

Southeastern Conference Baseball Tournament

Sunday, May 30, 2021

Hoover, Alabama, USA

Hoover Metropolitan Stadium

Arkansas Razorbacks

Dave Van Horn

Postgame Press Conference



Arkansas - 7, Tennessee - 2

DAVE VAN HORN: What a game. The final score was 7-2, but it felt a lot closer than that. Great job by our pitching staff. Wiggins came out and gave us quality innings, threw the ball well. Ryan gave us what we wanted, one out plus an inning. Lockhart was kind of a bullpen day for him. He gave us one inning. Got to Kevin, Kevin did a great job, threw right around 49, 50 pitches.

During all of that, got just enough hits, got some big hits, hit a couple home runs, and really played great defense. Hat's off to the players for getting after it today.

Q. Cullen was just on here with us, and he said that he and the guys really wanted to win this tournament for you. What does it mean when you hear that?

DAVE VAN HORN: I really appreciate that. I think that they knew that I wanted to win it, and I made sure that they knew that. We had a little meeting before the game, I called it with the whole team, and I wanted the team to know that the coaches were 100 percent in to do whatever we needed to do to win this game today. We were here to win because that's the way they've been playing for us all year. Didn't want them thinking we were going to hold back or hold back this guy or that guy, saving them for down the road. This is a big tournament, and we wanted to win it.

For the kids to say that, I appreciate it a lot. University of Arkansas never won this tournament in baseball, so it's big for the school. Trophies are going to be there after we're all long gone, and they're going to talk about it one day.

Q. Wiggins, what were you hoping to get out of him? Do you think that he maybe had a little extra motivation to pitch well today considering it didn't go so well last time he faced Tennessee?

DAVE VAN HORN: I'll answer your second question first. I feel like he was highly motivated to pitch well against Tennessee because he gave up that home run and it didn't go good. It's baseball. That's the way it happens. Yeah, he was highly motivated. What we wanted out of him was exactly what he gave us. We were hoping he'd give us three, maybe four, and that's what he did. They put together a couple of good swings with two outs and nobody on in the first, they got a double and a single, and he held them down after that.

Had another little inning where he had to get out of a jam after he got a couple of quick outs. You've got to give Tennessee credit. Those guys will fight you at the plate, and they're really good.

Q. Sometimes when a team gets to the finals, they really have to spend their pitching in Hoover. It didn't feel like you guys really had to tax your pitching staff. How good do you feel from a pitching standpoint going into regionals?

DAVE VAN HORN: Probably felt as good as I felt about our pitching staff right now. We did not use them that much. Kevin went twice, but he always does. I think he threw a total of 70 pitches the whole week here. He'll be fine. Lyle got a little bullpen in today, a little extra work, good deal.

I think all the coaches would probably agree, with having guys come out of the pen, like Tole and some of these other guys, it gave us some good innings, that we felt as good as we've felt all year about where we're at on the mound.

Q. If I have my years right, I think the last conference tournament title for Arkansas was your first year as a GA under Norm in 1985. Given the fact that Arkansas hasn't won a lot of conference tournaments, at least the championships, how good does this one feel?

DAVE VAN HORN: It feels great, just to win it, and now we can get over that little conversation about we've never won it, we don't try to win it. It's a tough tournament, and there's some great teams that come in here. It usually

boils down to having depth in the pitching staff. You've got to stay in the winner's bracket. It really helps.

For our guys to come out, after we'd already won the regular season championship, and to play like they did here, it's their makeup, man. It's their DNA. These guys show up, and they get after it.

Q. I'm wondering if you could comment on Cullen Smith, changing positions in this tournament and hitting three home runs. Just what he meant for you.

DAVE VAN HORN: Cullen Smith, he was amazing this weekend. I don't know if he made the All Tournament team, but he's All Tournament to us. Base hits, home runs, played really good defense, had to flip over from his regular position of third base to first and played it great.

He just likes to play, and sometimes we have to calm him down a little bit he gets so excited. He's got a little bit of football mentality in him. It's tough to play that way every day. In the game of baseball, there's just too many games, and I talked to him about that a little bit. But you've got to love the energy he brings, and he wanted to win.

Q. Interesting decision, you brought Lockhart in for an inning. If you could update us, do you think Zebulon will be ready for the regional?

DAVE VAN HORN: We won't know on Zeb until tomorrow. They're going to do a little MRI on his bicep and see if there's fluid in there. If there's fluid in there, he won't be ready. If there's not, it's up to see whether he's going to get over the pain. He's kind of cramping up is probably the wording they've given us. That's probably not the technical word for it, obviously, but we should know by tomorrow night.

Q. Jalen was the MVP. Yeah, I don't know how Cullen didn't get on the tournament. You might want to demand a recount. What did you think of the week Jalen had with the glove and the bat?

DAVE VAN HORN: It was just a combo. He deserved it. He started a few double plays. He made a couple of diving plays, fielded balls up the middle. He looked like a big leaguer this weekend. He hit a big home run to stretch that lead. He got the big hit when we were losing. I think they might have thought we were going to bunt, and they threw him a fastball, and he hammered it to center, right center. We ended up punching in three runs that inning. He just had a great tournament.

Q. I think I heard you say on the SEC Network, the kids gave you the game ball. Has anybody ever done

that? I assume you have a place in the Van Horn household or your office. Has anyone done that with another team, and what do you plan to do with the ball?

DAVE VAN HORN: The team's presented me with a ball or two after maybe a 500th win, 700th win, something like that, but not maybe after a conference tournament. I don't know why they gave it to me. Maybe they thought I wanted to win it more than anything. Really I just wanted to play good and fight today. Like I said earlier, we let them know that we were all in, man. We were going after it, and they did it.

What am I going to do it? I'm going to put it on a shelf or something.

Q. Was the plan to go with Kopps for the final three innings all along if you got the lead?

DAVE VAN HORN: Yes. Yeah, we were going to try to get through the six with the guys we pitched, and if we had a chance to win, we were definitely going to bring him in with nine outs to go.

Q. It seemed like Tennessee got some good swings off of him. What did you think of his stuff today?

DAVE VAN HORN: I think the first inning he was too amped up. He left a couple pitches up. The left handers got a couple hits on him. The right handers didn't do much against him, and that's because he left the ball up to those guys.

I thought Tennessee did a nice job, when we played them over there a few weeks ago, they did as good a job with Kevin as anybody. They fought off a bunch of pitches against him. So they had seen him a lot more than maybe some of the other teams. I would say that Kevin's stuff was probably up and down today, but, hey, it's still better than a lot of guys when they're as good as they can be.

Q. Watching the game, Battles' defensive play in the fourth was a turning point. Did it feel that way on the field?

DAVE VAN HORN: There were two outs at the time. If he didn't make the play, they would have had runners at first and second and two outs. It wasn't a huge play, but it was just the fact that it was such a great play. Were they going to score? Who knows? It could have been the turning point in the game. I think the players just appreciate the guy going headlong, getting the ball in his hand and making a throw to Robert from the ground. I think just ground level, it was a big time play, and it just excited

everybody.

I mean, it was a big play. I don't know if it was the turning point because we don't know what would have happened after that. You don't want to give those guys any more swings with runners in scoring position. We were already down a run at the time. It was definitely a huge play in the game.

Q. Do you kind of feel you started some pitchers on this trip, not only Lockhart, but Noland and some others, that now you can count on?

DAVE VAN HORN: Lockhart, I think he's got his confidence back. Noland, he should have his confidence back. He threw great yesterday, three innings. Stuff was nasty. Just getting like Tole coming in, throwing the fastball for a strike, throwing a slider that he can get out of a big jam. It's big to know that we can count on those guys. We've got to get monk going again. He didn't have a good weekend, but we know how good he is. We'll try to get him squared away and get him ready for the next weekend.

Q. You go around with a bull's eye on your back all year. It can't be easy to win weekend after weekend all year. Now people think you're the No. 1 lock for the NCAA Tournament. Your thoughts on doing it every weekend.

DAVE VAN HORN: I think ever since we were ranked maybe No. 1, it just seems like the guys, they don't talk about it. We've never talked to them about it. I've mentioned that. They just go play. Yeah, I think everybody's given us a great effort. You look at our schedule this year, it's ridiculous. And the number of wins that we have against teams that are ranked in the top 25, it's got to be 20 or more, it seems like. Honestly, it just seems like that's all we play is top 25 teams.

We handled it. I really like the way the team reacted today after they won the championship. They were happy and excited. Just like the coaches, but they didn't go crazy. They know we still have work to do. There's going to be some good teams we're going to have to handle if we want to advance. Nothing's promised. We've got to take it. And I think they did a nice job after the ball game.

Q. It felt like Smith gave you Slaven's level production with the home runs and extra base hits, the RBIs. Did you feel that way, that he filled Brady's shoes somewhat?

DAVE VAN HORN: Yeah, he did a great job. He drove in runs, he hit 3 hole a couple of games, he hit down in the

order a little bit today against the left-hander, and he did some damage. Yeah, we want to get Brady back, but it was great that some guys picked us up. Cullen definitely did that, and that was great to see.

Q. What kind of momentum are you guys carrying over? You've been doing this all year. Maybe you're not carrying over extra momentum. How do you feel about that going into the postseason?

DAVE VAN HORN: You answered your question pretty much. We just feel like things have been pretty normal because we never -- we stayed steady. We're just climbing, staying steady. We've never gone down in the valley, so to speak. So I feel like it's the same. It's not like we struggled two weeks and now we're on this momentum thing. It's the same team.

That's what I like about this team. They just show up. We'll see what's going on tomorrow. We'll start getting our feet underneath us, get some light workouts in, and be ready to play. So just another week.

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