

UK volleyball has multiple ways to win

By **LARRY VAUGHT**
Contributing writer

Kentucky coach Craig Skinner has led UK volleyball to nine straight Southeastern Conference championships but he doesn't talk a lot to his team about winning.

"We talk about whether we play in ways that are deserving of winning. We have to continue to find different ways to win because that will be required in the NCAA Tournament," said Skinner.

Kentucky should be one of the four No. 1 seeds in the NCAA Tournament when pairings are released on Sunday. That would mean as long as Kentucky kept winning, it could play four games in Memorial Coliseum until reaching the Final Four in Kansas City.

"We have really embraced playing on the road this year. Part of you almost likes winning on the road more because there is nothing more satisfying than winning in front of opposing fans," UK associate coach Kyle Luongo. "But come tournament time you want to be in front of your people and keep the same routines you had during the season. You get to sleep in your own bed, practice in your gym. The support we've had lately has been incredible and that's why we have been fighting so hard to be a regional host."

Kentucky has road wins over No. 3 Texas, No. 6 Texas A&M, No. 7 Louisville and No. 24 Penn State along with home wins over No. 8 SMU and No. 18 Tennessee. Kentucky's only regular-season losses were to No. 1 Nebraska in Nashville and at No. 4 Pittsburgh.

That brutal schedule made sure there was no "false sense of confidence" for Kentucky.

"That false sense of confidence is one of the most dangerous things you can have is to think you are good but yet you really haven't been exposed or tested," Luongo said. "And if you feel you are good enough to get the wins eventually, it doesn't really hurt you to lose big matches early in the season. It might not feel good and not look great record-wise but you learn so much from playing non-conference matches like we did."

Skinner led Kentucky to the only national championship ever won by a SEC team in 2020. This team obviously will have a chance to challenge for



VICKY GRAFF

Kentucky players celebrated after winning another SEC title but have never lost track of the end goal – a national championship.

another title.

"We don't have to rely on one thing. We can do a lot of things to let us be successful. If something is not working we don't have to panic. We are not just one-hit wonders. We need multiple ways to be successful and we have that," Skinner said.

The coach likes that his team's work ethic has not changed from September until now.

"They are working hard and are not satisfied. We like to be a little bit edgy and not comfortable with our play," Skinner said.

Luongo joined Skinner's staff this year because the expectation at Kentucky is to compete for championships. That's the same expectation that brought SEC Player of the Year Eva Hudson from Purdue to Kentucky this season.

"Eva has had plenty of individual success and some team success. She was hungry for a little bit more than just more player of the week nods or all-conference selections. She loved them but she was most hungry for a deep tournament run in Decem-

ber," Luongo said.

That's why she did not hesitate to become teammates with UK junior Brooklyn DeLeye, the 2024 SEC Player of the Year and also an All-American like Hudson.

"From an insider's perspective I can tell you they realize they need one another and they can also empathize with each other because they both know what it feels like to be relied on and be the one expected to make plays," Luongo said. "They know what it is like to have the responsibility on them to come through for the team. They quickly built trust with each other and it would be hard to separate who was more valuable to the team's success. They are both legitimate national player of the year candidates."

"Their on-court personalities and playing styles are different but they both know what it is like to be a dominant outside hitter. Eva would not have had the season she did without Brooklyn and vice versa with Brooklyn needing Eva. They are a great one-two punch and I don't think

any other team has that same caliber of players."

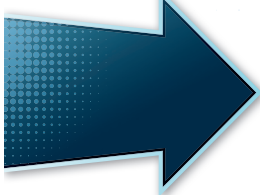
Few teams have a setter as talented as freshman Kassie O'Brien, the SEC Freshman of the Year and top candidate for national

freshman of the year. Luongo works with UK's setters and admits he is "super proud" of O'Brien, who was not UK's starter early in the season.

"She would tell you that



See What's Taking Shape Locally



Your local newspaper keeps you informed about important local events and community developments. Subscribe today, and stay in the loop!

- New Businesses • Real Estate
Jobs Market • Public Notices
Local Government
Community Health
Dining & Entertainment
Events & Activities • Local Shopping
and so much more



First Vineyard's Thirteenth Annual
Christmas in the Country Craft Fair
November 29, 2025 • 10:00 – 3:00

50+ Talented Vendors
Handmade Merchandise
Sip & Shop
Reasonable Prices
Local Artists

Food & Drink Available
Heated Pavilion
Plenty of Parking
Well-Stocked Winery
No Lines

Help Support Small Businesses & Enjoy the Holiday Season!

First Vineyard Winery
5800 Sugar Creek Pike, Nicholasville, KY
859-421-8819
www.facebook.com/firstvineyard

The Advocate-Messenger

YOUR TOWN. YOUR NEWS. 150 YEARS AND COUNTING

Subscribe Today By Phone or Online
859-236-2551 | www.amnews.com