

AL Division Series: Royals vs Yankees

Saturday, October 5, 2024

New York, New York, USA

Yankee Stadium

Kansas City Royals

GM J.J. Picollo

Pregame 1 Press Conference

Q. J.J., coming off the Wild Card series and coming into Yankee Stadium, how do you assess where your team is at?

J.J. PICOLLO: Well, they're very confident. It was a tough series, two one-run games, a lot of tight moments. But you can gain confidence out of two wins like that. I think we're in a good spot mentally.

Q. Tommy Pham is a guy that's bounced around the last few years. What did you like about him when you grabbed him off waivers?

J.J. PICOLLO: Really just his intensity. He brings a certain swagger to a team. We saw Arizona benefit from it last year. Somebody we targeted at the trade deadline. We thought he'd be a nice mix with our group of veterans. And whenever you add playoff experience, it's always a good thing.

Q. How has he done since he's been here, and what's impressed you about him since you've seen him?

J.J. PICOLLO: Well, just leadership. He's had a couple big hits. He had a big home run for us early on. But really it's just the way he comes and competes every day. We had live BPs yesterday. He wants to hit in live BPs, constantly working, wants to perfect his craft, and it's very evident that he wants to win.

The other day was the first time he wasn't in the lineup for a long time. Handled it great, ended up getting a pinch-hit later in the game. But if you watch him through the game in the dugout -- I know the cameras caught him a couple times -- he's into the game. That guy wants to win.

Q. As you were going through last August, September, October, how did you go through in your mind the steps you wanted to take to change the



mindset?

J.J. PICOLLO: Well, it clearly started with the starting pitching. Games are won and lost on that mound, and our starting pitching wasn't deep enough to compete at a high level. So that was the focus.

Fortunately we had acquired Cole Ragans in the middle of the year, so we had a piece that -- you know, we didn't know how good Cole was going to be when we acquired him. But it was apparent the end of September he was going to be in our rotation.

So now it was a matter of going out and trying to put pieces of the puzzle together. Starting pitching, they were the biggest pieces, but we also had to address the bullpen, we had to address our lineup. But we also wanted guys that had experience in the playoffs, so the younger guys who were still learning what this is all about were around guys that had been there.

So it was a combination of those three things, and it came together nicely.

Q. How about just for the group staying and returning to get them to go into the offseason with the right mindset coming off that?

J.J. PICOLLO: Well, they were excited. The guys that. Whether it was Salvy, Bobby -- there were others, but those two in particular -- were very excited that we were active in free agency. We were showing that we wanted to get better.

Salvy was at a point in his career last year where it was the first time he ever thought about not being a Royal because he wanted to win. And when he asked me for an honest assessment, I said a lot of things got to go right. We've got to turn this roster over. We've got to stay healthy throughout the year. A lot of things have to go right for us to be back in the playoffs.

But here we are, and Salvy is a part of it, so it worked out really well.



Q. For a player like Pham who's available into Spring Training, how do you go through deciding whether to try to add him in February, March, or wait to see if he's available at the trade deadline?

J.J. PICOLLO: We felt our outfield was in a good spot to start the year, so it wasn't as much of a need. We thought maybe a right-handed bat would be helpful, but we were comfortable starting with the roster that we had in April, late March.

But then as you're going through the year, you're evaluating the team, we're staying in the race, we're playing good baseball. Now you start thinking like a buyer at the deadline. And Tommy was a guy, again, that fit the needs of the team better at that point than he did early in the season.

Q. I'm wondering when you guys were looking at Will Smith in the offseason, how much you guys just said, if we sign this guy, we're going to the World Series?

J.J. PICOLLO: It's not that simple, but Will -- the reason we wanted to acquire Will, it was really because of what he would bring from a leadership standpoint, his experience in the playoffs. And we know him very well. When you're talking about trying to build a culture of winners, Will is the epitome of it. He's won more than anybody the last three years and really the history -- in a three-year span with three different teams. That was his value. What he was looking for was a spot where he could compete, the back end of the bullpen. We had that.

The year hasn't gone quite the way he wanted to from a performance standpoint. However, he still had a tremendous impact in that clubhouse through the good and bad times.

Q. Now that you've pretty much seen a couple months of Lucas Erceg, what made him the right person to get that swing-and-miss that you wanted in the back of your bullpen?

J.J. PICOLLO: Well, our scouts did a good job. The numbers were telling us that he was moving in the right direction. He's a young major league pitcher -- regardless of his chronological age, he's a young major league pitcher.

Part of our objective at the deadline was if we were going to give up prospects -- quality prospects, guys at the top of our system -- we were going to have to get in return players that had years of control. And Lucas had years of control.

What you don't know is how somebody is going to respond in the ninth inning. He was pitching high leverage in Oakland behind Miller. You don't know how he's going to respond in those moments where he's the closer. But I think what he's gone through over the last two months gives us a lot of confidence that we do now have a closer. So he's, again, continuing to improve. He's going to keep getting better.

Q. My second question, looking at the foundation, we talk about the players that you brought in. But the coaches that you have, Brian Sweeney, Zach Bove, Alex Zumwalt and the like, how important have they been in taking these guys and developing them into what you wanted?

J.J. PICOLLO: Extremely important. I think it's pretty well documented that Q and Brian and others, I didn't have any history with them. We did a deep dive in our hiring process, looking for certain things, looking for coaches that would challenge us and show us different ways to go about development at the major league level.

But what stands out more than anything, Q's steadiness through 106-loss season and an 86-win season and being here right now, he hasn't changed one bit. It's very steady, and players feed off of that.

Brian, Zach Bove, Mitch Stetter have changed the culture of our pitching, and a lot of it is just through positivity. It's hard not to enjoying being around Brian Sweeney and Zach and Mitch. Even through the bad times that we've had, the tough times, they've been the same guys. When you play 162 games, that's really important. You can't get on this roller coaster of when you're going good, you're positive, when you're going bad, you're negative. Players don't respond to that.

They play a huge part in what's going on right now.

Q. Two of the big guys that have really paid off are Lugo and Wacha. Neither had a ton of innings last year or profiled necessarily as a big-inning guy. How were you able to get the best out of them and manage the workloads. And specifically with Wacha how did that deal come together? What did you like about him?

J.J. PICOLLO: Well, I'll start with Seth because he was the first one that we signed of the two. Seth, I want to say he threw 148 innings last year. And when you think about what you want out of a starting pitcher, it's more in the 180 and ideally 200 inning mark.

The background work we did on Seth, there were a lot of

really good indicators that he would be able to handle a 30-, 40-inning jump in innings total. He had the mindset that he wanted to pitch 200 innings. He shared that early in Spring Training, which quite honestly at the time, we would have been happy with a 175.

But once he got rolling and talked about getting to 200 innings and he was pitching very efficiently, it was just coming together for him.

With Michael, a little bit different because he had been averaging, I want to say, 127 innings a year over the last several years. But once we signed Seth and we had Brady and we had Cole, we felt like we can add Michael Wacha, and if he gives us 130, that would be fine. You look at the collective number of innings that they'll throw, if we could get to 800 as a starting staff, we'd be very happy with that.

So it wasn't as important that Michael threw 175 innings as it was for Seth. But they fed off each other really well. Again, they've stayed healthy. Michael got hit with a batted ball early in the season, missed a couple starts. Other than that, he's been strong.

They've been very efficient. I think here lately, we've been able to get them out of games a little bit earlier because the bullpen has been pitching better the last month. But early in the year, we were pushing them through six and seven because we needed to, but they responded well and never seemed to slow up.

Q. Could you elaborate a little bit more on the impact Sweeney has had on the pitching department going back to when you hired him ahead of the '23 season? The turnaround this year has been a lot because of the pitching and the pitchers you have, but his process as he has instilled that over the last two years.

J.J. PICOLLO: Well, I'd be remiss not to mention Paul Gibson, as well. He's our director of pitching, and primarily overseas the Minor Leagues. But he and Brian have worked together on overall processes top to bottom. Because the last thing you want is something being done differently in the Minor Leagues or differently in the major leagues than what they just went through in the Minor Leagues. So there's been really good communication. We have other people in play, as well, that are conduits between Triple-A and the Big Leagues. Malcom Culver is one of them, Andy Ferguson, they're very involved, Brandon Nelson. It's a team of people that share a vision, and there's no guesswork that our pitchers are going to go through.

But Brian and Paul in particular have worked really hard to come up with our principles and what we believe in, and

once you start having some success, then more people buy into it. Mainly talking about the players do.

So it's been a great thing to be a part of. The one thing that we all know, you never have it solved, so we're going to have to stay ahead of it. You've got to keep working and thinking ahead. If we're going to be a really good pitching organization, we need to keep thinking and challenging each other, and that's something that Brian does very well. He asks a lot of questions.

I think going back to the question about Q and Brian, they both ask a lot of questions. There's not one person in that coaching office that thinks they have all the answers, and that's what makes it a fun place to work.

Q. What did you like about Lorenzen, and how has he been those couple outings since he came back? He didn't have much role last year in October for the Phillies, but what role do you anticipate him having?

J.J. PICOLLO: So when we acquired him -- and again, kind of the common theme, somebody played in the playoffs, had experiences that some of our younger guys didn't. But when Michael became available, we were reaching a point in the season where you want to protect really all five starters, so if we wanted to skip a start or we had an injury, we had the depth to overcome that.

Michael pitched very well as a starting pitcher and then he aggravated his hamstring and he's been battling the hamstring for about a month now. But he had some highlights before the injury. On a rehab start, aggravated it again, so now he's somewhat limited. We think he can go three innings, but if we can get two innings out of him, we'll be really happy.

He matches up well against righties and lefties. He's pitched in these roles, whether we need him to start a game or be a reliever. He's been in those roles. It's really the versatility that he provided us that we didn't have. We didn't have somebody that did it at least at that level like Michael has.

It was a nice addition, and he's helped us get through some tough times.

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