



VOLLEYBALL'S DANIEL JONES

Creating A Legacy of Excellence

"I Love My Job And Am Blessed To Do It In Such A Beautiful Place With Such Amazing Young Women."

BY CYNTHIA LOGAN

It's hard not to notice that the Montana State University women's volleyball team is on fire. The 2021 season (January–April this year due to the

pandemic) included a nine-match winning streak, including a sweep over Idaho State and a victory over UNC, last year's Conference winner. At this point, says head coach Daniel Jones, "there is no team in the Conference we can't beat. We know we can be a true contender for a title."

Ever since Jones took the helm, the program has done nothing but soar. Hired on an interim basis in 2017 as the 11th head coach of MSU Women's Volleyball, Jones immediately knocked it

out of the park, beating Big Sky Conference champion North Dakota in Grand Forks, winning a tournament championship at Utah State with victories over the Aggies, UC Santa Barbara and Pacific—not to mention the first Griz-sweep season since 2005, and the first double digit season win since 2012 (doubling the 2016 win total). Nine of his players achieved Big Sky All-Academic Honors; in fact, under his guidance, Bobcat Volleyball has had eight semesters of a team GPA of 3.0 or higher. Clearly, the

guy is doing something right.

"Daniel is the right coach to lead the MSU volleyball program," says Athletics Director Leon Costello, who made Jones' position official after that stellar season. "He is committed to the academic and athletic achievement of our student-athletes and continuing to build a program that will compete for Big Sky Conference championships. He has also assembled a great staff with the same qualities, and I am excited for the future of MSU volleyball."

And that future looks bright indeed. Elaborating on comments he made back in 2017, Jones shares his enthusiasm: "My vision for this program is centered around building the legacy of Montana State volleyball, to leave the program better than I found it." He defines his job as: 'creating an environment of learning and growth that allows each person to elevate their position, their jersey to a higher place.' "When we talk about building a legacy, it's a never ending journey. We leave an impact anytime we interact with someone; it's about leaving people better than you found them. We can implement this on a daily basis—there's no endpoint. Athletics is a unique vehicle where we get to work hard to improve ourselves. We do it on the court and we do it as people. It's my job to help make the young women in the program better—it's tough to improve them since they're already great, but helping them navigate that path during their critical collegiate years... is my mission. I love my job and am blessed to do it in such a beautiful place with such amazing young women."

Like nearly all young boys in his native New Zealand, Jones played rugby and cricket as he grew up. But after breaking his back

playing rugby when he was 21, he decided to give volleyball, which he'd played in high school, a go. "I fell more in love with the coaching aspect of the game," he says. "It's dynamic and fluid; it's hard to have structure." He graduated from the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, NZ in 2002 with a bachelor of education degree, specializing in physical education. He began his coaching career at Avondale College (Auckland, NZ), where he helped guide the program to the 2003 national championship. "I was fortunate to win a championship early on," he says. "It fueled my passion." He took over the head coaching position in 2006, the year he met Lacey Koelliker, a volleyball player with the Utah Valley Wolverines, when her team visited New Zealand. The next year, Jones came to America to pursue his passion for volleyball; he worked summer camps the next three years, building relationships with coaches throughout the country, which led to a position at the University of Utah. He and Lacey began dating in 2008, when, having finished her playing career, she had become an Assistant Coach at Utah Valley University. "It took us five years to figure out how to get married!" quips Jones. They tied the knot in 2012 and now have four children: Adalee, Kaden, Marra, and a new baby girl, Quinlee. Jones continued working at the University of Utah from 2010–2013. When Adalaee was born in 2014, Lacey retired from coaching and Jones stepped in "to attempt to fill her shoes" at Utah Valley. Jones says his older girls "get in the yard and dink around with volleyball," and will attend Bobcat volleyball camp. "Our oldest girl says she wants to play for me."

She'll have to meet a high bar: "I've always said I want the best volleyball players from Montana

to stay in Montana and stay at Montana State, says her dad, who is thrilled with five newly recruited freshmen. Among them is Jordan Radick from Bozeman High and Audrey Hofer from Helena Capital, MSU's first Under Armour first-team All-America recruit. "Bozeman and Montana State University is where we want to raise our family, a place where we have put roots down," states Jones. "We have invested in this program, the University and the community—we are Bobcats, my children are Bobcats, and we couldn't be more excited to continue to grow as a family and to have the fine examples of character, integrity and selflessness that the young women of our program exude."

Among those young women are outside hitter Hannah Scott, who as a junior was a First Team All-Big Sky selection, and middle blocker Emma Pence, who is impressed with Jones' motivational ability. "Daniel has done a great job pushing me individually to be the best middle blocker in the Conference. I told him that was my goal, and asked him to treat me like one, and he's



held me to that standard,” says Pence. “He’s very well-spoken when it comes to motivational words and has done a great job saying the right things.” In response, Jones comments; “I think intrinsic motivation is a big deal when you want to become an elite athlete. Emma Pence is motivated and that’s all I can ask for as a coach.” Jones recalls first seeing Scott play with the Southern California Volleyball Club. “We spent some time watching Hannah; then, getting to know her as a person, it became a no-brainer to get her to become a Bobcat,” he says. “We work hard to recruit passionate young women who are motivated to be their best. I like to say that better people make better Bobcats.”

The past few year’s achievements couldn’t have been a whole lot better, with three athletes receiving all-conference honors in the same year (2019) and libero Alyssa Rizzo breaking the all-time digs record for Montana State. “Rizzo’s career breaking dig was nothing spectacular,” said Jones at the time. “She was just doing her job. That is the thing with being a libero. Sometimes it’s not glamorous work, but she ranked among the nation’s leaders, led the Big Sky, and now has the school record. She just did her job, had no ego, and set a great example for what Bobcat volleyball is all about.” (A defensive specialist, the libero wears a different color than the rest of the team and may not serve or rotate to the front line. Unlike a sub, the libero may enter for any back-row player at any time). This season, 2019’s All-Big Sky Libero of the Year, Rizzo will be a volunteer assistant coach, adding to the already strong support. “All three of our coaches played libero, so we feel like we know how to train that position pretty well,” says Jones (whose



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pronunciation of the Italian word makes the position sound glamorous indeed). “Cole earned All American libero in Wisconsin and Taylor was an All Conference performer at libero, he says of Associate Head Coach Cole Aiuzzi and Assistant Coach Taylor Els.

Who will be at libero going forward? “Libby Christensen is returning, as well as Maci Abshier,” says Jones. “We also have Shayla Webber from Joliet... let’s just say there will be great competition in that role!” So, are there any weaknesses in Bobcat volleyball for the upcoming season? Jones considers briefly; “I look across our roster and on paper I don’t think we have any weaknesses,” he answers. “Each team has to figure out how to bond. We have all the individual talent to be successful. It’s how to achieve that as a team.” He

cites team benchmarks including wins at the Big Sky Conference Tournament as confirmation that “we are doing something special here at Montana State. I have no doubt that we are recruiting the right athletes and building the right culture that is going to lead to more and more ‘firsts’ for the program in the future.”

Perhaps MSU will be the first Montana university to bring in beach volleyball—after Jones left, the University of Utah installed three indoor courts with a beach floor. “I’m in Leon’s ear as they look at next phase [of developing the new Bobcat facility],” says Jones of his chats with Costello. “A sand pit would be great for football players—they’d love it—and we could put up a net and maybe have some volleyball. If we can import that, it wouldn’t be the worst thing.”



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