our best often is something that forms out of habit, and can be practiced, just like any other skill in volleyball. I have also started doing some work with some neuro/bio feedback doctors. We are working on the premise that all thoughts have a physiological response, and that through certain things, like breathing and visualization for example, we can control our physiological responses to our thoughts and also find ways to quiet our thoughts when needed. The task with playing volleyball and playing well is to be in the present moment as often as possible. Easier said than done, though!"

Where do you see yourself in another 4 years?

"In another 4 years I hope to still be playing. Every day is a new day. I would like to play as long as possible, and as long as I feel like I am continuing to improve and enjoy the competition."