

# USA Women's Team Practice May 8, 2012

## Notes and Observations

At 9:00 exactly team come to two giant wipe boards and Hugh addresses the team. He talks to the girls about a 5k run/walk that Nicole Davis and some of the other players are organizing as a fundraiser for breast cancer. Several members of the team have been affected in this quad with Mothers and other relatives battling the disease. He mentions to the girls that it's not compulsory and with a practice that afternoon, to "Make good choices."

He next mentions that Marv Dunphy has been added to the coaching team as a scout and will be going to London with the team.

He next has two "housekeeping" things to discuss. First, yesterday's practice the balls being passed and dug were too close total net and the need to pull them off. He tells the team once they pull them off the net they can reevaluate whether or not to put them back closer.

The second thing he says to the team is about non setters setting. The skill is rough and he tells the team if you aren't good at that skill he doesn't understand why you aren't in the gym 20 minutes before practice working omit.



He next introduces sports psychologist Ken Ravizza who tells the girls about the last 8 months of his life, battling prostate cancer and then in the middle of that, having a

heart attack. He tells the girls about getting through the tough times in a match or a season and adds that now, "I've had to walk the walk." smiling.

He tells the girls about getting themselves in the moment, about being focused. The team is attentive and takes in his 12 minutes thoughtfully.

At 9:19 the team does dynamic stretching with their trainer.

At 9:28 the team, spread across 4 nets, self tosses and attacks over the net to one defender, adding tips for reading purposes. Stacey Sykora and Kristin Richards pepper aggressively and soon all the players are at this point peppering. Coaches are circling the courts, little pieces of feedback given when needed. At 9:40 the team grabs a water break.

At 9:42 the team starts a serve and pass where upon serving to a side of three, a non setter takes the second ball and sets to a hitter who attacks at the position of the setter, opp/setter, middle or OH. Hugh makes a point of saying this isn't service practice, serve for real. Nearly everyone is serving jump floats with wicked movement. The serving and receiving teams are rotated. Score is kept and the losing team cracks out pushups and situps. At 9:59 they finish up and grab water.

At 10:01, LMU coach Tom Black who is helping while the team is training is serving at the liberos while the rest of the team is honing their blocking footwork and artwork on the net.

Now from coach's serve team is working by position on passing, transitioning out and taking a swing. Two setters per court. There is no wasted time or space in this gym. Now the passers are giving way to the middles quick attacks.

Cut up bananas, strawberries and blueberries sit by the water cart for the taking. Setters are switched and the swings get more violent.

A drink break and Karch gives the new instructions, Ravizza holds them for a second and asks the team where they are right now. If they are not in the moment, get in the moment and make themselves better.

There is now 6 on 6 on the middle court. Teams are waving off the court when losing a point from a serve and a point again from a coach's toss: wash drill. A radar gun is set up on the middle court to measure speed of serve. Every ball is pursued without hesitation or question. One of Hugh's favorite sayings is every ball has value and that is very apparent in this gym. .black is on a side court working defense with Sykora. Like clockwork, drill ends, water break and the next drill begins at 10:30. Another 6 on 6 drill starts. . It's an algebraic equation on the white board, a code very few

understand. The games start at 20 and teams have to win by 2. The competition on the court is palpable.

Every drill and warm-up features the culture of this gym; there is no pouting, no outward signs of frustration. On point hands and hugs, on an opponents point, just hands. There isn't a lot of talk from coaches, very specific feedback but not a lot, only where they deem it necessary. Bodies hit the floor nearly every play. The talk on the court is loud and encouraging. Quiet won't get you to the UK and the girls know it. 25 girls are competing for 12 tickets to London. It's uber competitive but the team chats and laughs with each other. There are no Isabel cliques. They all get on with each other and it looks and seems genuine. It has been nearly 2 hours and I haven't heard a coach raise their voice once, not once. Does it go to the point that these girls are so good and experienced that yelling wouldn't work OR that this science based coaching staff acts always looking for an edge in training and matches realizes that it is counter productive on their athletes.

It's 11 and everyone grabs a drink. The military isn't timed this well.

Several of the girls, Logan Tom, Lindsey Berg and Jordan Larson head to the weight room while the next drill gets going. Everything is on the board. There is no confusion about where a player should be in a certain drill, keeping the practice efficient and time respective.

After another mental spot check from Ravizza, at 11:05 an outside hitter's tournament starts up. Yesterday the team ran a middles tournament. A serve is followed by a coach's out of system bounce which is the team's first contact. Again, the play never seems to get ragged. Yes, mistakes are made but they are quickly etched away and the next ball is upon them.

The coaching acumen in the gym is staggering. Hugh of course, one gold medal in. Karch Kiraly, Paula Weishoff, Marv Dunphy, Tom Black, Jamie Morrison...a clinic with this lineup would make a Wall Street banker flinch. But they thrive together, focused on a common goal, egos set aside. The same thing they ask of these 25 amazing athletes. Dunphy doesn't hesitate to throw a towel down on a sweat spot on the floor. Black jumps in to serve without being asked. There are no prima donnas in Hugh McCutcheon's jungle.

At 11:19, Hugh steps onto the court and quietly chats with Alisha Glass who has made a couple bad sets in a row. The chat is quiet, Glass resumes her work.

It's staggering to think, looking at the athleticism and effort in this gym that more than half of these young women, the best players in the United States, will get cut...perhaps for the first time in their lives.

The drills aren't run at a breakneck pace, probably to ensure the best contacts and to make those best contacts are repeatable and something to learn by.

It's 11:43 and the girls are tired, they are being pushed to their physical limits. They don't get to take plays off here, everything matters and another oft repeated McCutcheonism, "There are no small things," is clearly taken to heart.

Through it all, Karch, Paula and Hugh observe. At 11:52 and the drill still needing to be completed, the girls grab water and many a quick nutrition bar or snack. During the break Kristin Richards pulls Nicole Davis aside and asks her about how to pass a certain ball. Even though they don't play the same position, only 12 girls go to the Olympics. Yet, Nicole doesn't hesitate to help her.

"Finish strong" Hugh says. And back on the court they go, knowing practice will run long today. They don't complain, they go to work.

12:07, the play is still at a high level but the practice shirts are growing darker from sweat with each ball.

The drill finally ends at 12:18. The team is called together and Hugh tells them to let the last play go and be ready for the next ball. He tells them that as always in his gym, they'll work on it and get better tomorrow.

Most of the team grabs their bags and they head to the weight room. But many, including Kim Glass stay and work on serving and passing. Having not left the court most of the three hours, Nicole Davis is taking another 50 serves.

The coaching staff meets at the board to discuss the day and look toward tomorrow. "Well work on it and get better tomorrow....."