

Episode 30: Gophers volleyball off to 4-0 start to 2021 campaign

In this week's episode of the "Weekly Rundown," our staff discusses the Gophers volleyball team's start to the season, the team's top-ranked recruiting class and what to expect from the team this weekend against Purdue.

Nolan O'Hara and Brendan O'Brien

INTRO MUSIC PLAYS

NOLAN O'HARA: Hello, and welcome back to another episode of the "Weekly Rundown," presented by the Minnesota Daily. I'm your host Nolan O'Hara. We spent the last couple weeks on the podcast talking about the Gophers men's basketball team, but this week we're going to shift into another Gopher season that's starting up now the volleyball team. So, I'm joined with a familiar voice on the podcast, Brendan O'Brien, who covered football for us this fall and is covering volleyball for us here this spring with the delayed season because of the pandemic, and it's good to have you back on the podcast. How's it going?

BRENDAN O'BRIEN: I'm doing well, Nolan. Glad to be back after a couple months away. Glad to have something new to cover this spring. So it'll be fun.

O'HARA: For sure. It's exciting. I know I had a lot of fun covering this team last year. They went when they went 27-6 and earned a Final Four appearance, beating you know, Fairfield, Creighton, Florida and Louisville in the tournament. But you know, they did lose in the Final Four to Stanford, who won the national championship, but it was a really fun season. And they've returned a lot of their roster from that Final Four campaign this season. And added the top ranked recruiting class going into this year. And so far, so good. They're 4-0, they haven't dropped a single set yet. And kind of just looking at these newcomers in particular, you know, this top ranked recruiting class, I guess, what have you seen from them so far?



O'BRIEN: Yeah. So I think the biggest thing that I've seen, but also that's been really important that coach Hugh McCutcheon has mentioned, and a lot of the players have mentioned in some of these early on media availabilities, is that there's a lot of depth within this roster. Melani Shaffmaster is one of the freshmen that came in, she's been starting at setter. But they still have two other really capable setters along with her that could come in and play it at any time. Melani's played, I think, in every single set to start the season, and she really hasn't come out except for one set, I believe. So they also have some really good hitters and depth there. Not only do they have Stephanie Samedy, and Adanna Rollins returning, they have Taylor Landfair, who is a freshman a part of that No. 1 ranked recruiting class, she's also the No. 1 rated recruit overall in the country. So obviously, you're going to add some depth there.

I also think what these newcomers add, where there's a really important example is early on in the very first match, it's the second set against Michigan State. And they were up by a little bit, and then Michigan State went on a run to tie it at 16, I want to say, and McCutcheon made some double subs, he moved out, I want to say Samedy, Rollins and, I believe, Shaffmaster. And then he put in some bench players. And it kind of looked like he was just resting up some players during the set that they look tired and maybe what you know, was just thinking, Okay, maybe Michigan state's going to steal momentum here and maybe take this set, but we'll come back and make sure that we're well rested for the rest of this match. But that's substitution that he made actually helped propel the team to when they really didn't miss a beat, and they went in a tight set. But I think overall, the newcomers just add a different element where this team is able to compete with almost whoever they put out on the court.

O'HARA: Yeah, for sure. And, you know, you mentioned the depth at setter and that was something that kind of intrigued me before the season. Because last year, they had you know, they had graduated Samantha Seliger-Swenson who was one of the best setters in the country and bring in Kylie Miller who, who started out really strong and then got injured and there was kind of a rotation at center with Bayley McMenimen and Tamara Delonga and it was just kind of that rotation ever since even when Kylie came back. Um, so one thing I was interested in looking at this season if that was something McCutcheon would go with again with Shaffmaster, they brought in the transfer setter in Hunter Atherton and then they still had McMenimen there. So I was curious to see that, but it hasn't been that so far has been Shaffmaster kind of taking the lead there. I guess what has McCutcheon said about what she brings to the team and kind of what have you seen from her in these first four games to earn that starting spot?

O'BRIEN: Yeah, the biggest thing that stood out to me from what McCutcheon said about her was after the first match, he was just asked about her play and our first start, and he just said that she was really set steady, and just setting up a lot of the talented hitters really well. And I think it's important that they do have a good setter, just because they have three really good hitters who can unleash unload on the ball at almost any point in the match. So it is important to have a setter who can, you know, set them up well, to attack on the ball. And that's one thing that I think if she continues to play steady like she has been, then I'm sure McCutcheon will kind of continue to give her that opportunity. If they feel like they can improve with other players too. Or if they feel like they need to do what they did against Michigan State subs and players out bring in some new players and kind of get some rest and have some new faces in there. They might do that as well.

O'HARA: And her height at the net to definitely presents, it's going to be tough for teams to try to shoot over her and Regan Pittman with that with that height at the front of the net, some tough defense there for sure. And then, you know, you have also brought up Taylor Landfair who, No. 1 overall recruit. And she's kind of taking the role that like Alexis Hart had last season kind of filling that spot as an outside hitter. What have you seen from her in these first four matches and how she's been playing?

O'BRIEN: She's been playing really well; I think there's been only one match where she hasn't gotten at least eight or nine kills. And she played really well in her opener. And then I believe one of the Friday, Saturday matches against Maryland, she actually led the team and kills you talk about height and difficulty at the net. She's not, she's only fourth on the team and blocks, but she's 6-5. So she's going to be somewhat of a problem defensively to what was really interesting. Talking with McCutcheon, after the wins at Maryland, he said she's obviously incredibly talented, but she has so much capacity to learn more about how to improve just as a volleyball player. So, it really helps again, adding that third person that can really add power with some of their swings, in addition to Rollins and Samedy, but she also just adds another element on the court, and she's really young. So obviously she could this week could just be seen the start of something that could be a really great career for the next three years.

O'HARA: Right. Yeah, three more years after this. So definitely can see, see what kind of trajectory that we're that goes after this this season. And you know, it's going really well this year, like you said, you know, four games in, four wins, haven't dropped a set. And you did mention, you know, there are some tight sets, there where McCutcheon subbed some players in and, but they've managed to come back in every single one of them, I guess how would you assess overall, the team's performance so far and kind of that like resiliency to be able to come back from some tight sets early here in the year?

O'BRIEN: Well, I think the most important point would be what you just kind of said at the end of the resilience, resiliency to do well, in some of these sets where things aren't going well, they kind of pull it out towards the end. The one thing that I thought was interesting, talking with Melani Shaffmaster earlier this week was that she thought that one thing that the team has talked about and could improve upon throughout the season is bringing a little bit more of their own energy, just because they're playing in empty pavilions across the country this season. So, that's one thing that I think it still shows a lot about how talented this group is. Because the one thing that was interesting in their first couple of matches against Michigan State was that throughout most of those sets, Minnesota was leading, but Michigan State definitely had a much higher energy level. So it'll be interesting to notice how those that changes throughout the next few matches.

The other thing, that's where it'll be a little bit more important to view not that Michigan State or Maryland aren't good opponents, but the next four weeks for Minnesota are really going to be a good measuring stick for how talented this team is and how far this team could go in postseason play. Because this weekend, they're going to be playing at Purdue who's ranked No. 13 in the country, then they'll host Penn State who's No. 9 in the country. They'll travel to Lincoln to play No. 4 Nebraska and then they'll host No. 23 Michigan so obviously, four straight ranked opponents will be a little bit of a higher test for this team. And it'll be interesting to see if they can actually fall in some of those sets early on and then battle their way back like they have in the first four matches.

O'HARA: Yeah, it's definitely, the Big Ten is not an easy conference for volleyball. I remember talking to McCutcheon last year, and you know, this is last year. So there was non-conference games in this non-COVID season. But, you know, the non-conference games were tough, tough. They're playing Texas and Florida and Stanford right off the bat. And I remember asking him about that tough non-conference schedule. And he's, he just said, 'You know, we're going to be playing good teams all year long. So we might as well play good teams in non-conference play,' you know, as opposed to what you can see in in basketball and football sometimes, um, but yeah, it's definitely going to be a fun group to watch, especially against these tough teams coming up. And you know, a lot of this core this team is still returners with Stephanie Samedy. You know, Regan, Pittman, C.C. McGraw, Adanna Rollins, I mean, how have they been playing? And how have they been kind of helping these younger players adjust to these new roles on the team?

O'BRIEN: I think just having a lot of veteran leadership just makes it easier one, because a player like Landfair, who is coming in as the No. 1 recruit as a freshman, maybe she goes to a different program. And she starts immediately, whereas she comes to Minnesota, and now she's not starting, she's played in most of if not all of the sets this year, but she's not starting, she's rotating in and out quite a bit. So, I think it obviously helps in that regard for the players to still kind of also sit back and learn from some of these veterans. As far as Samedy and Rollins, it's just clear, like how much power they have and their swings. There's I think there were, Samedy made a couple of plays against Maryland where she had just incredible kills from the back row, which just says a lot about her as a player. They both contribute on defense. Rollins against Maryland had a nice little service streak against Maryland, and I believe Friday night maybe it was Saturday, but so obviously she's gotten good there early on in the season. And then we're just talking about the veterans in general, C.C. McGraw and Regan Pittman.

Obviously, add to that to McGraw what's most impressive, and just jumps out watching her is just some of these rally saving digs that she'll make. Sometimes she'll just make them with one hand to where she'll just kind of pop, those will dig a ball out with just one hand and just it'll go flying in the air. And maybe they didn't, you know, end up getting the point. But it just kind of saves the rally and I think brings a little bit more of that energy knowing that you have a player who's willing to get on the ground and do something like that. And then Pittman, I don't know if the stat sheet yet really highlights how good of a player she is. But she I mean, the one thing that it does highlight is she's doing a lot of different things on the court, whether it's getting some blocks with incoming middle blocker, Katie Myers, but I think she's going to be a player within the next few weeks, you're really going to see that she is just another one of these really talented players on the team.

O'HARA: Right. Yeah. And it's got to be different for all these players kind of adjusting to this this COVID season where I mean, I guess you did get longer to prepare, but who knows what that looked like, you know, if they, how much they were really able to do. And you know, some teams had played this fall a little bit too. So that's kind of all over the place. And, you know, talk about some of McGraw's digs, I don't know how many games I've watched last year, it's like I have no idea how she got that because there's some you just are just have no idea how anybody could get under them. But yeah, I wanted to ask about Adanna Rollins, too, because she — toward the end of last season — was playing really well. She'd been playing well all season, but at the end of last year, she really had stepped up and made some big plays and some of those playoff matches. Has she continued to improve there and kind of what she brought to the team in terms of her leadership?

O'BRIEN: I definitely think she has improved just from the standpoint of she's been very consistent with how many kills she's getting each match. She's also providing a spark on defense. McGraw obviously leads the team and digs like we just talked about, but she second on the team so she's obviously willing to get you know in on that and one thing that I kind of touched on too was, you know, I guess it's hard to tell if it's kind of a fluke II thing against the team. Or if it's something that I know that talking with them after Saturday's match against Maryland, I asked her and McCutcheon if serving was just something that they thought they could exploit against Maryland, or if it's something they've been working on. And Adanna was a big part of that in the first hour in the second match, rather, having like four or five, service aces and had a streak of three during it. So I think overall, there are definitely those areas where, you know, who knows if the service aces will continue, but if she still keeps working on it, that would be a big key for the Gophers. And then on top of it, if she can continue to just really stay consistent as far as attacking the ball, then I think that's going to just add a whole other element that other teams are going to have to try to figure out.

O'HARA: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, the more hitters you have, the harder you are to stop, so it's going to be fun to watch this team throughout the rest of this year. And coming up, you know, we got a couple games this weekend, they'll be playing Purdue, a team that the Gophers beat twice last season pretty easily, I think 3-0, 3-1. But you know, Purdue is a good team and ranked like you said, ranked No. 13. I guess what expectations do you have for this weekend? And what do you think about Purdue's team? And what they might be able to do against the Gophers?

O'BRIEN: Yeah, I mean, it is early still in the season to know, now this team still is ranked in the top-25 as they were in the preseason, they had dropped two matches, I think they got swept both times by Wisconsin, but then they bounced right back, and they swept Iowa in two matches. Look, if you just looked at the individual statistics, and for Purdue and compare them to Minnesota, they look somewhat similar to a lot of the other Gophers. But they really where the Gophers are noticeably better are in key statistics like attack percentage, aces, digs and blocks. So I'll be interested to kind of just watch and see if Minnesota was able to kind of continue that or now if they're playing a little bit of a, again, not saying that Michigan State or Maryland aren't tough opponents, but they also weren't ranked in the top-25 or top-15. One thing that we had talked about before our recording was Grace Cleveland, I believe you said, and so she's one of Purdue's players to look out for obviously. But I still think that with the Gophers talent, it's still going to be something tough to handle, even on the road.

O'HARA: Yeah, I think it'll be a good kind of first test to see kind of exactly where they are, you know, how much of a struggle it will be to get through these sets. You know, obviously, I expect the Gophers to kind of come out with a couple wins here. But it'll be interesting to see, like exactly how much they are challenged and how they respond to it. And I guess from your perspective, do you have any kind of predictions for these matches upcoming this weekend? And is there anybody from the Gophers you think we should watch, anybody who you think could have a breakout couple matches?

O'BRIEN: I wouldn't be surprised if this weekend, their winning streak of not matches, but sets rather, comes to an end, even though they've won all 12 of the sets they've played in thus far. I wouldn't be surprised if maybe they drop one just because of the competition that they are playing this weekend. I would still assume that they have two victories, but you never know, obviously, with travel, and things like that. I would say overall, the player to keep an eye out for would kind of be Regan Pittman, just because I think you know, she, again, the stat sheet necessarily hasn't been she hasn't been lighting it up in one particular category. But I think at some point that she's going to, you know, have a match where she's going to look really dominant, just because of how she's played throughout her career in Minnesota.

O'HARA: For sure, yeah. And, you know, you look at like, Purdue's losses coming to Wisconsin. I mean, there's, there's no shame in that, Wisconsin was another Final Four team last year, and they were they're a tough team for sure. So that'll be another team to watch out for later in the season. Well, but overall, I think that's, I think that's everything we had for today. I appreciate you joining. It's been good to chat a little bit about the volleyball team. We'll have to have you on here soon. Maybe a little bit later in the season. We can talk some more volleyball.

O'BRIEN: Yeah, of course. Thanks, Nolan.

OUTRO MUSIC PLAYS

O'HARA: In other news: The Gophers women's basketball team lost 94-68 to the Iowa Hawkeyes, ending what was a three-game winning streak for the game. They will look to bounce back on Sunday when they take on Ohio State. After a 20-goal series against Arizona State, the Gophers men's hockey team continued its hot streak, scoring 10 goals and earning the sweep in last weekend's series against Ohio State. This Friday and Saturday, the Gophers will look to continue the streak against border rival Wisconsin, when they take on the Badgers at Mariucci. The Gophers women's hockey team will also be taking on their border rivals this Friday and Saturday at Ridder Arena. No. 2 Minnesota will look to knock off the No. 1 Wisconsin Badgers in this No. 1 versus No. 2 matchup. The Gophers wrestling team will be back in action on Friday against Illinois. Coming off dual wins against Purdue and Rutgers, the Gophers are 4-2 this season in duals and will look to keep some momentum going against the Illini. That's all for this week. Be sure to check our website mndaily.com for more extensive coverage and tune in again next week to get the "Weekly Rundown" on all things Gopher sports. Thanks.