



Iconic Pro Beach Volleyball Player

GABBY REECE

Offers Words Of Wisdom To MSU Bobcats

BY KRISTEN WILLEUMIER, PH.D. NEUROSCIENTIST

"You Are Living The Miracle. To Play NCAA Volleyball Is A Miracle."

~ GABRIELLE REECE

As we approach the 2022 MSU Bobcat volleyball season, I thought it would be inspirational to sit down with iconic pro beach volleyball player Gabrielle "Gabby" Reece, and have her share some wisdom with the women's team. For those who don't know of this gorgeous, 6'3" supermodel/actress/ NYT bestselling author/fitness advocate/ volleyball legend, here are some of her extraordinary career highlights.

Gabby's meteoric rise to athletic fame began at Florida State University (FSU) in the late 80s, where she still holds the program's record for solo blocks (240) and total blocks (747). She dominated the beach volleyball scene throughout the 90s, where she was a two-time Offensive Player of the Year with the Women's Volleyball

League (1994-95), leading the league in kills (1993-96) and blocks (1993). In 1997, Gabby's four-person team took first place in the Beach Volleyball World Championships, and that year she was inducted into the FSU Athletic Hall of Fame. She competed in the 1999-2000 Olympic 4x4 Challenge Series, and the 1999-2000 FIVB World Beach Volleyball Tour. In 2018, she became the first Seminole volleyball player to have her jersey retired.

Gabby has graced the covers of countless fashion and fitness magazines, and was the first female athlete to design a signature shoe for Nike. In addition to her athletic prowess, she's married to big wave legend Laird Hamilton, and is an amazing mom to three beautiful daughters. Izabella, Brady and Reece.

Kristen Willeumier: How tall were you when you played NCAA Division I volleyball as a Florida State Seminole?

Gabrielle Reece: When I went into college I was 6'3," 145 lbs. When I left I was 6'3," 165 lbs. I played as a professional athlete between 165 lbs. and 172 lbs. Currently, I'm 179 lbs.

KW: What position did you play?

GR: Middle blocker.

KW: What was the most challenging aspect of playing that position?

GR: I was very green. I came in with eight freshmen on a 12-person team, so we had to play. We couldn't wait to get

better; we had to perform. And so it's like anything; if I say to you as your Middle blocker, I'm going to cover this area, and you strategize your defense around me, my job is to make sure that that area is protected. And so when you don't do that, no one else can really do their job. So I think sometimes as a middle you have to try your best to take the space you said you were taking so your defense trusts and moves around that and you don't leave holes. In the middle you have to be a decoy. So you have to be willing to be in the air whether you have the ball or not. There is a value to that that isn't always a personal gain.

KW: What did you love about playing Middle?

GR: Middles have a glory position. Liberors are keeping balls alive and passing balls and making things really happen. They don't ever get too much glory. Middles get a lot of glory. They get big blocks and quick kills and things like that. That part of it, you get a lot of strokes. If you're not playing well and their (the opposing team) Middle is beating you, it's not pretty.

KW: How did you get through the tough days, particularly when you were a freshman playing as a Division I athlete?

GR: I was trying to stay out of the way and not make mistakes at the beginning; I realized it was important for me to learn to take up space. As far as getting through the hard times, I call it

'rack focus.' It's like in the movies (where the focus changes from one subject to another). When the ball is in play, it's the most important thing happening. Eventually, what I would try to do was pull way back when the game was over, not only to maintain perspective, but to look at what I didn't do well, so I could learn from mistakes, and lessen them in the future. I took ownership of the parts that I blew—not playing the blame game, even when I felt compelled to apologize to a teammate that I didn't do my job.

KW: How about as a pro athlete?

GR: As a pro, I had one season in particular that was really difficult. And listen, I shed a few tears behind the bleachers as a grown professional. Then you dust yourself off and get back to work. You let yourself have your feelings; let it out, and then say, 'OK, I got this.' And let it go. Be willing to tackle your weaknesses so the game elevates.

KW: What training advice would you give MSU players?

GR: We were antiquated. These girls (who currently play in the NCAA) have a more sophisticated style. What I would say now is volleyball players tend to be quad dominant. I would encourage them to protect their knees by smashing the tissue of their quads. Put clean socks on and smash the quads of your teammate. I would also stretch more. There is so much repetitive trauma. We call it unwinding the wind. If you lift heavy and pound balls, you will eventually run into something (i.e., some type of injury). Do those unsexy little stretches. If I could find a way to remind them to include stretching, it would improve their performance and help them feel better later. If they can





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train and run barefoot on a soft surface, it would be better than just pounding (on a hard surface). It would be better if they could liberate their feet from their shoes. That helps the ankles and articulation of the feet.

KW: What did you do to overcome performance anxiety? Did you have any rituals you followed?

GR: In the pros, I would use certain things to trigger me to compete. I would get dressed in a certain order. I would pull my hair back and that became something. When you play in the pros you put on glasses, so once I put my glasses on I would be completely in the zone. When I ran around the court I would develop a sense of ownership and belonging to the place where I was. And I was committed to showing up for my teammates. When a play wasn't going my way, I learned the skill of letting go and focusing on the next ball.

KW: Did you have any challenging injuries you had to overcome?

GR: In college, I had sciatica and some back issues. I had an artificial knee at 46. It was mainly dealing with my knees and shoulders, and a tight back.

KW: Were you internally driven to excel, or did you have a coach who motivated you?

GR: I always wanted to show up for my teammates and my coach. All the coaches I had showed up prepared, and were open to discussion. That inspired me. Being accountable inspires me. It's about motivation, positivity, and having a strategy for practice and tournaments.

KW: Do you have any advice on building a great rapport with your coach?

GR: Be yourself. I am still friends with my coach (Cecile Reynaud) 30 years later. If my coach and I had an issue, I would respectfully go to her office. If I got pulled out of games, I would sit next to her on the bench and ask what she was seeing. I treated her with a lot of respect, and I was given a lot of respect.

KW: Do you have any thoughts on navigating through issues with teammates?

GR: If you have any issues with your teammates, go directly to them. Be a person who is not only a good example, but is a unifying energy on a team. Have a little humility and a little thoughtfulness with your words. Be the example. Be powerful.

KW: What is your strategy for success?

GR: The formula is simple. Do you know how to work hard? Do you know how to show up? Do you know how to ask questions? Do you know how to say, "I don't know how to do something?" If you do, you can get through a lot. If you can say, "Hey, it's my fault," you can really get places.

KW: When you began playing volleyball at FSU, did you have any indication that you would go on to play pro?

GR: I was on an adventure. I was very surprised to get a scholarship to college. I wanted to see if I could do the best I could. When I went to two-a-days in August of my freshman year, if you asked my teammates from there today if they thought I would not only peak, but excel and then go on (to play pro), I would say more than 50% would have thought I wouldn't survive. I was really green and they were way ahead of me. I

didn't have a ton of support.

KW: What is your favorite volleyball memory?

GR: My favorite volleyball memories are the tournaments where I was in flow. There are ones where you are in sync with everything happening. Maybe it's happened 15 times (in my career). It's easier to get into flow in sports that occur in nature, like surfing and snowboarding.

KW: What lessons did you learn from playing volleyball?

GR: You don't run away from the discomfort. You know how to take constructive criticism. You can work with people you don't fundamentally agree with but have a common goal. You can survive being embarrassed. You can survive losing and you can graciously accept winning.

KW: What do you love about being a female professional athlete?

GR: The best thing about sports is that I was around a lot of very powerful women, so when I meet them now, I can celebrate them. I can be happy for them. I'm not intimidated or threatened. When you can really celebrate powerful women, it liberates you.

KW: What final thoughts do you have for the MSU women's volleyball team?

GR: Remember, you are living the miracle. To play NCAA volleyball is a miracle. Be present, enjoy it, and max out, so when you do move on, you can move on.

For more health, fitness and lifestyle insights from Gabby Reece, check out her podcast, *The Gabby Reece Show*.



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