

A Tradition Of Excellence

An Interview with Katie Schumacher-Cawley, Head Coach, Women's Volleyball, Penn State University



Katie Schumacher-Cawley with the NCAA Division I Women's Volleyball trophy that Penn State won in 2024

EDITORS' NOTE Katie Schumacher-Cawley was named the third head coach in the history of Penn State Women's Volleyball in 2022 and made history of her own in just her third season at the helm of the program. Already a national champion as a player on the Nittany Lions' first championship team in 1999, Schumacher-Cawley added a national title as a coach after leading the 2024 team to the championship with a 3-1 win over Louisville at the KFC Yum! Center in Louisville. She became the first female head coach to lead a team to an NCAA Division I Women's Volleyball title. All of this came during a season in which Schumacher-Cawley announced publicly a breast cancer diagnosis in October. A two-time All-American at Penn State, Schumacher-Cawley took over the program after spending four seasons as an assistant under legendary head coach Russ Rose. She enters her fourth season as the team's head coach in 2025. Penn State advanced to the NCAA Tournament in each of Schumacher-Cawley's first three seasons as head coach at her alma mater, helping the program extend its streak to 44 consecutive appearances. The Nittany Lions advanced to the Regional Semi-final in each of the first two seasons before breaking through with the title in 2024. In Schumacher-Cawley's first three seasons as head coach at Penn State, the Nittany Lions have had players earn six All-American honors, nine All-Region accolades and 11 All-Big Ten awards, including nine first-team selections. They were ranked all 48 weeks of the AVCA Coaches Poll while posting an overall record of 84-19 for a .816 winning percentage. Before returning to Penn State as an assistant coach in 2018, Schumacher-Cawley spent eight seasons as the head coach at University of Illinois at Chicago and one season at Penn. A 2002 graduate of Penn State, Schumacher-Cawley helped lead the Nittany Lions to the 1999 NCAA Women's Volleyball Championship, the program's first national title, and three Big Ten Conference crowns during her career. She was a two-time American Volleyball Coaches Association (AVCA) All-American, three-time All-Big Ten selection and three-time AVCA All-Region selection. Schumacher ended her career with 1,310 kills, 772 digs and 299 blocks. Schumacher-Cawley also played for the Lady Lion Basketball team in 2001-02. A Chicago native, Schumacher-Cawley played volleyball and basketball at Mother McAuley High School



Coach Schumacher-Cawley celebrates clinching the 2024 Big Ten title with a win over Nebraska

and led the Mighty Macs to state and national titles in volleyball. She was inducted into both the Girls Catholic Athletic Conference (GCAC) Hall of Fame and the Catholic League Hall of Fame in 2003. In 2008, a resolution in the Illinois House of Representatives congratulated Schumacher-Cawley for her achievements. On October 15, 2008, she was inducted into the prestigious Chicagoland Sports Hall of Fame for her contributions to the sport of volleyball as an athlete and a coach. She was part of a class that also included Pro Football Hall of Famers Dick Butkus, Gale Sayers, and Marv Levy; Chicago

Cubs great Andre Dawson; and Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley. Schumacher-Cawley earned her bachelor's degree in communications from Penn State in May 2002.

Will you discuss your career journey?

I started coaching immediately after graduating, knowing that my passion for the game extended beyond playing. My first opportunity came as a volunteer assistant at the University of Illinois under Don Hardin. That season was invaluable – I gained firsthand experience in the daily operations of a high-level program,

learning the intricacies of coaching, player development, and team management. It was during that time that I realized coaching wasn't just something I wanted to do – it was something I was meant to do.

After my season at Illinois, I took the next step in my journey as a graduate assistant for Don August at the University of Illinois at Chicago. That role challenged me in new ways, as I was not only developing my coaching philosophy but also gaining experience in scouting, training design, and recruiting. I was fortunate to stay at UIC, first as an assistant and eventually as

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the head coach. Over eight seasons leading that program, I learned the importance of building a strong team culture, adapting to the ever-changing landscape of college athletics, and finding ways to elevate a program year after year. Those years shaped me into the coach I am today.

After nearly a decade at UIC, I took a leap into the Ivy League for one season. That experience broadened my perspective, allowing me to coach in a unique academic and athletic environment while continuing to grow as a leader. But when the opportunity arose to return to Penn State, I knew it was the right move. Penn State represents everything I believe in – excellence, tradition, and a commitment to both athletic and personal development. Coaching here is an honor, and every day I am grateful to be part of a program and university that truly invests in its people.

Did you know early on that you wanted to spend your career in coaching?

I knew I wanted to be involved in coaching. I love working with all ages, but college has been such a blast. I couldn't be happier coming back to coach with Coach Rose and having the opportunity to stay here and continue on the Penn State tradition of excellence.

How do you describe the Penn State volleyball culture?

The Penn State Volleyball culture is built on a foundation of accountability, trust, and an unwavering commitment to excellence. Every player, regardless of their role, has an impact on the team's success. Whether they are a starter, a key rotational player, or someone pushing the team every day in practice, their contributions matter. This program is not just about individual talent – it's about how each athlete embraces their role, elevates those around them, and commits to the greater mission of the team.

We set high expectations for ourselves, not just on the court but in everything we do. Excellence isn't just about winning matches – it's about discipline in training, dedication to personal growth, and carrying ourselves with integrity in the classroom, in the community, and in life. Our culture thrives on a collective mindset – putting the team first, trusting the process, and taking pride in the hard work it takes to be part of something bigger than ourselves.

The legacy of Penn State Volleyball is built on the players who came before, those who laid the foundation of championship-level

expectations, and it continues with every athlete who steps onto the court today. Each player is entrusted with upholding that legacy while also creating their own. It's not just about playing for the present – it's about building something that will inspire those who come next. That's the standard, and that's what makes this program so special.

What were the keys to Penn State's ability to win a national championship this past season?

The keys to our success this season were the leadership and unwavering commitment of our five seniors: Jess, Quinn, Anj, Taylor, and Cam. Each of them embraced their roles as leaders, not just by example, but through their voices, their work ethic, and their ability to hold both themselves and their teammates accountable. They set the tone from day one, ensuring that the lessons learned from our Sweet 16 loss fueled our drive rather than defined us.

What made their leadership so impactful was the way they took ownership of this team. They didn't just show up – they invested in the culture, in their teammates, and in the legacy they wanted to leave behind. They understood that leadership isn't about titles or seniority; it's



Coach Schumacher-Cawley and her players cut the net in celebration of their 2024 NCAA Division I Women's Volleyball championship

about action. They pushed the standard higher every day, making sure that this team trained with purpose, competed with heart, and carried themselves with pride.

Beyond the court, they helped create an environment where younger players felt valued and empowered. They knew that leaving a legacy wasn't just about their own success, but about lifting the entire program forward. Their leadership wasn't just about winning matches – it was about building a foundation that future teams could build upon. Because of them, this team didn't just respond to adversity – we thrived through it. Their impact will be felt long after their time here, and I couldn't be prouder of the way they represented Penn State Volleyball.

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

I want players who truly want to be a part of Penn State – athletes who embrace the legacy, the culture, and the responsibility that comes with wearing the blue and white. I'm looking for individuals who not only want to compete at the highest level, but also strive to be leaders on this campus and in the world beyond volleyball. Penn State is about more than just playing a sport; it's about developing character, learning to push through adversity, and preparing to make a lasting impact in whatever path you choose.

This is such a fun and transformative time in these student-athletes' lives. It's a period of growth, self-discovery, and building relationships that will last a lifetime. The lessons they learn – discipline, teamwork, perseverance – will carry them far beyond their playing days. I want them to embrace every opportunity, challenge themselves daily, and take full advantage of the incredible resources and support they have here. More than anything, I want them to walk away from their time at Penn State not just as better players, but as better people – ready to lead, inspire, and make a difference wherever life takes them.

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

The state of college sports is constantly evolving, bringing new challenges and opportunities for both athletes and programs. One of the things I truly love seeing is student-athletes maximizing their academic and athletic careers – whether that means graduating early and pursuing a master's degree or finding new ways to grow within the game. Education has always been a cornerstone of Penn State, and I fully support players who take advantage of these opportunities to set themselves up for success beyond volleyball.

The transfer portal has become an integral part of the game, changing the landscape of recruiting and roster development. While it provides athletes with options, my hope is to build a program where players come here to develop, invest in the culture, and grow over time. There's something special about committing to the process, putting in the work, and seeing long-term growth as both an athlete and a person.

That being said, we've had transfers come in and make an immediate impact – bringing experience, fresh perspectives, and a hunger to wear the blue and white. It's about finding the right fit, players who embrace the values of this program and are eager to be part of something bigger than themselves. No matter how they arrive here, my goal is to create an environment where every player feels valued, challenged, and supported in their journey to becoming the best version of themselves – on and off the court.

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

The growth of women's volleyball is truly remarkable. The increased visibility through the Big Ten Network and other major networks has elevated the sport to new heights, giving these incredible athletes the recognition they deserve. It's exciting to see the game reach a broader audience, inspiring young players across the country and proving that women's volleyball is a dynamic, fast-paced, and highly competitive sport that belongs in the national spotlight.

Beyond the collegiate level, the emergence of professional leagues in the U.S. is a game-changer. These leagues provide opportunities for players to continue their careers at home, allowing them to stay connected to their communities while competing at an elite level. It's no longer just about going overseas to pursue a professional volleyball career – now, there are legitimate pathways right here in the U.S. that are shaping the future of the sport.

This growth sends a powerful message to the next generation. Young girls watching these athletes on national television, seeing them compete in packed arenas, and following their journeys into the professional ranks now have role models to look up to. They can dream bigger, knowing that volleyball isn't just a passion – it can be a career, a platform, and a lifelong pursuit. The momentum behind women's volleyball is only getting stronger, and it's an exciting time to be part of this movement, pushing the sport forward and creating even more opportunities for future generations.

How do you describe your coaching style?

I would say my coaching style is built on a foundation of relentless effort, accountability, and an unwavering commitment to growth. We will go hard and give our very best effort every single day – because every day presents an opportunity to improve, to push past limits, and to elevate both ourselves and those around us. It's not just about individual success; it's about contributing to a team, lifting up our teammates, and working toward a shared vision.

Beyond the court, we will represent this program, university, and community with integrity, passion, and a standard of excellence that goes beyond wins and losses. The way we train, compete, and carry ourselves will reflect the pride we have in our program and the values we uphold. This culture of discipline, respect,

and unity will define us – not just as athletes but as people who are driven to make an impact in everything we do.

You have referred to Penn State volleyball as a family. As you have been public about your battle with cancer throughout the past season, what did it mean to you to have the support of your team and the entire university in this fight?

I am beyond grateful for my team, staff, and everyone here. Penn State is more than just a university – it's a family, a community built on support, resilience, and an unwavering commitment to excellence. The people here truly care, not just about success on the court, but about who you are as a person. They push you to be better, lift you up when you need it, and remind you that you're never in this alone.

This year has been incredibly challenging, while battling cancer. But I am deeply humbled by the strength of those who came before me – the fighters, the survivors, the innovators who have helped advance medicine and make treatment more effective. Their courage and perseverance paved the way for people like me, and for that, I will always be grateful.

Through every challenge, it's where I've built lifelong relationships, where I've witnessed the power of resilience, and where I've had the privilege of raising my three daughters in an environment that values family, integrity, and something bigger than ourselves. I don't take a single moment for granted, and I consider myself incredibly lucky to be part of something so special.

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?

It hasn't totally sunk in yet what this group has accomplished. The season flew by, filled with moments of resilience, growth, and pure joy. Every challenge we faced only brought us closer together, and the way this team responded – through adversity, tough matches, and high-pressure moments – was truly special. This group didn't just play volleyball; they competed with heart, represented Penn State with pride, and left a lasting impact on this program.

This was a season that will stay with me forever. From the grind of preseason to the electric energy of conference play and the intensity of the postseason, every step of the journey was meaningful. The connections built, the lessons learned, and the memories made are what make this experience so rewarding.

As I reflect on what this team accomplished, I can't help but be excited about what's ahead. We have a strong returning group that understands the standard, the work ethic, and the mindset it takes to compete at the highest level. And with the addition of some really special players, the potential for this next team is incredibly high. It's a new chapter, a new challenge, and an opportunity to build on what was established. The bar has been set, and now it's time to raise it even higher. ●