

Coming Home

An Interview with Dani Busboom Kelly, Head Coach, Women's Volleyball, University of Nebraska

EDITORS' NOTE Nebraska native Dani Busboom Kelly was named the fourth head coach in program history in January 2025 by Nebraska Director of Athletics Troy Dannen. A Husker national champion player and assistant coach, Busboom Kelly spent the last eight years building Louisville into a national power. The Cardinals have reached two NCAA Championship matches, three NCAA Semifinals, five regional finals, and have won four ACC titles. Busboom Kelly was



Dani Busboom Kelly

the starting libero on Nebraska's 2006 national championship team, and she was an assistant coach when the Huskers won the 2015 national championship in Omaha. She took the helm at Louisville late in 2016 after being named AVCA National Assistant Coach of the Year in her final season as a Husker assistant, and she guided the Cardinals to heights the program had never experienced. In her first season at Louisville in 2017, Busboom Kelly took over a program coming off a 12-18 season and led it to a 24-7 record, an ACC title and an NCAA Tournament appearance. For her efforts, she was named the AVCA East Region Coach of the Year for the first of four times at Louisville. Following her first season, Busboom Kelly was named the head coach of the U.S. Collegiate National Team Europe Tour, leading them to the gold medal in the European Global Challenge. The Cardinals continued to improve each season, reaching the NCAA Tournament Second Round in 2018 and the program's first-ever NCAA Regional Final in 2019. During the shortened 2020-21 season, Busboom Kelly's Cardinals went 15-3 and won the ACC Championship, and she was named ACC Coach of the Year. Louisville broke through in a big way in 2021, winning 32 straight matches to begin the season before finishing the year in the NCAA Semifinals for the first time in program history. Busboom Kelly was again named ACC Coach of the Year as well as AVCA National Coach of the Year, as the Cardinals achieved their first #1 ranking in program history. She became the first woman in NCAA history to coach an undefeated regular season. Busboom Kelly was the ACC Coach of the Year for the third year in a row, as the Cardinals won their third straight ACC title. Prior to her time at Louisville, Busboom Kelly played a vital role on the Husker coaching staff, assisting with Nebraska's setters,

liberos, outside hitters, and recruiting. Regarded as one of the best recruiters in the nation, Busboom Kelly helped Nebraska's resurgence to the forefront of college volleyball, as the Huskers captured the 2015 NCAA Championship at the CenturyLink Center in Omaha, the same place Busboom Kelly won the national title as a player for the Huskers in 2006. Before joining the Husker staff in 2012, she was an assistant coach at Tennessee from 2009-10, and an assistant coach at Louisville in 2011. As a captain at Nebraska,

Busboom Kelly moved from setter to libero in 2006 to help Nebraska's defense and finished her career as one of only two players to rank among NU's all-time leaders in both digs (1,281) and assists (2,873). In addition to her accomplishments on the court, Busboom Kelly excelled off the court for the Huskers. She was a 2006 second-team Academic All-District VII selection, while earning six Big 12 Commissioner's Honor Roll

accolades and becoming a three-time first-team Academic All-Big 12 honoree. She earned a bachelor's degree in communication studies from Nebraska in 2007. Following her graduation, Busboom Kelly spent time with the U.S. Women's National Training Team before working as a sales representative for an Omaha insurance company. She also worked as a sideline reporter for radio broadcasts of Nebraska volleyball matches on the Husker Sports Network and was an assistant coach with USA Volleyball's Select A2 Program.

Will you discuss your career journey?

I decided to get into coaching about a year after I graduated from Nebraska in 2007. My first job was as an assistant coach at Tennessee for two seasons. It was great to get to know a different conference and a different program after only being around Nebraska up to that point. After Tennessee, I went to Louisville as an assistant coach for one season and had an awesome experience working under Anne



Dani Busboom Kelly coaching women's volleyball at the University of Nebraska



Dani Busboom Kelly, surrounded by her family at a celebration of her return to the University of Nebraska as Women's Volleyball Head Coach

Kordes. She was a great mentor. Then there was an opening on John Cook's staff at Nebraska and I went back to my alma mater. At the time, it was pretty much a dream come true. After five great seasons at Nebraska, I got the call from Louisville to go back there to be their head coach, and the rest is history. I spent a lot of time coaching outside of Nebraska, which Coach Cook encouraged me to do to learn how other programs operate and coach in a different landscape. I've learned a lot from that experience, and that has prepared me to come back to Nebraska and feel confident.

Did you know early on that you wanted to spend your career in the sport of volleyball?

It wasn't until my senior year of college – when I switched positions from being a setter to a libero – when I considered coaching. At the time I was looking into doing medical or pharmaceutical sales. But being part of that national championship team in 2006 and playing a different position for the benefit of the team really inspired me to want to give back to the sport of volleyball.

What excited you about the opportunity to return to Nebraska as head coach at this time?

Nebraska is home. When you're coaching, you want to be at a place that has a goal to win national championships and Nebraska does. The people, the fan support, everything about it makes it a place you would want to coach at. What I love about Nebraska is that the expectations never change. We are trying to win conference championships, get to Final Fours and win national championships. But also, we want our

players to leave here loving the sport of volleyball and loving the game. Maybe they want to play pro volleyball or coach or give back in some other way. We want our players to have an amazing experience at Nebraska, and usually that leads to success.

When you are recruiting players, while you are looking for the best talent, how important is personality and character?

It's extremely important to have a good mix of personalities on a team. You never want to recruit 16 people who are all the same. Obviously, talent is most important in high-level sports, but personality and culture is a very close second. Players who are coachable are the ones who will end up having the most success, and the teams with the best chemistry that embrace every personality will usually be the ones that go far.

What are your views on the state of college sports today, especially with the transfer portal and players moving from school to school?

It seems like every five years or so there are big changes in college athletics, and it just takes time to adjust to the changes. And just like everything else changing in college sports, it can feel scary and new at first, but it always works itself out. The transfer portal is no exception. It is different than how programs were built even just 5 to 10 years ago, but college coaches and student-athletes have been and will keep adjusting to the changes that keep coming. I'm very excited for the future of college sports because the student athletes are being put on a higher pedestal and are being showcased for more

and more people to watch. Women's volleyball especially feels like one of the sports that is just starting to take off.

Are you surprised to see the way women's college volleyball has grown and what the game has become?

I'm not surprised at all. Volleyball is a great product, and the women's college game is so exciting and fun to watch. Everywhere you look there are attendance records being broken and TV ratings setting new highs. I really think it just took some more marketing to increase awareness. Once you get new eyes on the sport, people get hooked on it. I think there is still a ton of room for growth in our sport, too. What's been really amazing about our sport is how the ball just keeps rolling. This past season we had the first woman win a national championship as head coach with Katie Schumacher-Cawley at Penn State, and now you're seeing more women take over historic programs and getting a chance to lead and show that we can do it. For me, it's more than just being a woman. It's about showing how we can be very successful and competitive, but we can also have great family lives and great lives outside of our sport, and I'm hoping to model that to our players – that you really can do it all.

How do you describe your coaching style?

I work really hard to be consistent as a coach. I do think I'm pretty serious most of the time, but I also don't want us to take our sport so seriously that we lose the fun in it. If we are consistent in our personalities, then everybody knows what to expect. When everyone has that trust in each other and knows what to expect on a daily basis, then that's where you can have some fun with different variations in practices or on road trips. It just creates a culture of trust. I am very fortunate that I've gotten to work with great coaches in my career and put trust in them, and that will continue at Nebraska with all of our staff returning. I know I don't have to worry about little things here and there because I know our staff is taking care of that. We'll come to work every day and love what we do because we want these players to be successful.

With all that you have achieved as a player and coach, are you able to take moments to reflect on your accomplishments and celebrate the wins?

For sure. It's always been a pillar of my coaching style to celebrate the little things as much as the big things. We go through so many ups and downs throughout the course of a season or a career. It's important to enjoy the journey and not take any of it for granted. My teams are always having fun and celebrating every step of the way. I'm just humbled and grateful to be here in this moment, living another dream of mine to represent Nebraska Volleyball and this state, a place that means so much to me and my family. It's tough to wrap my mind around it sometimes. It's an honor to be part of a place that cares so much about the sport of volleyball and continues to push the limits and show everybody what can be done. ●