

Senior Eskola leads UNC to ACC title, NCAA berth

Libero now owns ACC digs record

BY SCOTT POWERS
SENIOR WRITER

Of all the liberos and defensive specialists in the history of the ACC, not one has recorded as many digs as North Carolina senior Brianna Eskola.

Eskola set the conference career record at 2,213 digs in UNC's ACC-clinching victory against N.C. State on Friday.

But to her teammates and coaches, Eskola's importance isn't in the number of attacks she prevents from reaching the floor but in her leadership on the court.

"She's just always so encouraging," senior outside hitter Lauren Prussing said. "If we are having a rut that we can't get out of in practice, she steps in and refocuses everyone."

Eskola has taken her role as a leader to heart this year.

"There's usually someone who's the enforcer, and everything, and for me it was easier and more natural just to be like, 'You can do this really well,' or, 'Go after it,'" Eskola said.

The Minnesota native has a long-time connection to the North Carolina volleyball team, coming to camps at UNC when she was in middle school.

"The good and the bad news is: Bri was about 5-foot-6 in seventh grade and only grew about an inch afterward," coach Joe Sagula said. "At that point, we thought she had potential to become a great outside hitter — or anything."

By the time Eskola was looking at colleges, the Tar Heel coaching staff was recruiting her as a libero.

"She came in with a great vision for reading the game on defense," Sagula said. "I thought she came with a very good natural ability and a willingness to throw her body around and go after balls."

In her first year, Eskola played defensive specialist for the Tar Heels, who won the ACC championship. The next year she stepped up as the starting libero.

UNC went through two difficult years, finishing ninth and sixth in the ACC before returning to the top of the conference this year.

This season the coaches saw a change in how Eskola acted on the court.

"She was much more demanding this year, which has put her at a level which has been one of our most valuable people in this program, and that's what you get when you have people who are willing to step it up and put it all on the line," Sagula said.

And Eskola has maintained her positive presence on the court.

"What I love about playing with Bri is when I get a kill and then I turn around, she's the first person behind me, just screaming," Prussing said.

The result was Eskola's second ACC championship. She said the return to the top of the conference was very different from winning it three years ago.

"We were freshmen," Eskola said. "It wasn't really our team. This year it's more of our team. We play a significant role, and it's not just the hard work we put into this year but the past two years. And we know how hard it is to get back."

Contact the Sports Editor at sports@unc.edu.

Tar Heels wait for bowl pick

Possible trips to Nashville, Charlotte

BY DAVID ELY
SENIOR WRITER

The North Carolina Tar Heels didn't have long to savor their victory at rival Duke on Saturday.

As players ushered in to the visitors' locker room at Wallace Wade Stadium, questions quickly turned from UNC's hard-fought victory to speculation about where the Tar Heels will go bowling later this month for the first time since 2004.

Some players simply said they will be grateful to go to whichever bowl chooses UNC. Others offered their cities of choice, or what conferences they'd most like to square off against.

But sophomore safety Deunta Williams was bolder when it came to where he thought his team should play.

"Where ever the national championship game is," he joked.

Of course, North Carolina isn't in the mix for a BCS title — and Williams added that he was "just kidding."

But there are a few noteworthy bowls that look like possible destinations: the Chick-fil-A Bowl in Atlanta; the Champs Sports Bowl in Orlando; the Gaylord Hotels Music City Bowl in Nashville, Tenn.; and the Meineke Car Care Bowl in Charlotte.

The Chick-fil-A Bowl gets the first choice of ACC squads after the FedEx Orange Bowl, and the bowl has sent a representative to most of UNC's games. The Champs Sports

Bowl is fourth in the pecking order, followed by the Music City Bowl and the Car Care Bowl.

Scott Ramsey, president and CEO of the Music City Bowl, said each bowl's selection hinges on the outcome of Saturday's ACC Championship Game in Tampa, Fla.

"I think that North Carolina would be a great fit for us," Ramsey said. "But there's a lot of parity in the conference. I think we have to see how it will play out in front of us."

At 8-4, 4-4 in the ACC, the Tar Heels are at the mercy of the title game's outcome and the whims of the bowl committees on Sunday.

If Boston College wins, Ramsey said Florida State and Georgia Tech could become possible picks for the Chick-fil-A Bowl and the Konica Minolta Gator Bowl in Jacksonville, Fla.

If Virginia Tech wins, he said BC could end up playing in Nashville because the Eagles played in Jacksonville and Orlando last year in the ACC title game and Champs Sports Bowl, respectively.

As far as the Music City Bowl is concerned, North Carolina fits the requirements of a potential candidate: a team that travels well, is on the rebound and has a fan base within driving distance.

Regardless of where the Tar Heels end up playing, coach Butch Davis said bowl games have a tremendous impact on a

"I think that North Carolina would be a great fit for us. But there's a lot of parity in the conference."

SCOTT RAMSEY, MUSIC CITY BOWL

UNC Bowl Predictions

CBS Sports Gaylord Hotels Music City; vs. Kentucky

Bruce Feldman (ESPN) Gaylord Hotels Music City; vs. Vanderbilt

Mark Schlabach (ESPN) Meineke Car Care; vs. West Virginia

Stewart Mandel (SI) Meineke Car Care; vs. Pittsburgh

program. That includes the 10 to 15 additional practices UNC gets for participating in a bowl, and the recruiting boost it enjoys when high schoolers visit the Tar Heels as they prep for their postseason destination.

"If you're fortunate enough to be a program that gets a chance to go to bowl games every single year," Davis said, "it's unbelievably invaluable for your football program."

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