

Southeastern Conference Baseball Tournament

Thursday, May 27, 2021

Hoover, Alabama, USA

Hoover Metropolitan Stadium

Tennessee Volunteers

Tony Vitello

Postgame Press Conference

Tennessee 12, Mississippi State 2

THE MODERATOR: Coach, if you could open it up with a quick recap of the game.

TONY VITELLO: There was a lot that went on in the game, but the whole story is they're all big wins. There isn't any win that's not big. That might have been our best, or at the very least, one of our best wins of the year when you throw all circumstances out there on the table.

Coming back from yesterday, not a lot of sleep, early wake-up, facing a guy that came into the SEC labeled as one of the best lefties in the conference and one of the best closers in the country sitting down there waiting too. That's in everyone's mind, everything that went on. It's a tough group, tough group of kids. We didn't have any magic speech or anything like that.

They just like to compete, and they kind of seem to like the bounce-back thing more than anything. Ready for whatever you got.

Q. What do you see from Chad early on just from the way he attacked and especially how he maneuvered that third inning where things could have gotten a little dicey?

TONY VITELLO: His first scrimmage inning on our campus, if I'm not mistaken, was a leadoff double. We thought a lot of Chad. That's why he's on our campus. It was just kind of interesting. The guy smoked the ball, and then he almost turned into a different guy with that runner on second, and he left them standing there in the scrimmage inning.

Any time you say something about your team, you can look at individuals and pick apart. Call it bounce-back or some toughness or some resiliency, he seems to be at his best when his back is kind of up against the wall. But if you're



just going to go the start of innings or the start of games, the beauty of coaching that kid is you've kind of got a level of consistency there. He's not perfect, nor is anyone else. But you kind of get a consistent lead into the weekend or lead into the game, and I've said it over a million times. Our guys really love that, and they play behind them.

We got a normal Chad Dallas, and then we also got Chad when he's at his best, like I said, when his back's up against the wall a little bit.

Q. Just as a follow-up to Chad, were you pleased with the 93 pitches? Was that about where you wanted him today?

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, I was teasing him he wasn't going to get to see Allen again. That guy hits lasers, but he hits lasers off of everybody. We were going to give him until Allen, but Skinner did such a good job against him with two strikes and also had barreled a ball earlier in the game. Just felt like it was good to go out on that note. He got us where we needed to be, three times through the order. Leave the game with a lead against an SEC team, that's huge.

So the one thing that I think you're kind of asking about too, the one good thing is we didn't have to overtax him. Yes, he started almost every weekend this year, but there was a weekend where there was a little bit of a break. We typically kind of ease our guys into longer starts early in the season. And on top of that, I really can't reflect or remember an outing where we pushed him to the brink where he was well over 100 pitches. Nothing's perfect, but it worked out well.

Q. And just with the bats, you kind of feel like yesterday you just found holes and got them to fall today.

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, I feel if you put together competitive or quality at bats, odds will be in your favor, and that could be over the course of a game, a weekend, or a season or a tournament. But you're not always going to get what you want. Even if you throw a good pitch, especially with the high level of competition, the guy might



square it up. Even though you maybe make a great play or turn the double play, the guy may beat it by a step.

I spoke on the toughness part of our team. I think those guys are willing to put bad at bats behind them and compete or a bad swing behind them. Again, if you have those types of at bats, you'll find enough holes in that stuff. Mississippi State hammered a couple of balls too that we caught too, but at the end of the day, you make your own breaks.

Q. As a manager, what was it like to jump out to that big lead early so you don't have to worry about doing the mental gymnastics of making sure guys are ready for the regional and all that stuff, in terms of pitching and all that?

TONY VITELLO: No one's bags were packed today. It may have been an obvious deal. Just to flip it and look at Mississippi State, had the good pleasure of legendary coach Ron Polk is around the facility. We were kind of chitchatting and worrying about next week. Those guys are ready. Their fans will be ready, and the SEC will have any team that maybe left here earlier than they want to, which is pretty much everybody unless you win the dang thing. The conference will have everybody ready. They would have us ready regardless of how we go into the regional play.

No. But what it really, really does, Blade was in relief today or at least was going to be available. We were not forced to do that, and then he gets one more start repetition-wise, if we use him tomorrow. At the very least, it will be good to continue to get some guys some reps going into next weekend.

Again, nothing's in a perfect, dainty, nice little box, but our guys get another chance to compete in Hoover, which I know is what they wanted.

Q. What kind of a jolt did you all get from Pete's home run there? It's a tough lefty-lefty match-up. There's two outs. Looked like he kind of got a fat one there and did some damage with it. What kind of juice did that give the team?

TONY VITELLO: It gave me -- I'm going to be selfish. It gave me a huge jolt because the guy truly is one of the better bat control hitters in the country, and he's a starting hitter in the SEC. Therefore, he's one of the better hitters in the country. But like a lot of our guys when they try too hard or go outside of themselves, they end up kind of marring or taking away from their natural swing.

There wasn't a lot of effort to that swing, and kudos to him

because, again, he's facing MacLeod. So it was excellent work. It gave the guys a jolt because we've got a bunch of personality, some of them are goofier than others in our locker room, and Pete's just a guy that everybody cheers for. Couldn't be happier for him when he does anything successful because they know he's always had their back. Kind of like Heflin and a few of the other guys that have been through thick and thin here. He kind of literally bleeds orange.

So it impacted the way the guys thought. It wasn't just about a three-run lead.

Q. Liam was hitting the ball hard yesterday. How good was it to see him have a big guy, and how confident are you that his slump or cold stretch, whatever you want to call it, was going to be short-lived?

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, if you go back to even South Carolina, a couple of hard-hit balls in particular to right fielders, and yesterday hit a couple of missiles. With the theme of -- again, our team, you could either let that beat you down, or you could come back with a little bit more determination. There was something going on there with him and the cages. You just kind of felt it. He was determined to keep plowing ahead and just determined to have a good day, and the swings delivered the same message or kind of said the same thing about the kid.

I hope I didn't step in front of him in his post-game interview, but he deserved that one. We're obviously pretty dang blessed to have that guy leading off for us.

Q. And Troy found the stat, but Landon Sims had just given up 15 hits all season going into the game. I know it wasn't a super high leverage situation, but how impressive that you guys were able to get five hits on him?

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, it's different for him when you're a closer and you go outside your role, circumstances change a little bit. But at the same time, we knew we had a good opportunity to face that guy today. And the one bit of confidence we can take -- again, the lefties we've seen in this league, I don't know who will play in future outside of our conference, but it can't be anyone that's better. Same thing, Leiter, Rocker, Kopps, Sims -- you know, you'd be leaving other people out too if I kept going. Our guys have seemed to have a good approach to those guys.

Again, I think they like a little bit of the bounce-back thing or the challenge thing. We play pretty well on the road, so I think that stuff goes hand in hand. We were pretty fortunate to do what we did, but probably anyone else who

faces that guy the rest of the year will hate us because I don't know if he'll give up another run.

Q. After the way yesterday's game ended and to see the way these kids bounce back, they didn't pack it in. They didn't say, hey, we'll just go win at the regional. What does that say about this team's character and grit?

TONY VITELLO: If you just kind of go full circle, it's why we're where we're at. It's nice to hear people talk about winning the division or winning a certain amount of games in our league, but to this point, we've done a lot of good things. And you could interview Chad or you could talk about Pete's home run. Each game's kind of got its own little individual story. But the entire story from start to finish with the group, including I feel bad for every kid out there with the pandemic circumstances.

But even with starting with stuff as simple as that, we really handled a lot of that stuff well. The GPA was super high. I don't mean to try and recruit you to our program, but this group in particular just seemed like everything that was thrown at them, they handled it pretty well. Heck, our first road trip, A, it was on the road. Most SEC teams start at home, at least the warm weather ones. And our bus broke down like 30 minutes down the road. Adversity's kind of been thrown at them, just as it is at every other club, and they seem to kind of like it, or at the very least, they respond well.

Q. I want to ask about tomorrow's pitching plan, I guess. Do you anticipate Blade starting? And what would his workload look like, if so?

TONY VITELLO: I think Kirb was hot the first day, and I think it's important to have him in the mix. He's an important strike thrower for us, and the fans certainly get excited whenever that goofy mustache and his hair come running out of the bullpen. We'd like to use him.

Obviously, like I kind of already mentioned, we'd like to use Blade in some capacity before we leave here so he could say postseason outing or whatever. Again, the competition level is something that prepares all of our guys.

We haven't made any final decisions, but those are two guys I definitely would like to see on the mound at some point before we leave here. And tomorrow is another, call it do or die if you want, but it's just a baseball game. So we'll have those guys ready to rock and roll.

Q. I guess it's kind of rare to have a game where you're on the road and you're done before lunch time. So I guess I'm wondering what the rest of the day

looks like for you all. Do you just go back to the hotel and kick it? Do you stay at the park and watch some games? What's that schedule like?

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, I assume you or everyone else listening has never had a bad nap. Me and Chad were both in the locker room, and we both said it feels like the same thing, it feels like it's 5:00. Because it's that time, you can kind of get yourself sorted out with a couple meals and relax a little bit. You don't have to go crazy at the hotel preparing because we don't necessarily know who we play. Just kind of recalibrate everything and get off your feet and relax.

We don't have any super strategy or anything like that. It will be wake up tomorrow and kind of have the same energy and approach we have today, and we'll see where it leaves us.

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