

AL Wild Card Series: Royals vs Orioles

Tuesday, October 1, 2024
Baltimore, Maryland, USA
Camden Yards

Kansas City Royals

J.J. Picollo

Pregame Press Conference

Q. J.J., can you just take us through the process to get Vinnie back, and when you thought it might be a possibility for today and all the conversations that went into it?

J.J. PICOLLO: Yeah, it was probably about ten days ago it became a little bit more real that it might happen. It was when he progressed from hitting the softer baseballs, two base balls. We always moderated the amount of swings that he would take. And he's not a guy that takes too many swings, anyway. So it was fairly easy.

Our medical staff did a great job. Vinnie did a great job. Very focused. Great plan to get him on track.

And then when he took the live BP on Tuesday in Atlanta -- I'm sorry, Saturday in Atlanta, it was pretty apparent that he was going to be ready to go as early as today. He needed to get through a few more steps, which he handled great, and here we are.

Q. I know Vinnie is able to swing and hit a baseball but what are the next steps in his recovery as far as getting back to first base and things of that nature?

J.J. PICOLLO: Yeah, well, one, we've got to keep playing. That's one. He's got a couple weeks until that would happen. We are not going to put any added pressure. You know, the pounding of the baseball, hitting that area, is just too much right now.

He's not even begun that at that point. The big thing is just to get him back in our lineup. If it does happen, I would imagine, again, this is just total guesstimate, it would be probably two or three weeks before we felt really comfortable in him being back out there on the field.

Q. You talk about the boost Vinnie gives you not only on the field but in the clubhouse?



J.J. PICOLLO: He's a great leader. He's done a tremendous job even through the injury being part of this.

His teammates love him. He loosens things up. You know, being in the lineup and not being in the lineup are two different things. There's only so much you can do when you're not playing.

But I think every man in that clubhouse was hoping that he would be back in the lineup today or at some point. It's a big boost for us emotionally, and obviously our lineup is better with him in there.

Q. Vinnie was just in here and he seemed plenty relaxed. How would you kind of describe the emotional makeup of the team? You have got young guys who haven't been there before, and kind of bright eyed and going after it and then you've backfilled with a lot of veteran guys who have absolutely been there before.

J.J. PICOLLO: It's a really good blend of veteran guys with guys who haven't been here before. But if I'm not mistaken, every player we added to the roster in the off-season, and then even other than Lucas Erceg at the trade deadline, all had playoff experience.

So they expected to be here. You know, I had a few players, without naming names in the off-season, saying I'm coming here because I think this team can win; they remind me of teams I have been on before. A lot of that had to do with Bobby and Salvy, and then adding to the pitching staff around Cole and Brady was big. You could feel the camaraderie and culture changing, even back early in spring training. You could feel the difference in that clubhouse. Just more experience, guys that know what this is all about.

So when you have these tough losing streaks we went through here late in the season, they handled it great. Never changed, never wavered. They were the same every day, and that's important when you're playing 162 games.



Q. When Michael Elias took this team over in 2018, the Orioles, you could tell his blueprint came from from the Astros, and seeing what they have done the last couple years with the 100 losses and then being a good team and then coming around like they did last year and this year. Did you notice anything about the Orioles' blueprint? Did you pay attention to it? Did you take any inspiration or any notes from what they did in why you of your rebuild?

J.J. PICOLLO: What they did was very inspiring. It showed you how quickly it can turn. They have a very, very talented team, very talented farm system. They are lineup is tough and basically home grown pretty much top to bottom.

That is a blueprint that we had ten years ago. Same thing, a lot of homegrown guys. When you're a small market team, you have to rely on your farm system to have enough players on the major league field at any given time to compete at a high level; so you have the financial resources to go outside to complement your farm system.

So what they did, you certainly notice it. They are very, very good and they are back here again. So there's some similarities. I think we went about it a little bit differently in some ways but it's hard not to notice when a team builds -- an organization builds a farm system, and then they have success on the field.

Q. He's not homegrown, but sort of in a way kind of feels like it in Cole Ragans being acquired in the trade and becoming what he's become as a Royal at the big league level. Now preparing to start Game 1 in this organization's first playoff appearance in nearly ten years, what can you say about how he's developed and what you hoped he might be when you traded for him and what he's become?

J.J. PICOLLO: Well, he's become more than we thought. When we got him in the trade we certainly thought he would be part of the starting rotation. You just don't know how much he would impact the rotation. But it was pretty apparent, when we ended the season last year, we got something pretty special. Going through his first full season, he makes the All-Star Team and here he is, our Game 1 starter.

But I would say he's exceeded expectations. Our scouting staff really liked him. Our professional scouts really liked him. There were things from an analytics standpoint, the metrics were improving in areas that were important to be an a starting pitcher. He always had three pitches but his velocity really jumped last year and more importantly to be a starter, his command was getting better. That was one

thing we had some concern with when we acquired him, if he would be able to command the zone like a starting pitcher needs to and he continues to improve this.

Q. Do you look back on that trade as the moment where things started to take shape or was it signing Chapman?

J.J. PICOLLO: One led to the other. You know, again, the scouting department made the recommendation that we should sign Aroldis with the thoughts that if we weren't in contention, hopefully we provided for each other something. He needed a place to sort of resurrect his career. We could give that to him with an opportunity to pitch late in games. And then he pitched well. So his return to us was Cole. It worked out well.

But I haven't really thought about it like that. I know we spoke about it the other day. But when you look at the key players on this team and on this roster, Cole is certainly one of them, and he was the first.

So when you look at the key members in that rotation, he was here before guys were acquired this winter, so I think you could say that; that was the start of it.

Q. Given just the size of the turnaround you guys have had this year and all the work that's gone into that, how much will the next few days, weeks, whatever it is, change the way you assess this season, if at all?

J.J. PICOLLO: We're going to assess this season just like we did last year. There's things we're going to need to do this off-season to improve. We didn't win the division. You know, so ultimately, that's the goal. You want to be one of those first two teams so you have a bye this week and not have to play the Wild Card round. So we are going to have to make assessments that lead us to hopefully making decisions again to improve this roster.

But at the same time, we are very happy to be here. I would say, not unexpected. You know, when we got to July, we felt like we had the team that we could compete and get to the playoffs. And here we are.

Q. I'm sure you knew that Bobby, was special the moment you saw him play on the Showcase Circuit in 2017 or 2018. But was there a moment this year where it became apparent to you that he had made the leap; that he was not just someone who can be something but was firmly one of the best five players in the sport?

J.J. PICOLLO: Well, I think the consistency through the early part of the season, knowing that he may do something even more special, it was probably right before

the All-Star Game where he really started to take off offensively.

He participated in the Home Run Derby, which you hear that argument, should you, shouldn't you. But quite honestly, at that time, he wasn't pulling the ball a lot. He was hitting a lot of balls to right center field, and we had staff members that felt like that may help him.

You know, we didn't expect him to go all the way into the last round to take as many swings, but when you look at where he really took off, it was after the All-Star Game. And maybe just that experience of being on the big stage, he just kind of came into his own. And he was phenomenal for that month after the All-Star Game.

Q. And what's the big separator for him? What makes him so different?

J.J. PICOLLO: There's so many things that he does that is special. The makeup is unbelievable. The humility is incredible. The talent is incredible. You know, there are a lot of good players around the league but when you look at what he does offensively, defensively, on the bases, there's not a game you watch that you don't notice something Bobby Witt, Jr. does, but it's with the humility that really stand out that makes him special, and teammates love him.

Q. With Vinnie back, obviously that puts a lot of pressure immediately on his shoulders, Bobby and Salvy, too, with the offense. How do you feel like he'll handle that, both mentally and physically, given he's not a hundred percent?

J.J. PICOLLO: He's going to be fine. Our mindset right now is we need to pitch, play defense and timely hitting. That's the recipe for success in the playoffs. That's what we have done for the majority of the year.

Vinnie just need to be Vinnie. Take good at-bats. Get on base. Salvy needs to come up with people on base and with Bobby and Vinnie in front of him, that is what we hope will happen so we have those opportunities.

But knowing Vinnie and the way he approaches things, he's going to be just fine. I don't think he's going to try to do too much. And we've talked to him just about different things, how the opponents may pitch him. He understands that. It kind of plays into his hands a little bit because he's a very patient hitter. So we don't really have any concern with it.

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