

Southeastern Conference Baseball Tournament

Tuesday, May 24, 2022

Hoover, Alabama, USA

Hoover Metropolitan Stadium

South Carolina Gamecocks

Coach Mark Kingston

Andrew Eyster

Will Sanders

Postgame Press Conference



downs this season, but we clearly never gave up and kind fighting until the end.

It wasn't the outcome we had hoped for, but that's how it goes sometimes. I'm going to miss this group of guys. It's just a gritty group, honestly. That's the best way I can describe it probably.

Q. Take me through the emotions you're feeling right now and kind of as your career wraps up, what this place and this program means to you.

ANDREW EYSTER: Yeah, I was afraid you were going to ask that.

I've talked about it before, how coming in four years ago it was just a place to play my two years and move on to pro ball. Things don't always work out as you planned, but I wouldn't trade it for the world, how these last four years have gone.

I feel like I've given a lot to this program, but what I've gotten in return is substantially more. I've gotten some of my best friends, people that I consider family, a home, a home away from home, somewhere that I'm probably going to live once I'm all graduated and done with everything. Just a future, a life, a life outside of baseball.

That's something that I don't know if I deserve that, but I'll forever be grateful for this place and for this program, for the community, for the university. It's done so much for me and my family. I'll forever be indebted for sure.

Q. Andrew, what is fighting back there in the ninth inning to force extra innings, what does that say about the fight and the grit of this group?

ANDREW EYSTER: Yeah, it says a lot. Not being able to score a run the whole game and then coming into the last inning and just finally putting something together. It wasn't pretty. Wimmer started off with a nice hard hit down the middle, and Si kind of had the jam shot through that hole. And there was a runner out there and I got two strikes, and I was like, I'm just going to try to hit something on the ground and run like hell, and we were able to get it done.

Florida 2, South Carolina 1

MARK KINGSTON: Yeah, I think at this point in the season, most coaches are going to tell you how proud they are of their team, and that's exactly how I do feel. It's real. It's genuine. This team went through so much this year and just never gave in.

The injuries, the adversity, and we used a lot of mottos, a lot of cliches to get through it. It's a marathon, stay in the fight, never quit, don't give up, all those things, and anybody that watched us play tonight saw the makeup of this team. They saw what they're made of. They saw how this guy pitched. They played with their heart, and that's all we asked for them no matter what we were going through.

They gave us everything they had, and that's all we can ask.

I'm happy to answer questions.

Q. Andrew, I know the emotions are difficult to process in this moment, but listening to what your coach just said about what you guys have battled this year, all the injuries, all the ups and downs, what are you going to remember most about this group of guys and what stands out about this team in particular?

ANDREW EYSTER: Yeah, I mean, I kind of feel like we were kind of just a bunch of average Joes, honestly. We had some great young players come in and really step up big for us all season. Just a lot of older guys, a lot of transfers, some JuCo guys. That's the best way I can describe it. It was a bunch of grinders, a bunch of guys that just love to play baseball and really come together. And like Coach Kingston said, there was a lot of ups and

ASAP sports . . . when all is said, we're done.®

Unfortunately we couldn't put another one together, but that's just kind of -- we've had so many situations like that this year where we've been down late and make a comeback. That's kind of been one of the themes of this team, I think.

Q. What was it like for you out there, Will? What were the emotions like for you having to go punch for punch with Florida in such a tight ballgame?

WILL SANDERS: I think those are the best types of ballgames because it's just a rhythm. He goes out there, gets three outs, I go out there, get three outs, and we just keep playing. It's a tough game, but that's why we all play baseball. It really is sad that we were on the wrong side of that. I mean, one ground ball that takes a weird bounce off a bag, it kind of is the epitome of our season. Just looking for ways for us to take advantage of it and come up short is sad and really heartbreaking because we've been through so much adversity and so much struggle and injuries with everybody out.

We just tried to find ways to win games, and it's hard, but I just viewed today as another opportunity and do what I can do, show the team, and just give the team some confidence to keep playing, stay in the fight, and see what happens. We were on the wrong side of a weird circle ball.

Q. You were emotional at the opening comments and you saw the emotions of your players. Can you tell us kind of what's going on inside the dugout and what it means to you to see the emotions coming out of your players like that?

MARK KINGSTON: We care. We care. At the end of the day when you're invested, you care. This group cares. Anybody that was near our dugout saw how energetic and lively that team was. We just kept saying it, Will just said it, stay in the fight. We said that a lot, stay in the fight. You don't ever give up. You don't ever give in. You're never knocked out until it's over.

The guys did it. These guys did that. The emotion is just disappointment and not having the success in the win/loss column that we know is expected, but also keeping the context of why that happened. And along the way, the guys did not give in to the frustration, to the adversity.

Look, some years everything goes right and you stay healthy and all the prospects turn into production guys and everything goes right, and then some years, it's just whatever can go wrong can go wrong.

In both those situations you've got to handle it properly. When everything is going well, you've got to learn how to

win with class; and when everything is going wrong like it did for this year, I've got to teach guys and you've got to try to make sure the group never gives in.

This was the latter. This year was the latter. Again, that was a hell of a ballgame out there. It could have gone either way, and we fought until the very bitter end. That's what I'm going to remember from this group. They fought until the very bitter end when they knew the disappointment around the program and the win/loss record. But also within the context of why it's happened, they could have given in and they did not, so that's what I'm going to take away from this group.

Q. Take me through that weird 10th inning there where the ball bounces off the bag and take us through the play at the plate.

MARK KINGSTON: Yeah, again, like I said, it's one of those years where everything that could go wrong goes wrong. In a tight ballgame, sometimes a little -- the wrong bounce -- one bounce can be one team's great fortune and the other team's misfortune. We were on the line like you're supposed to be on the line, Jalen was in position, playing no doubles in that situation, and the ball hits the bag and goes over his head. Sometimes you just have to say it wasn't meant to be.

It was a crazy -- that was a crazy inning. The inning that we tied the ballgame was a crazy inning. You had the base hit, we started the runner at that point. We had some decisions to make with the tying run at first but the winning run at the plate. And Sightler and Eyster, you've got two guys that can leave the ballpark, so the decision at that point was do you try to move the runner and start them up because it's Wimmer who can really run, or do you sit back and hope for a two-run homer or hitting the ball in the gap.

We got to a certain count. We felt like the best thing to do was start the runner, and we ended up with a first and third situation there which led to Eyster putting a ball in play to tie the game? And then we had another decision to make, do we roll the dice and start Eyster at the risk of ending the inning with him getting thrown out? He's not a stolen base guy. But we went with the delayed steal to give ourselves a chance to try to win the game there. It almost worked. It almost worked.

If we were going to go down, we were going to go down being aggressive, pushing the envelope, playing with no fear. That's what we did. Again, at the end, it was a bang-bang play at the plate. The ball clearly beat the runner. But we just dropped the ball, and sometimes that happens. That's a great summary of life. Sometimes you just drop the ball.

Q. Seeing a guy like Brandon Sproat two times in one week, how do you feel your team viewed that challenge and how do you think they handled that challenge?

MARK KINGSTON: Well, that's an elite arm. That's a guy that will pitch in the Big Leagues. Seemed like every time I looked over my left shoulder out to the scoreboard when they showed the TrackMan, it was 97, it was 98, it was 97, it was 98. That's an elite arm. I don't know that the hitters were seeing the ball great tonight on both sides. I think that played a factor in the fact that it was a 2-1 ballgame.

Both pitchers are outstanding, and both pitchers are going to pitch in the Big Leagues, but I also think it was just one of those nights where guys weren't really picking the ball up, so the pitchers really took advantage of that.

Look, hats off to Sproat. It's an elite arm. Not many people thought he would make it to college out of high school, but he did, and he's taken advantage of it, and I think he's going to have a really good career.

Q. You mentioned some of the disappointment around the win/loss record around the program. Obviously Gamecock fans very high expectations. What would your message be to fans who might come away from this a little bit disappointed?

MARK KINGSTON: Yeah, we're all disappointed. We're all disappointed. But in my opinion the word "context" is what matters most. When you factor in you had 10 pitchers throughout the course of the season that pitched either very, very little or not at all, and what kind of impact they would have had on our won-loss record. I mean, Mississippi State -- Chris Lemonis is a good friend of mine -- they lost a couple pitchers and you saw how devastating it was to their overall season. We lost five times that or three times that based on whether you consider they lost two or three guys, whatever.

It handcuffed us. It just did. There are days I look up and say, man, how did we win that many, and there are days that you look up and you say, man, if we had this guy or that guy, just two or three of the ten, it's a completely different season. My message is we're disappointed as well, but on the inside we know exactly what this team probably could have done had we not just been so unfortunate with the volume of injuries.

Q. I know the rule is two outs, runner at third, you send him on home. But considering who the runner was in Sightler and the ankle and struggling and all that and where the ball was hit, was that still the right play?

MARK KINGSTON: Absolutely, absolutely. Wingo made the right choice, and I told him as soon as he came in the dugout. I'll give you the reasons why. Number one, with two outs, you generally do send the runner. Number two, we only had, what, two or three hits at that point, so you don't know if you'll get another chance. Number three, because there were two outs, the infielders were really not paying a whole lot of attention to the runner, so the runner has a chance to get a better primary lead and then a better secondary lead. So he got a good jump.

Lastly it rained for about eight hours today. That was not a dry field. An outfielder has to come get that ball. It's a hard play generally. You've got to field it, you've got to make a good throw, and the catcher has to make a catch and a tag. You combine a wet throw with that, to me it was a no-brainer, Wingo did the right thing.

Q. Obviously pitching injuries were a big piece of this team, but the offense finished at or near the bottom in most offensive categories. What do you attribute that to? What's the frustration level and what's the next step?

MARK KINGSTON: To me it's very obvious. I'll ask you a question: Do you know how many hitters were on the All-Freshman team this year?

You don't. I'll give you the answer. Three. Freshmen just did not play in our league this year by and large. Tonight we started four I think it was. We started four. So the top half of our lineup I think on most days could go head-to-head with just about anybody in the league, but then the bottom of our lineup were just a bunch of freshmen that are still needing to get stronger, still getting at-bats at this level, playing the SEC level, which is the highest level of college baseball for the first time.

To me that's the biggest reason why you saw some unevenness with that offense. On good days, we were pretty good. We had some really good days. And then there were days when you face a guy like Brandon Sproat. Freshmen -- trying to put together runs and rallies with freshmen when a guy is out there throwing 98, it's a challenge. Those guys will learn from it, they'll get better from it. They always do.

Wingo is a perfect example. He's a much better player as an older player that was he was as a freshman. To me that's the biggest reason you look at why the offense was like this. The first half of the lineup was experienced and old like most of this league this year, but we were the youngest bottom of the order in the league by far.

