

Southeastern Conference Baseball Tournament

Wednesday, May 26, 2021

Hoover, Alabama, USA

Hoover Metropolitan Stadium

Tennessee Volunteers

Tony Vitello

Postgame Press Conference



Alabama 3, Tennessee 2

TONY VITELLO: Blood and guts game literally. I mean, our catcher has a nose bleed, I think from a foul tip, but it was a blood and guts game, and it came with stoppages in play and interesting things like that. But I think, if you paid for your ticket -- I'm not sure what the price is -- but I think the Alabama fans and fortunately we seem to be racking up, Tennessee fans, got their money's worth. Ready for whatever you got.

Q. Tony, can you walk us through the bottom of the 9th inning. I also saw when everybody was running through the outfield, you ran straight to the umpire, knowing that you saw the call on the field. What was that explanation like from them? And then also you were also talking about did the second baseman get hit in the lower region is something you were asking the umpires as well.

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, I asked him if he -- he said he hit him in the nuts. So I was trying to get clarification. So I guess I was either a little too demonstrative with my body language or you're a really good lip reader. Maybe that was disrespectful in the fashion that I asked, but obviously, there was a lot of energy in the park at that point. That's all I got on that deal.

Kind of with my opening statement, I don't have really clear thoughts about the game other than it's about the ballplayers, man. Guys out there playing ball, and I certainly don't want to discredit anything Lee did. He's one of many examples. You might see another closer here on the field in a second. Fergie is this type of guy. Not a lot of credit or shine in high school, but if you're a good kid and a hard worker and compete like these guys do, good things seem to happen. Those were the guys that were out on the field.

Both teams kind of committed to their closer, and again,

credit to their guy. But I'll live and die with our guy Sean Hunley any day of the week and twice on Sunday.

Q. Tony, what did you see at the plate today? It seemed like you all were hitting a lot of hard balls just kind of running at people. Was that frustrating?

TONY VITELLO: It's frustrating internally, but when the stakes are high, I guess stakes are high. You talk about poker. I mean, you can't show your hand. I think both teams had some well-struck balls today. I don't know if we had more or not, just locking in on our guys. At times bats were really good, and they didn't get rewarded, but that's the nature of the beast, and it also kind of comes with the territory of playing here.

A lot of times, the park will play big, but for the most part, I was just pleased with the preparation. The game before us got cut short, so we literally rolled right off the bus and on the field. The guys were ready. Will Heflin continues to be a leader on this team in a lot of different ways. Again, I think right out of the chute, especially with Fergie's at bat, the guys were ready to play ball. To me, that's what it's all about is ballplayers on the field.

Q. Sorry to go back to it, but what did you see in the play on the 9th? You mentioned a kind of contact.

TONY VITELLO: I saw Mac slide straight into the base. Maybe too demonstrative. Still young and dumb. Sometimes my etiquette isn't the best. That's why I was pointing to the slide mark there. He slid straight into the base. The replay, I just checked the replay one time to see what my opinion was. I didn't ask Fergie what was going on, if he was protecting his face or whatever.

So that's my read is a pitcher made a great pitch, one of the best players ever to play at Tennessee did what he needed to do, short through the middle, kind of what we were talking about against a good -- a pretty dang good pitcher with a lot of movement. We want to play ball hard. There's teams here probably with more talent than us, so we want to play hard, and we anticipate or expect our guys to run as fast as they can from point A to point B. In my opinion, that's what Rucker and Fergie did in that situation.

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Q. There's not a ton of postseason experience on this team. Is there some positive in seeing a bunch of craziness happen in that 9th inning?

TONY VITELLO: Absolutely. Emotions are going to run high. This weekend, next weekend, they certainly ran high in the SEC. That's the benefit you get thrown into a fire every weekend, and you've got to do it ten times. You get as much practice as anybody in the country at learning to control adrenaline, learning to control emotions, and then just kind of feeling your way through stuff.

Kudos to a kid like Christian Scott. He almost had a game-tying homer, I think last year, or the last time we were here, against Auburn, and he came off the bench and was phenomenal for us today, and a lot of that has to do with him controlling his emotions. He's come a long way from what he was as a freshman that year he did that.

Sean Hunley has got the world coming down around him, it seems like every time he's out there, but in particular today. He led by example by controlling his emotions.

Q. You said several times this is about the players. Your reaction to the story in the 9th is it's about the players. How do you explain something like that to your players? Do you just say, bad luck? How do you explain that to them? Also, do you still want clarification from the SEC on that call, or are you okay with it now?

TONY VITELLO: No, I'm not okay with it. I'm not okay with losing either. But you either win or you learn, and we talked about things we can learn from in the outfield. I didn't really explain it to them. They know by now. There's verbiage and things like that. You show up and better play ball, man. This isn't an easy jersey to wear, and we take pride in that. I'm sure the other teams here do too.

This is the SEC. This is a big deal. So you show up, and you play ball. The scoreboard will tell you who did that better, and regardless of how we got there, their guys had a gutty performance, as did ours. And the scoreboard says we were an inch or however many inches you want to call it, short today. And our guys can either go home, and we've got some time -- not a lot of time before we wake up early in the morning -- but they can either be frustrated by it or maybe use it as fuel.

Q. Tony, with Will, what led to the decision to establish the rotation this way with Will, then Chad? Is that a reflection of kind of setting things up for next week as well potentially?

TONY VITELLO: I love him. He's earned everybody's respect around here as a starter, as a person. The Tennessee Vols are here for the first time in a long time. We barely even caught our breath last trip here, and we had to go home. So he's been here, he's done it. He's one of the big reasons why we're in this position. And then because he was so efficient -- I mean, that's maybe an emotional answer, but if there's any upside to it, we were fortunate that Will was efficient with his pitch count against South Carolina. We decided to go with Sewell, just like we did today, to get us out of a jam at South Carolina, but he only ended up with 60 pitches.

We feel grateful for the way he threw today in a lot of different ways, and one way is that Chad and Blade can stay on task. And Will Heflin, since he got the job, has kind of always been the guy, Tell when you want me to throw the ball, and I'll do it. And he walked by me in the hall and said he'll be ready to go on Friday. I didn't even see his pitch count. I don't remember it. I appreciate that thought, but I don't know if it will be Friday for Will again. We'll see.

Q. Tony, Christian Scott, having him come in there in the 9th inning and get a single, what does that say about him, his fourth SEC at bat, and the confidence you have in him?

TONY VITELLO: He's one of many guys, and it's a back-and-forth chess match in your head. To be fair to those guys, I think most coaches would agree with me, this time of the year -- again, I've said it before -- you've got to let your guys play. Post the lineup that the guys are used to and play ball. And you kind of dance with your date that you brought to the whole deal or whatever kind of quirky phrase you can throw out there.

But we've shown it to you, at least the local guys that have followed our team. We've done some things where we've given guys great responsibility, and it's because they've earned it. I think there's a lot of trust up and down the dugout. Jackson Greer catching for us -- I could list off all the guys. But part of it's a COVID year and everyone's roster is a little deeper -- he's one of many guys that we would trust with the season on the line. This was that type of deal. This is the postseason.

So that was that type of deal, and he handled it in excellent fashion. I hope the other guys on the bench saw how much his presence affected his performance, and obviously he'll be ready to go again the next time we call his name.

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