

# FINAL REPORT

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## Slovak Women's National Volleyball Team U22

Period: 02.06. – 05.07.2025



**Head Coach:** Nenanja Ristić

**Assistant Coach:** Peter Minárik

**Assistant Coach:** Vladimir Stojiljković

**Strength & Conditioning Coach:** Goran Panković

**Physical Therapist:** Daniela Chymičová

**Mental Coach & Team Manager:** Adam Kocian

#### Nomination of the U22 national team

| No. | Name                | Year of Birth | Height in cm | Position       | Club                     |
|-----|---------------------|---------------|--------------|----------------|--------------------------|
| 1   | Ritterová Petra     | 2005          | 174          | Setter         | Hit UCM Trnava           |
| 2   | Cibulová Karolína   | 2006          | 175          | Setter         | Slávia Kooperatíva EUBA  |
| 3   | Špačková Katarína   | 2006          | 178          | Setter         | ŠŠK Bilíkova Bratislava  |
| 4   | Truchlá Barbora     | 2006          | 186          | Middle-blocker | Hit UCM Trnava           |
| 5   | Libáková Sofia      | 2007          | 189          | Middle-blocker | SŠŠ NR                   |
| 6   | Špilárová Lara      | 2008          | 184          | Middle-blocker | VK Nové Mesto nad Váhom  |
| 7   | Fričová Ivana       | 2006          | 188          | Middle-blocker | SŠŠ NR                   |
| 8   | Matalíková Karolína | 2005          | 180          | Outside Hitter | Slávia Kooperatíva EUBA  |
| 9   | Valentová Deana     | 2005          | 180          | Outside Hitter | TJ Sokol Šternberk (CZE) |
| 10  | Bobáňová Klára      | 2005          | 183          | Outside Hitter | VA UNIZA Žilina          |
| 11  | Hrušecká Tamara     | 2005          | 186          | Outside Hitter | VK KP Brno (CZE)         |
| 12  | Kovalčíková Linda   | 2008          | 180          | Outside Hitter | VK Nové Mesto nad Váhom  |
| 13  | Siládiová Marína    | 2005          | 184          | Opposite       | Slávia Kooperatíva EUBA  |
| 14  | Furdová Nikola      | 2005          | 191          | Opposite       | Slávia Kooperatíva EUBA  |
| 15  | Boldocká Hana       | 2006          | 186          | Opposite       | ŠŠK Bilíkova Bratislava  |
| 16  | Čavojská Daniela    | 2005          | 166          | Libero         | ŠŠK Bilíkova Bratislava  |
| 17  | Maťová Natália      | 2007          | 168          | Libero         | UKF Nitra                |

The following players did not make the final nomination: Špačková, Kovalčíková, Fričová (injury)

#### Week 2.6. – 8.6. Lipovsky Hrádok

##### Number of Trainings:

12 trainings (9 technical-tactical + 3 conditioning)

##### Challenges:

Players arrived with varying levels of physical fitness. Significant differences in basic strength and mobility were observed. Some players showed a degree of technical and tactical forgetfulness..

##### Objectives:

Reintegration into the training process, refreshing technical elements, and conducting individual diagnostics of physical condition (FMS tests, basic strength and mobility assessments).

Introduction to the players and the way they work.

#### Comments:

#### Head Coach:

We focused on the basics and adjusting to the intensity of training. The priority was to restore the technical feel and familiarize the players with the systemic requirements of the national team. The biggest problem that accompanied us for the first 3 weeks was the incompleteness of the team. This week we had a maximum of 11 players at training. We always did morning practices in two groups, one group worked in the gym, the other on the floor and vice versa.

#### Strength & Conditioning Coach:

My focus was on power and strength of core muscles, stability and basic weightlifting exercise. Afternoon training was focus on movement technique, specific coordination and running technique.

#### Mental Coach:

At the beginning of the preparation phase, a clear discrepancy was observed between the expectations set by the coaching staff and the players' actual understanding of what it means to approach a national team camp with a professional mindset. This gap was particularly evident in the first week and can largely be attributed to the cultural differences between the Serbian coaching staff - who brought a strong, high-demand professional culture — and the current mindset and habits of the players.

From day one, it was essential to set clear standards. As a staff, we openly communicated what it means to represent the Slovak national team: the level of effort required, the commitment to giving 100% in training, attention to recovery and nutrition, and a general sense of pride and responsibility. A critical moment was addressing the lack of basic knowledge and motivation among some players — for example, players not knowing the names of those currently competing for the senior national team, or players covering their lack of effort by hiding behind the team. These behaviors were confronted directly and constructively.

The first phase of the camp was focused on adjustment and alignment. The coaching staff was unified in creating a culture of high standards, where both performance and behavior had clear expectations — and where unmet standards led to logical consequences, always paired with honest, transparent explanations. This approach was crucial for cultivating accountability and internal trust.

Off the court, a strong emphasis was placed on the human side of performance. Players were encouraged to communicate openly and transparently, and an “open-door policy” was established from the outset. Every athlete was given space to express personal concerns, which allowed us to address potential conflicts or internal frictions early and constructively. This built a foundation of mutual respect and psychological safety within the team.

## **Week 9.6. – 14.6. Liptovsky Hrádok**

### **Number of Trainings:**

14 trainings (11 technical-tactical + 3 conditioning)

### **Objectives:**

Increase the intensity of technical sessions, introduce team tactics, and integrate corrective exercises into the conditioning work. Work on the block defense system. Each practice had a focus on some elements of the game (defense, block...)

### **Work Approach:**

Parallel work on the field and in the gym. Morning workouts focused on technique and conditioning, while afternoon workouts combined game segments and system learning. Individual corrective programs were implemented before each practice.

### **Comments:**

#### **Head coach:**

After the first week where we trained mostly technique, now the first problems are appearing. The first thing I encountered was giving up after 2-3 mistakes in a row, and not accepting leaving the comfort zone. With some players, I was most disappointed by the fact that they don't want or don't know how to try something different. The number of players in practice is still a big problem, and an even bigger problem is that different players are absent every day, so it was very difficult to create some kind of continuity.

#### **Strength & Conditioning Coach:**

Focus on second week was on power and strength, weight lifting, functional core exercise, jumps and explosivity. Afternoon, on the court, focus was on sprinting and specific coordination.

#### **Mental Coach:**

In the second phase, I conducted individual consultations with all players to assess personality traits, communication styles, and individual challenges. These insights were shared with the coaching staff to tailor communication and feedback strategies. This approach helped the coaches adjust their methods in a way that resonated with each player, aiming to extract full commitment and engagement on and off the court. This individualized communication strategy allowed the staff to remain demanding without being rigid, adapting the tone and message to the needs and personalities of the athletes, while maintaining non-negotiable performance and

behavioral standards.

As the preparation progressed, the team naturally began to form a strong internal culture. Notably, we observed minimal subgroup formation, the players connected across positions, clubs, and age levels. Leadership roles emerged organically. While the appointed captain led the group with authority, a wider “captain team” composed of older and more experienced players supported the group culture. Importantly, every player, regardless of role or playing time, found a defined place within the team. Responsibility was shared across the roster, which contributed to a stable and unified team dynamic.

#### **Week 14.6. – 22.6. Púchov**

##### **Number of Trainings:**

7 trainings + 2 conditioning +2 preparation matches ( Czech republic )

##### **Work Approach:**

Emphasis on team cohesion and implementing tactical tasks through game-like scenarios and scrimmages.

##### **Objectives:**

Team cohesion and evaluation through preparatory matches. Defining player roles. Giving all players a chance, and first determining the starting lineup, as well as the players' reactions to the assigned roles.

##### **Comments:**

##### **Head coach:**

First match against Czech Republik U22 we lost 1:4

In this match, we did not have tactical instructions for the opponent, my goal was to see what we have at our disposal and what the team's approach is. The emphasis was on service, service reception and block defense on high balls.

The first thing that was very visible was the bad reception, which also followed us in the qualifying matches especially after the 20th point. A lack of self-confidence was felt on the field, and it was clear what we had to work on. The goal was absolutely not the result, all players got their chance. The fear of the opponent was visible among most of the players. The thing that positively surprised me, and on which we worked a lot in the second week, was not giving up. For example, in 3 sets we were in deficit by as many as 8 points, but we managed to get a result, what we lacked was that finish, where we made bad decisions. In the end, what annoyed me the

most was the way they accepted the defeat as if nothing had happened. So, I reacted along with Adam after that.



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Second Match we Won 3-2. After the first match we had two meetings, one was with Adam and one with me, we were all together. With Adam the focus was on what the national team means for them, with me he was also about that but more about technical and tactical things from the game. The emphasis was on pointing out mistakes as well as how to correct those mistakes. We mostly worked on points after 20, we looked at all the decisions they made, and how the result does not affect their game (thinking about what they should do and not about a possible mistake). For this match, we prepared for the opponent with clear instructions on how they play, the reaction of the players was great. Even in this match, the final result was not in the plan, so all the players got a chance, but we won the sets where we played in the starting line-up very easily, and that was very important to me (It should be known that Czech played almost the entire match in the starting line-up).

I have to be satisfied with this match, because the approach was completely different. And what we talked about the most, the endings were good.

These matches showed me a clear picture of what we have, who can play and who we can count on, as well as what our biggest problems are (reception, play with middle blockers, out of system balls).



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### **Strength & Conditioning Coach:**

Focus on third week was on strength, weight lifting, prevention. Second training in gym was adapted for the game focused on strength, weight lifting and specific functional exercise for volleyball. On the court focus was on specific movement and explosivity.

### **Mental coach:**

The first game ended in a 1:4 loss. From a mental performance standpoint, the defeat was not primarily about volleyball skills or tactical errors, but rather a reflection of psychological immaturity in key moments. Especially at the end of sets, we observed tension, loss of focus, and a lack of courage. The natural tendencies that had been identified at the start of the training

camp, such as perfectionism, fear of failure, and passive body language became visible under match pressure. The team did not rise to the challenge. Instead of stepping up, many players defaulted to a passive, habitual rhythm. This “autopilot mode” is something we’ve historically seen in Slovak youth teams, when the score turns against us, players continue playing, but without intent or fire. What was even more concerning was the level of respect shown to the Czech team - not a healthy, competitive respect, but a form of psychological submission. Some players played as if the outcome was already decided, and it was clear that they had lost belief in their ability to win. Nobody broke the mental spiral. No one took the risk to challenge the momentum. There was no leader who would bring energy back into the team. That was a critical observation and one we addressed directly.

After the match, we held an honest and firm team meeting. The players were given clear feedback: they did not compete with pride. They showed fear. They played with too much respect and allowed the opponent to dominate not just on the scoreboard, but mentally. We reminded them of what it means to represent the national team - the values, the standards, the responsibility. We emphasized that competing means playing with courage, not just going through the motions.

This meeting marked a turning point. The response in the second game was a testament to the team’s ability to adapt. We saw a completely different approach: players took responsibility, showed presence on the court, and engaged emotionally. The fear and hesitancy were replaced by confidence, assertiveness, and better focus. Particularly in the final moments of each set. Players who had previously hesitated now played freely and with intensity. Combined with tactical and technical adjustments, this shift in mindset led us to a 3:2 victory. More important than the score, however, was the psychological growth. The team began to understand that being part of the national team is not just about talent. It’s about behavior, standards, and mindset. The second match showed that the group is capable of responding to pressure, if the internal switch is turned on.

#### **Week 23.6. – 29.6. Púchov**

This week we started with another program, we trained three days in a row and then a day off, to get the team used to the qualifying tournament (three days and three games). In this mini cycle of 3 days, we did the gym on the first day, medium intensity on the second day and the highest intensity on the third day, so we also prepared for the opponents.

**Number of Trainings:**

8 trainings + 2 conditioning

**Work Approach:**

Intensive correction of tactical weaknesses. Individual meetings with players to clarify their roles.

**Objectives:**

Stabilize the game in reception, reduce mistakes in attack and strengthen team cohesion. The first part of the training focuses on out of system balls and setting high balls, every day. The second part of the training is a 6 on 6 game with a clear lineup and clear tasks.

**Comments:****Head coach:**

The tactical improvement is evident. Physically, the players showed better results in explosiveness and speed tests. The attitude and mood in training were at a high level. The first problems (individual) with not accepting the role in the team appeared, but you can find more about that in the details about the players.

**Strength & Conditioning Coach:**

The focus on four week was on basic strength exercise, weightlifting, core function. Specific functional volleyball exercise. On the court the focus was on specific movement and explosivity.

**Final Week & Qualifications 30.6. – 5.7. Púchov****Number of Trainings:**

5 trainings + 1 conditioning + 4 team video preparation + qualification matches

**Work Approach:**

Reduced intensity before qualifications. Focus on details and mental preparation. (also, with Adam) Team meetings and opponent analysis were conducted.

**Objectives:**

Ensure physical freshness, a clear tactical structure, and psychological readiness for competition

### Comments:

### Strength & Conditioning Coach:

The focus last week was on strength, prevention, specific weightlifting exercises and specific explosivity exercise. On the court the focus was on specific movement.

### Qualification Matches:

**Slovakia - England 3:0 (18,16,8)**

### Comments:

### Head coach:

With this match, I can only be satisfied with the result, I think that we had to make a bigger difference in the first and second set (maybe it ultimately cost us a place in the European Championship) A large number of service mistakes during the entire match, even 22, which is of course unacceptable. And when you start the match like that, it's very difficult for anything to go right, fear crept under our skin, that we couldn't do the things we do very well.

We are very sorry that we entered the match very nervous, I think we were neither afraid of the opponent nor underestimated them, my opinion is that we were afraid of the importance of the match. I know that it was very difficult for the federation to organize more friendly matches, but I think we needed two or three more matches, so that we would have entered the match more relaxed. The only problem was that it was not our goal to risk the service and for that reason I cannot justify this number of mistakes, I believe that this team has a good service, and that we spent a lot of time working on it.



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### Mental Coach:

The qualification match against England carried significant weight. The task was clear: we had to win 3:0 with a considerable point difference in order to advance. Playing in front of the home crowd added to the pressure — and this pressure manifested in very visible ways on the court. From the opening moments, it was clear that fear of failure was the dominant psychological state for many players. The awareness of what was at stake created tension, which directly impacted one of the most fundamental parts of the game: the serve. With 22 service errors, it became evident that this was not just a technical issue, but a mental one. Nervousness, overthinking, and a lack of emotional regulation led to a collapse in what is normally a

controllable skill. Serve execution, often the first victim of pressure became a mirror of the team's internal emotional state.

In this match, the psychological tendencies we had previously identified became even more pronounced. Some players were clearly overmotivated, trying too hard to force outcomes, leading to rushed decisions or technical inconsistency. On the opposite side, others withdrew mentally, showing signs of passivity and emotional shutdown. This duality is a common reaction in high-stakes environments, especially for younger athletes still learning to manage pressure. We also noticed the non-verbal cues: Scared expressions, body language that signaled confusion, and a collective hesitation. Players often looked towards the crowd or staff almost seeking answers - a defensive mechanism in moments of emotional overload. Once again, as seen in previous matches, the team fell into a kind of mental autopilot. The urgency of the moment wasn't matched with assertive leadership on court. No one truly stepped up to shift the momentum from within.

And yet, despite all of this - despite the pressure, the errors, and the visible tension — the team managed to win the match. This is a critical point. The performance was far from perfect, but it did not fall apart. The players were able to remain focused on other aspects of the game and hold on to the essential parts of execution that secured the result. It showed a level of resilience, even if not paired with courage. The foundation of preparation, especially the discussions about standards, responsibility, and emotional regulation likely helped the team to stay structured, even while underperforming in key areas.

This match will serve as an important case study moving forward. It showed both the fragility and the potential of this group: the emotional impact of external pressure is still high, but the team has developed enough internal structure to withstand it, at least to a certain extent. The next step is not only to endure pressure, but to thrive under it. That means turning fear into focus, and responsibility into courageous action.

### **Slovakia - Poland 1:3 (23,-15,-16,-21)**

#### **Comments:**

#### **Head Coach:**

A completely different face than against England, we entered the match bravely, we didn't respect the opponent too much, the energy was at a high level, and at the end of the set, that bravery paid off. We respected 70% of some instructions that we agreed before the match. I even think that we surprised Poland and that they did not handle it well. After that, the worst scenario, in our heads it was as if we had already won, we lost our focus and forgot all the things we were supposed to do, everyone started playing for themselves and the same fear as against the Czech Republic (first game) and England is repeated. And when you play against a quality

opponent, then you have no right to such mistakes, Poland was almost the only team on the field for the next three sets. They were stronger than us in every element, we had a hard time winning our points, while they on the other side did it very easily, and that greatly affects the self-confidence of both the players and the entire team. The fourth set showed me that you can count on some players in the future, because after two easily lost sets and a big deficit in the last one (15:6, 17:8), some players showed great character and didn't give up until the very end, we managed to reach 21:21, but in the end we couldn't hold on until the end, and we lost because of our biggest problem from the beginning (reception).



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### **Mental Coach:**

The qualification match against Poland was, from a mental performance perspective, the strongest showing of the team during the entire tournament, at least in its initial stages. From the very first point, the team appeared focused, determined, and confident in their ability to compete with a strong opponent. There was a clear sense of belief and presence. The players followed tactical instructions closely, fought for every ball, and played with courage. One of the most notable improvements was in the serving behavior. After two previous matches marked by excessive service errors caused by nervousness, this game showed a reset: players served with confidence, and the fear-based patterns were no longer present. This psychological shift allowed us to start strong and win the first set, setting a positive emotional tone for the match.

However, as the match progressed, the Polish team began to step up. Their quality and consistency forced us into longer rallies and more complex solutions, and unfortunately, our response began to fade. As the pressure increased and the momentum shifted, we saw a familiar pattern: players began to lose focus, internal trust, and belief in their own abilities. The emotional engagement that was so present in the first set began to weaken. In the following three sets, the team gradually shifted into autopilot mode, similar to what we observed in the first preparation match against the Czech Republic. While the technical quality was still higher than in earlier matches, the body language and mental presence declined. The match became reactive rather than proactive, and no clear emotional or vocal leader emerged to break the cycle.

Despite this, one remarkable moment stood out in the fourth set. After falling behind 6:15 a scoreline where many players had clearly disengaged mentally, a few individuals unexpectedly stepped up. They showed visible courage, took initiative, and fought with renewed energy, even at a moment when the outcome seemed decided. Although the comeback was not enough to change the result, it provided a powerful insight: some players have the potential to lead and respond to adversity, even under extreme conditions. It gave us a clear indication of which players can be mentally reliable, and who may be prepared to take the next step towards senior

national team level. The game against Poland showed that while collective mental consistency remains a challenge, there is individual leadership potential within the group that can be nurtured in the future.

#### **Final summary:**

##### **Head Coach:**

First of all, I want to thank the federation for the opportunity, I knew what you wanted from me, we talked about it many times. I believe that I gave my best to meet your expectations in some way. The beginnings were very difficult and unusual. Individual players gradually arrived and departed. It took us almost two weeks before we started training with a complete and stable lineup.

I met a team without faith and without self-confidence, without that fire and emotion that every quality team must possess. Limits their further progress, with some I succeeded, with others not. I think that the team has improved, but I also think that individual players have improved a lot individually (Boldocká, Matalíková, Siládová, Truchlá). The problem we talked about was first of all their mental side and their attitude towards the national team, I think they have made a lot of progress in that field, I think they have learned the importance of the national jersey and that is the most important thing. That's exactly what we could see after the match with Poland ended. At the end I had a meeting with everyone, and told them all these things in front of everyone.

##### **Assistant Coach (P.M.):**

I would like to thank the Slovak Volleyball Federation for providing us with excellent conditions for the preparation of the U22 national team. Having the opportunity to work in such a well-structured training cycle is not something I take for granted — I truly appreciate the trust and the support that the federation has given us. The combination of multiple training locations, intensive training cycles, friendly matches, and mental coaching allowed us to work with the team in a comprehensive way — not only from a sporting perspective, but also on a human level.

I would also like to highlight the excellent cooperation within the coaching staff. Each member brought their expertise, individual approach, and the ability to communicate openly and constructively. Thanks to this team dynamic, we were able to establish a clear coaching direction and consistent expectations towards the players.

A special thanks goes to the players — for their effort, energy, and willingness to accept feedback. It wasn't always easy, but it was in the most challenging moments that the character

of the team and of the individuals truly showed. I appreciate their growth in terms of mindset, responsibility, and attitude toward representing the national team. I believe that many of them will take the most from this experience and use it for their further athletic and personal development.

I am proud to have been part of this project. This generation has potential — and if they continue on the path we've started, they can achieve great things.