

Southeastern Conference Baseball Tournament

Friday, May 28, 2021

Hoover, Alabama, USA

Hoover Metropolitan Stadium

Tennessee Volunteers

Tony Vitello

Postgame Press Conference

Tennessee - 11, Alabama - 0

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon, Coach. Before we take questions, if you could give us your general thoughts on the game.

TONY VITELLO: Sure. Today our guys arrived at the park ready to take advantage of an opportunity they created by winning yesterday. I really feel like our guys just like playing. We played 56 regular season games, and again they came out and took advantage of the opportunity with the leadership of blade Tidwell, and also I know Evan Russell just got done talking to you because he's bragging there's no way I could beat his interview, which I didn't know it was a contest.

Also, for Coach Bohannon's sake in Alabama, I hope they did what they needed to to make a regional. It would be good for our conference. If you look at the way their lineup plays and who's out there defensively, it's a regional team. It would be good for our conference if that happens. Not my decision, but that's the way it looked to me. So I was proud of our guys to be able to beat them today.

Q. It seems like it's really tough in these double elimination tournaments, if you lose your first game, to make a deep run. How important is it to get the run rule and save a few innings for your bullpen which the long term ability to make it to Sunday and potentially win this tournament?

TONY VITELLO: That's why I was bringing up Alabama, the thing is a grind. It's on your catcher. The guys are out there in the heat. Schedules fluctuate, you've got pregame. It's a grind. So when you look at the last two days, maybe the biggest take-away -- obviously, you'd like to win the ball game, but maybe the biggest take-away is you do not have a bunch of fresh arms going into tomorrow and also a little more fresh legs underneath our position players.



Q. You guys have outscored your opponents 23-2 in the past two games, six homers, and then when you look at the pitching, you only gave up five runs through three games in Hoover. How do you just summarize what they've done on the mound and then what they also saw today, not chasing a lot of pitches, just seeing what they liked and putting a bat to it?

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, my opening statements are never very great, but what I should have alluded to is kind of what you are, we did barrel some balls the first day, and I thought we showed up ready to play well. Heflin threw the ball great. We didn't get the result we wanted, but I think our guys are starting to get a little more cozy in this environment, and what you're seeing is a little better play defensively.

On the mound, guys seem to be in a bit of a groove, and then offensively, all the quality traits you brought up. I think our guys have, again, just benefited from realizing this is a pretty awesome environment. Hoover does an incredible job, but at the end of the day, when you're between the white lines or in the batter's box or on the mound, it's just baseball. This is a talented group, so these guys are doing well.

Q. The story the last two days has obviously been the offense. Specifically, how important has it been to get Drew and Evan kind of looking back to the form that they were in a month ago?

TONY VITELLO: It's important. They're right in the meat of the order. You never know. We could position guys differently. We've done it before during the year. But I think there's a comfort zone right now for some guys in the spot they're in, and the important thing is not to overthink situations or where they're at in the lineup and just go out there and play ball or be true to who they are, and they'll be just fine.

Everyone knows Drew is as intense as it gets, so when he goes outside of himself because of that, he doesn't do quite as well. But what you've seen in the tournament is him gathering himself a few times and really being an



under control athlete. It's a pretty good weapon when it is just that.

And Evan, you saw how far he can drive the ball today, and he's got a pretty good number of extra base hits and home runs, but a lot of that comes from facing SEC arms that, you know, the old Little League phrase, let them provide the power. Today was a special sweet swing. It wasn't a bad pitch. Just kind of dropped his hands on it, and because he is a strong dude, as much as I hate to admit that, the ball carried for him.

So the proper amount of effort level is key to both of those guys. For them to find that in the postseason or in the conference tournament when there is a heightened sense of intensity and all that other good stuff, it's impressive, and it's incredibly crucial for our group.

Q. You mentioned maybe the possibility of making a change in the lineup. Are Luc and Jordan guys that you kind of look at that maybe could move up in the order with the way they swung the bat in recent weeks? Is that a testament to how deep this lineup is?

TONY VITELLO: I think the lineups in our conference, I said it in the in-game interview, you typically don't get any breathing room because of the nature of the league and the recruiting and things like that. We have the benefit of having one of those groups where what I was getting more at is you could flip the thing upside down or slide a guy anywhere, and he wouldn't be out of place.

I really feel like, after Liam leads the game off, it's nine guys that compete for each other. They certainly compete each pitch, is what it appears to be like to me, and again blessed that we've got a lot of talent mixed in there too. That's it.

Q. I guess specifically with Luc, I think it may have been a week or two ago, when you said that he may lead the team in kind of hard hit contact percentage. It kind of has looked like all year just the numbers have not matched what it's looked like when you've watched him play. Has it just been that hard of luck season for him, and did you just have faith that at some point it would start turning?

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, he's an easy kid to have faith in. He's got really good hand-eye, and he's always been a strong kid, but now he's ultra strong. I think there was a lady standing out there in the forest, or whatever we've got going there, where he hit that ball. That thing was pretty impressive. Obviously, the juice is there, but he's a guy who was overswinging earlier in the year, and now he's not. So he makes it easy to stand by him because he

either hits the thing hard or battles with two strikes. His on base percentage, I think, reflects as much as who he is as that hard contact stuff does.

You're talking about a guy that's got a lot of attributes he brings to the table, including experience. So it's a key part of the lineup for us.

Q. And going into the weekend, I know you -- I guess you kind of fired those three starter bullets the past three days. I guess, to the extent that you know it to this point or want to say it, what is the plan this weekend? How excited are you to see some guys in high leverage situations who maybe haven't had as many this year?

TONY VITELLO: Really excited. You've seen, if you follow our team, how we've used guys on Tuesdays and in other situations too. I said it to the group yesterday, kind of been foaming at the mouth to at least have the opportunity to do that. Hopefully, I don't screw it up, but we've got some guys that are fresh, some guys that have experience that will be ready to go. We'll just kind of sit down at the hotel as a coaching staff and start with whatever we think the first option is and look at it.

The first option is send Blade Tidwell back out there. If he says no, we'll go to option two.

Q. Just what was Blade doing so well today, and what did you see from him over the last couple weeks as he's really turned it up a notch?

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, one and the same, if it's okay for me to say. Physically, he came in a gifted kid and really unique for his age, how professional he is in his routines, but getting with Frank and Coach Q, our strength coach, those things blossomed even more. Then what happened as the season started was learning to manage situations and call it emotions or adversity and things like that. There was a slow building up process to getting better and better till conference started, and then he gutted through a great win at Georgia.

Then after that, people start to adjust in the league, different situations come up, lineups are loaded, and he needed to kind of grow or evolve based off of what's in our conference and therefore what's the best out there in the country. Today I think you saw all those things that, again, leading up to the season, he's got going for him, but now a little bit more mature approach, very consistent approach, kept his emotions under control, delivery was smooth the whole game. I think he's grown up in front of all fans' eyes, and I think they're enjoying watching him.

Today was pretty dang good. I think it was reminiscent, to be honest with you, ironically, of A.J. Puk. We were in that dugout a few years back at my old job, and Puk had one of those performances where you feel like you're fighting up against a Major Leaguer. It was pretty special to watch Blade in that form today.

there and getting some reps, and it worked out with Blade as well. We enjoyed seeing the mustache out there for today. But thank you all.

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Q. You all have hit six home runs by six different guys the last two days. Can you put your thumb on maybe why, or is it kind of how baseball goes sometimes?

TONY VITELLO: No, I think going back to my answer of them getting comfortable in their environment. I mean, they're fully capable of doing so. It is interesting because this park at times can play big on you, but to my knowledge, it's kind of played true during our games, and our guys have the ability to do that.

So if they're getting a pitch and they're putting a swing on it, I think good things are going to continue to happen for us, whether it's over the wall or some other place. I think what they did yesterday against those arms was crazy good, and Alabama having to grind their way through this thing -- of course, like our team, missing a couple pitchers due to injury, did what they had to do today, and those guys were fine, but our guys capitalized on some pitches. When they do that, it's a strong group, and, again, they got some talent.

Q. Two questions for you. With an 11-run lead, was there any thought in saving Kirby for tomorrow? Secondly, with the way Blade, Camden, Redmond, Heflin are pitching, seems like they're all starting to pitch their best right now. What's the confidence level in the pitching staff going into next weekend and into the regional next week?

TONY VITELLO: I think, on the latter, it's always under the umbrella of we kind of like where our club was it right now. It started to sound repetitive. We talked about building towards May, building towards May, march towards May. In May we played our best baseball. That's defensively, offensively, and what you're talking about, pitching-wise. Maybe they're all happy they're not in school anymore. Sorry to say that Megan, but they're, again, kind of building some steam and playing their best ball as a group.

So one thing affects the other. If your defense is playing better, it makes it easier on the pitching staff. If we're swinging the bats the way we're capable of, makes it easier, and vice versa too. And frankly, trust with those pitchers, but some good arms there, and they're coming along quite well for us.

And the Kirby thing, I think he's better suited getting out

