

BEHIND THE NET with COLEMAN McDONOUGH | EPISODE 1 | ALEX KNIGHT & MERRICK MCHENRY

What's up everyone My name is Colin mcdonough I'm joined here by two of my teammates from the UCL A men's volleyball team Alex Knight and Merrick mchenry We're going to be talking about all things within the UCL A men's volleyball program including our national championship round last year What it took struggles we faced and just why we chose UCL A to play volleyball and go to school at Yeah So that's we're gonna lead to my first question Um Just why how did you guys get into volleyball Um For me personally I'm actually from Dallas Texas and back home for men's volleyball at least Texas isn't um too much of a sport Um at least for men's but you know women's volleyball is definitely a big thing So my mom actually played at Texas Tech and when I was born she was coaching different club teams and high school teams and things like that So I was just always around um her teams and playing with their girls and peppering and helping them out with practice So that's kind of how I got started and from them I've just kind of always been around it and I've loved it and I loved how it was different and a lot of guys back home weren't doing it So I definitely enjoyed it and I loved having something with my mom to be able to relate to and connect with her with Um but yeah it was definitely through my mom that I started playing volleyball Yeah I feel like I have a very similar path to me Um my sisters actually played volleyball Um I would always attend like their tournaments and like games in elementary school I would always be the one hitting the ball against the wall Um basically like a gym rat for volleyball Um and like coming from like Pennsylvania it's like kind of similar but like boys volleyball isn't that big in the youth area Um so yeah I just had to like get started I was like one of the only ones and then it kind of just grew as we got older and I actually had to like go to Columbus Ohio to play club volleyball like 3.5 hours away Um in order to get like more competitive volleyball Yeah I kind of had a similar situation So I lived in Dallas and then there's a club in Austin called Austin Juniors And kind of a similar situation where every weekend we kind of made like a super team in a way where we got kind of all like the best guys in Texas and we're like our last year our senior year everyone go down to Austin and we can all be on this team So it ended up being where every weekend we drive down it's about like three hours one way Um And we went every weekend and we

have training camps and things like that But ultimately it was for just the next step and being able to play and you know the next level teams and compete with teams who are out here in Southern California and try and keep up and things like that So yeah I definitely can relate to them Yeah And my story was a little different I it was my dream to play any sport at UCL A and my route was baseball but unfortunately I had an injury so I had to change sports and being tall It's either basketball or volleyball but I just wasn't very good at basketball So volleyball is the next option And I had a couple siblings who played but just like to be able to get to UCL A and play volleyball was um the second dream I had so ended up working out Yeah like would you say like the dream of UCL A was like because of like the competitive greatness at UCL A Uh like what kind of like was your dream to be at UCL A Like why Yeah So first of all my parents went there and my grandpa worked at Paul Pavilion And so um he unfortunately passed away before I got to UCL A but he always wanted to see me play in Pauley Pavilion because that's where he worked And um I think I chose U I for many reasons but one of them was the culture of excellence on and off the court and the great record in history he has with champ national championships and also the academic side and being in Los Angeles you just can't really get any better than that Yeah for sure Yeah but leading into that like why we chose UCL A I'm sure um everyone knows UCL A is number one public university in America Uh That's obviously a big seller for some but we kind of get the best of both worlds with our men's volleyball program being on top of with 20 national championships and then the academics being number one it's kind of like a win win Can't go wrong anywhere That's kind of how I chose UCL A Uh I just wanna get your guys thoughts on why we chose UCL A Yeah I definitely say mine is super similar and being from the South and being from Texas I knew that L A was a place that I wanted to just be able to experience and see how different the culture is and the people and just how fast the lifestyle is compared to back home in Texas So I definitely knew L A was a spot that I wanted I wanted to be at and then I think when it came specifically to UCL A I think at the time too especially the coaching staff was definitely a big part of what drew me to coming to UCL A and I think having spras as a head coach and to be able just to pick his brain and to learn from him and to be coached by him I think was something that was super Um It was just something that I thought was super exciting especially being from a place where you know men's volleyball isn't isn't too big of a thing So I thought why not go and get you know one of the best

volleyball minds and coaching styles and playing styles of you know our time right now So I think that was definitely a big drive for me And then ultimately I think this the historic winning culture and program of UCL A and I wanted to be a part of you know the people who came before me and the high level just volleyball that has been played at UCLA I definitely wanted to be a part of that culture and um you know help bring a national championship back to UCL A was also something that I thought would be just a super you know big and exciting challenge Um But yeah there are definitely countless reasons that I went to UCL A but those are a couple and I talked about my grand prior But also I think I live 20 minutes away from UCL A So being able to give back to my family in the way that they can come to all my matches and see um the work that our team has been putting in is important to me and they spend a lot of money for me to travel around the country and um invest a lot into me So I wanted to invest that back into them And then also just I wanted to win a national championship like I said and I think he said it was the best spot to do that And our coach being the Olympic coach and the the people on the team already and the recruits and the culture I just think it was something that I could not be a part of So um and I just definitely made the right choice So yeah for me like being from Pittsburgh like Pennsylvania I like kind of wanted like something new for college and I kind of like went all in and just said all right opposite coast Um But like living in L A it's just like the lifestyle like just experiencing something new every day something that was very appealing and I definitely have experienced something new every day living in L A Um Yeah but the competitive greatness at UCLA I feel is just unmatched like with 121 national championships Um Troy Aikman Jackie Robinson like Kareem Abdul Jabbar like the list goes on Like I feel like I just wanted to add to that last and now Coleman MCD Uh yeah but um yeah but considering we won the national championship last year I kinda wanna touch on that a little Um obviously you two were very major major role players in that in that tournament run Uh I just kinda wanna get your pick your brain on what it took like what struggles we face adversity throughout the whole season Yeah I think something that we had to do last year was fix the culture of our team I think you know every top recruit wants to go to UCL A and so there's so many highly skilled individuals that come and all the top recruits are there So trying to balance a team of having everyone who wants to be on the court and who deserves to be on the court and who would probably be on the court in any different program was tough to balance but trying to get the collective

buying of the team and realize that each individual person might have a role that that they don't want necessarily But if they buy into the culture of the program that will have will find success And so a lot of the credit obviously from the media and all that stuff goes to the people on the court But there were so many influential factors of people off the court who made the starters better and pushed everyone in practice every single day and helped the culture of the team which was um a a big factor in our success I feel like just like this collective like buy in from everyone on the team that like all right I'm not gonna be on the court Like how do I make the starters better every day in practice Like I feel like it's just like pushing like you guys every day in practice to make you better Uh I feel like that was a big big reason why we won Um There was a guy I'm gonna give Kyle Von Steve Shout out I remember he was telling me all right I'm gonna make everyone better on the on the on the court I'm gonna hit as hard as I can block block the crap out of them I'm just gonna just find any way to make them better And I just feel like that like inspired the rest of the team to make everyone else better I agree And I think just when it comes to a team like that is just so important and I think like we all knew as a whole that as volleyball players like we knew that we were able to achieve what we wanted to achieve I think it was more about taking a step back and focusing on the culture like Alex said and I think that's a lot easier said than done But I mean coming in our freshman year Alex and I we went 10 and nine before you know our record on the season was 10 and nine before COVID ended up you know ending our cutting our season short So you know to go from 10 and nine to after our fourth year of playing 31 and two you know that's don't get me wrong Like good volleyball is is part of it But I think a lot of it was just coming together as a team and and as a culture and being like ok how can we actually get better and how can we actually care about each other other than just being teammates and actually care about each other as you know other human beings with lives and struggles and things like that And we definitely made sure throughout the year and throughout the season to have hard and difficult conversations and you know sometimes we had to have captains meetings or sometimes we had to have you know two players getting together and having conversations But that's kind of any you know if you wanna have any type of group of people trying to achieve anything I think those conversations are very important and crucial to you know achieving whatever goal you're trying to achieve So I think ultimately it was definitely just buying into you know going to practice every day and not just going through the motions and

going through weights and trying to get better and but also just um adding in that extra just mental side of the game of making sure that we are cohesive as a unit And I can definitely say by the end um I felt like that's the closest I've ever been to a team at UCL A and I think that showed just by you know how well we played and how bad we wanted to win And I and I'll say like during that stretch run it was building the culture and then I think something that was really awesome was in the locker room before the game when I know one of our teammates said he was so nervous and was almost on the verge of tears that we just had a visual image of us like having our arms around each other's shoulders and just the c I just I felt like we won the game before we actually did because we felt so close as a unit And I think for any team that's out there like building the culture your team and knowing that each person has your back on the court or on the bench um is a big reason why we won it I just felt like we had the best culture and camaraderie and that that helped a lot And I just feel like for me like being a freshman last year it was just like the integration I felt like from you guys Like it was just like seamless It was just like all right these are my guys Like what Like you guys would always just make everyone feel welcome Um Senior leadership last year was very good about that I feel like that definitely improved the culture with like freshmen feeling like they're with everyone and not separate Did you feel like that was the case your freshman year America I mean I was just gonna like get on that point too is I mean I felt like that was something that we didn't feel our freshman year and it wasn't necessarily that you know people weren't being mean or anything like that It was just more of they felt so um just like on a different island and in their own different universe in us So it was just hard to connect and I feel like get along where you know I think Alex and I and the other seniors in you know fifth years last year we definitely had conversations of making sure like you know the freshmen don't need to think that we're best friends with them but ultimately we do want them to know that they have a place to you know come to if you know they're struggling or if they have questions or just if they need someone to talk to or reach out to I think that's definitely you know the dynamic that we wanted to have But I ultimately think like yeah there's definitely a level of you know having respect for people who are older than you But I feel like ultimately we are just like one team and um we are all just competing together for one common goal I think also one of the main things we try to focus on was learning how to play free on the court And I think having the Olympic head coach as our head coaches comes with a little bit of pressure

and I think allowing him and him being vulnerable with us and saying like before the game he was crying and saying how proud of of us he is And I think that helped us play free on the court to know that the coach has our back and he's proud of us and you know hearing that he cares for us in in and out of volleyball was important and I think it allowed us to not be worried about the result as much and play our style of volleyball and play as hard as we can Knowing that no matter what happens we'll be all right at the end of the day And we have our coach our coach has our back and our teammates have our back and you know it ended up working out So it's it's a win win Yeah Playing like the hardest you can the result will come I feel uh huh So next thing I wanna touch on is just like the regular season like we obviously faced some some struggles with um school and all that Um I would just say like the quarter system compared to semester system with a lot of the other schools that definitely added different types of stress than other schools go through Um I just wanna get your thoughts on the quarter system and how that affected our season Yeah I think when we have some critical matches when we're in midterms and finals week and so trying to be able to separate school and sports is really tough We took a trip to Penn State this year and when we were out there it was really tough to take our midterms on the road And I think that's not something that a lot of people understand is that we still have the same pressures of school that regular people have And I think you know a lot of times people just have the assumption that athletes get free tutoring or anything they want And I um and so yeah it's really hard to like mentally stay ready to compete on the court and get your school work done And um there's a lot of tasks that go into other than just what people see of us on the court I feel like just on the road it's increasingly difficult because you have travel you have team meetings video practice serve and pass the actual game You just got to find those places to study time and place to study Um I remember we were taking midterms at Penn State We were all just in the conference room Like I don't even know what time but we were all just grinding No one was talking um for about two hours So it's definitely a work academic workload I mean I definitely say for me personally too that just academics in general has definitely just been the hardest part of being a student athlete for me personally and being in college And honestly I don't care about the long practices I don't care about getting up early I don't care about lifting weights like don't get me wrong Like I might complain and it might not be my favorite thing some days But at the end of the day like I love playing volleyball and I love getting better So that part is fun to me and

I love traveling and I love being on trips with my team and playing Um but it's a school definitely like aspect I'd say of being a student athlete being in college is the difficult part And that's definitely about just using the resources that you know we're given and just being able to work on my time management which is definitely something I would say I'm still working on But um I definitely you know think that I've been able to just improve with um I think just growing more mature and getting older and things like that but it's definitely about being able to time manage and stay organized and being able to balance certain parts of your life and understand when there's times that you have to say no to certain things and yes to others Um But yeah I definitely say you know this season is difficult and especially we have midterms during very critical and important matches And like last year at the final four there were teams there who were already done with school and walked at graduation when we were on week five or six of school during midterm So it's definitely uh a different aspect of um you know being a college athlete and being in season But I definitely think UCL A allows us the space to you know find help and find resources to still be successful And like the quarter system it's what I feel is that we have three season three midterm seasons three final seasons compared to semester kids who only have two of those If you fall behind you there's no time it's already week seven right now I feel like I just got to L A from Pittsburgh but just gotta get on the academic course and go and get ahead Oh so what should we do that Do you want to talk about how we're gonna do it again this year How we're going to win this year or what it takes Eric What do you think What do you do when you're not playing ball I was debating between what have we learned from our experiences at UCL A like with everything we've been through or um what is it what is it gonna take Cause we were kind of on like the um academic So I think we should do um what have we learned from all of our experiences and like struggles Yeah Yeah So I was gonna ask what have we learned from all of our struggles Um Good accomplishments at UCL A Obviously they see like gives us the space to grow space to struggle and we just become stronger from that Um So what have you like personally gained from UCL A Yeah I'd say honestly I've learned so much and going on now my fifth year at UCL A I'd say I've definitely learned to uh not try and solve everything on my own and I've learned to reach out to others for help when I need it And I think that was something that I just struggled with with a long time I would just try and figure out my own problems or issues or I would just like shut my laptop and not worry about it or not respond to my

emails or you know just ignore everything which I'm pretty good at So if you know me so I do not So um I've definitely learned to you know try and get away from those habits of getting into my own shell and just locking my door and wanting to be left alone and reaching out for help and just being transparent and not being embarrassed about struggling or um you know being sad like that's not something that I feel weird about expressing to people anymore which I think I did at the beginning So I think just being more open and honest with how I'm feeling and reaching out for help and then I think also it really has just taught me to uh um I don't know it's kind of just taught me like how I wanna just like love others and I've been able to see relationships and people and how they've treated people like others And I think it's been super important to me to I don't know just love others well and to treat others how ultimately I wanna be treated And um also I think it's also just about treating others how they wanna be treated and how they expect to be respected But I think it has definitely been an extremely just transformative period of my life and I've been able to learn so much from it Yeah Mhm I've learned so much as well I think one of the biggest lessons that I've learned is that there's a lot more to me than just a volleyball player And I think coming into UCL A and having accolades out of high school or having a lot of expectations from certain people And coaches and outside noise has been tough to manage especially as a freshman um and an underclassman But as I've grown up I realized that there's a lot more to me than a volleyball player And I think going through my injury I tore my shoulder my sophomore year of college And I think taking time away from the sport allowed me to regroup of what I value and what I should be focusing on in life and how important my relationships and friendships and um with others are And so understanding that there's a lot more to me than just my sport is important And I think that's a lesson that a lot of people learn later than they they should because you can get so wrapped up in what you're doing on the VOL court or in any in any sport you're in that you don't understand you have so much else to offer than just uh you as a vol player So yeah I feel like adding on to that Um I would just say like not letting a bad practice like affect moods outside of volleyball That's like probably the biggest thing I've learned cause like in throughout before college it's just been all volleyball That's like my whole life Um But like once I get here there's just like so many other things to like UCL A and like L A and life in general out here Um So I feel like if you just let that affect you It's just like you're the one losing out So I just kind of bounce back the next day stronger

Um and being only in year two I've already learned like so much Um so like what's next for the next 2.5 years You learn a lot I mean I think being on a team sport as well it helps teach you about teamwork cooperation communication competitiveness under pressure There's so many valuable lessons that we don't really realize that we're learning until we take some time to reflect And I think you know a lot of people say they want to hire athletes and jobs And I think that we should take our skills that we have learned from being a part of a team which is super valuable to whatever we do next as well Uh Circling back to the national championship um I was gonna ask what's it gonna take for us to do again What should we avoid What should our mindset not be It's a good question I think the first thing that stands out is fighting the complacency that might occur knowing that we've already won And I think you know you might we might expect that we're going to win some certain games because we have last year we've done it already So what that means we're gonna do it again So fighting the idea that we don't have to work as hard this time because we know how to do it is dangerous And I think we have to work twice as hard because teams we have the target on our back this year And I think that's something that I personally love But um that comes with pressure for some people as well And so just continuing to work hard every day and not getting complacent and understanding that teams want to beat us even more now is important as well And I'd say ultimately I say this a lot but I think just playing one point volleyball and not looking at you know how can we be how can we win the national championship Yeah I think we need to be thinking about that but I think ultimately it's about how can we win the first point of our first match on January 5th or whatever it is Um and I think volleyball very much is about just taking at one point at a time and if we look at it with too too big of a lens that it's ultimately just gonna be too much and too stressful So I think just playing one point volleyball and then going in every day I think everyone just being able to find what about their game that they wanna work on no matter you know how great of a season they had last year everyone has room to improve And I think as going throughout the fall we definitely you know can see that we are nowhere close to where we wanna be and we have just more culture things to do and more systems and things that you know the freshmen need to learn and then you guys need to learn But that's a part of every year But I think again what Alex was saying was was super important just about not getting complacent And just because it happened once doesn't mean it can happen again It's nice definitely nice to have that

experience of knowing that you know we have done it again and we've been able to be unstressful um situations that we haven't been in before and we still were able to come out with a win So I think it's nice to have that in the back of our minds knowing that we've done it before But ultimately just reminding ourselves that just because last year has nothing to do with this year Um and just playing one point volleyball Yeah I would say it's just like we have to work twice as hard um team We're always gonna have a target on our back as as UCL A and that target just doubled in size because we won the national championship Um but one thing that bra said that really resonated last year was it's gonna hit the fan and you have to find you have to battle through that and just come out come out on top like it's always gonna hit the fans something's gonna go wrong eventually Um it's just how you respond to that And I think it's important to not freak out if we do lose early on or knock on wood but like we lose an important match that we lose our number one seed if we lose you know some sort of ranking that shouldn't matter I think it's important not to freak out and just to understand that the the games in May are what's most important And each time if we lose is a good learning opportunity to take on to the next game of what we can improve on and what we didn't do is good and what we're going to do better next time So I think it's just about collecting different experiences throughout the year and using them to our benefit at the end And I think also just reminding ourselves that winning a national championship doesn't mean we have to be undefeated And I think like returning as national champions everyone might have this expectation whether it's the players or you know fans or you know haters on volley talk And I have some things to say about like you know they people think that if you are the defending national champions that you're supposed to you know go undefeated but ultimately winning a national championship is not about being undefeated it's about winning when you need to win And I think ultimately if we have some setbacks that's ok We had some setbacks last year and we didn't let that affect us So I think ultimately just being able to move on no matter what might happen Yeah just how we respond to those moments those critical moments good or bad Uh I feel like we just have to be mentally tough this year in order to succeed again Yeah but moving on um I know you two have aspirations of playing overseas eventually Um One thing that has helped you guys is like the USA volleyball pipeline Um I just want to get your thoughts on how it is being in the USA like gym in the summers Yeah it's a great experience I did a lot of the stuff So I was able to go to um Costa Rica and

Tunisia Africa when I was in high school And I think there's so many valuable lessons and experiences you get to learn from traveling across the world and being able to represent your country And I take a lot of pride in that and I think that um we're super lucky to be born in America And I think that you know a lot of the experiences I've had on the road of people There was a kid from Honduras who asked for one of my rolls of tape and I said yeah of course you can have a roll of tape and I ended up giving him like five or six more and he ended up crying because he in his country he had to ask for a roll of tape and he got it in a month later and he had an ankle injury that he was battling And so it just gives you a lot of perspective of where you come from and how um lucky we are to have what we have And I think um just also being around the best people in the country helps you play better And I think it pushes me to be better when I'm competing against the top players in the country And I think that I've learned so many valuable experiences from playing with USA Yeah it just really puts stuff into perspective when you leave And I think for me just playing with USA has given me a lot of confidence and I think being able to play against or play on teams with guys who are older than me or a lot older than me or just have more experience and have been playing volleyball longer than me I think it's just helped me know that I'm able to you know keep up in certain situations And I'm also gives me just excitement for my future just because ultimately I do wanna play for as long as I can and I do wanna be an Olympian and I do you know wanna play professionally and things like that So it's been nice just to be able to be around the older guys and just to pick their brains and just to hear about their struggles and how they got to where they are and you know them giving me tips and just feedback and things like that has just been super great for my game and I think super great for um just my mental the mental part of my game And I love you know being down in Anaheim during the summers and it's great bonding to you know be able to play against guys who or play with guys who I've been we've been playing against for so long and just establish those relationships and form bonds and in that way has been super nice But ultimately I think it's good for me just to be able to play volleyball during the summer and continue to touch the ball when you know a lot of people might not be Um Yeah Yeah And I think it's valuable to see like what the Olympians are doing now as college athletes to know what it takes to get to the next level and how they recover and take care of their body and how much work they put in every single day is inspiring and makes me wanna work harder to hopefully get to that goal someday And

I think I took a lot of valuable things from being in the gym this summer and um just picking the brains of the older guys who have been through it they share their experiences with you and you learn a whole lot that I I hope to carry on Obviously uh words have profound meanings in life Um I just wanna pick your guys' brains about what word or words do you think describes you the best Hm I'd probably say resilient Um I don't know I think it's good for a lot of things in life whether it's volleyball or um just things in your personal life And I think I honestly I think I've been resilient in a lot of things throughout my life whether it was back home in Texas or you know things that have gone through while being at UCL A or just things um with volleyball and you know there's always mental struggles and just things that you go through and difficult times So I definitely think res resilient is a word that um I hold just very important to me and I think it's something that I you know love being defined as or described as And I think it's something that just through different situations that have happened to me throughout my life I definitely um would think of resilient as a a word Yeah I would choose the word warrior I think that embodies a whole lot of how I try to live And I think going through injuries and trying to come out the other side and be successful I think the word warrior and having that mentality uh embodies that And I think that if I carry that word warrior into my life later on I think I'll be successful because I think the warrior mentality is is super efficient for me I would say uh uh optimism Uh The reason I chose that was um because like if life it's just like didn't turn out the way you wanted it to that day or like there's a curveball turn to you that day next day is all that matters Um Turn it around like if I'm having a bad practice I think I got 45 minutes to turn this thing around What can I do Um Just optimistic about the next day Next next hour It's a good it's a good one Yeah All right That about wraps it up with our show today Um Thank you to Alex and thanks for having us Thanks for having me too