

# Southeastern Conference Baseball Tournament

Thursday, May 26, 2022

Hoover, Alabama, USA

Hoover Metropolitan Stadium

## Tennessee Volunteers Coach Tony Vitello Drew Gilbert Evan Russell

Postgame Press Conference



Tennessee 10, Vanderbilt 1

TONY VITELLO: It's a little repetitive of what I said on the field. I don't think I can come up with original material or more original material. I think the thing that was satisfying was there was a couple guys in Starkville that maybe didn't finish the series or have as great of a series as they would have liked, a couple pitchers in particular, and they responded in tremendous fashion. And then there was also a couple situations in the game where if you look at the box score, it looks like it was one-sided but it was not. There was moments in that game, there was a lot of moments, and our guys responded during those moments in quality fashion, and a lot of those were on defense.

You ask any coach, any sport, they want the defensive part to kind of come first and to go well, and fortunately with good coaching and a lot of hard work, these guys have played good defense for us all year long. It's something we take pride in.

**Q. Evan, what did you see from Blade after coming off that pretty impressive performance against Mississippi State and then coming in and starting the SEC opener?**

EVAN RUSSELL: I thought he looked like a different guy during Mississippi State. I thought he was on a mission, and the box score clearly showed, because his velo was high, he was in there to do a job and that was to win the game. I thought he came out today, was kind of feeling for some pitches, but he got in his rhythm and he definitely started making some really good pitches to some really good hitters. As long as he can keep the momentum going in the right direction, we'll be in good shape.

**Q. What do you think was key to getting off to a quick**

**start? You haven't played in several days and the first time no mid-week game. Just how nice was it to have that time off and it didn't even seem like you were off for several days with how you started?**

DREW GILBERT: Yeah, it was nice to have a few days of, but I think we can all agree here that we were ready to play after a couple days. But back to your question about getting off to a hot start, I think mentality-wise just coming out and attacking right away, whether that's pitching or offense. I think that's what we did, and numbers show it.

EVAN RUSSELL: You know, Coach V says, if you ever get out of the mentality of being on the hunt and wanting to attack, then you'll get exposed. I think that's kind of the approach that we took, and there was a lot of players that came out, especially Jorel Ortega with his AB to start off the game, it kind of set the tone for how the whole entire game was going to be, and everyone fed off of that.

**Q. Can you take us through some of that downtime, how you stayed locked in those moments and tried to prepare for tonight?**

EVAN RUSSELL: You know, this is a team that really enjoys being around each other, so it's not too difficult if we do have downtime and a lot of time in the hotel with each other because everyone truly enjoys each other's company. I think we have a lot of talent in the lineup and in the bullpen and on our entire staff, but being cohesive as a team is really the biggest thing that we have going for us.

TONY VITELLO: I think Beth, our nutritionist, too, she was a maniac. Because all these hours kept flip-flopping. And obviously our ops guy is in here, Chad Zurcher, who's a Memphis Hall of Famer. Good job, Chad.

But Beth -- and probably any nutritionist or just any team organizing stuff with the hotel, they do a good job working with us. But the rain has turned it into -- they're the hardest-working people right now other than the grounds crew.

**Q. Speaking of that downtime, you guys were able to get out of the hotel yesterday and go and have a little**



**fun. Pitchers got to hit. Evan, you were on the mound a little bit. What did that do for you guys' confidence, having to wait and wait and wait and finally you get to play? How did having fun yesterday help you?**

EVAN RUSSELL: You know, at this point in the season, it's good to get reps and keep improving, but you've got what you've got at this point. We're going to go out and we're going to have fun and we're going to compete, and it's always nice to have a practice where we can kind of just be free and enjoy being out on the field. Because although it's only been a week, it felt like we had been in the hotel for a month and we were ready to just get out there and play baseball.

**Q. I know that for years, the talk has been for teams that don't have a lot to prove going into this tournament for the NCAA tournament, how much do they want to be here, how much do they want to win. I'm wondering if getting to the finals last year and losing that game made y'all a little bit hungrier coming into this thing.**

DREW GILBERT: I mean, for some guys potentially, but again, this is a new year. We've got a new team. At the end of the day we just like competing. I've said it before, we don't really care where. We've been waiting to play. We're ready to play whenever.

EVAN RUSSELL: You know, last year during the championship game, there was a flyover that was pretty cool. I don't know if Gilby wants to get back and see that, but I think a lot of people do. I'd say he does, too. But I think that the SEC puts on a good show here, and we definitely want to come out and represent our conference and our team as best we can.

**Q. Vanderbilt has been at the top of the SEC for a lot of years now, but you've beaten them four times this year. What can you say about how you've handled this rivalry this year in pretty convincing fashion tonight?**

TONY VITELLO: I think part of it is just in this league, it's going to go back and forth. You see the fans, and as crazy as the fans are -- and it literally gets to a crazy points in all sports in this league -- if you run into them at the hotel, you're staying in Oxford and you run into Mississippi people -- I'm just using one example -- they're good people, and they see these guys kind of as heros because they're talented enough to be SEC athletes. And you go to a -- I went to school at Mobile my freshman year at Spring Hill Jesuit, and I want to the senior bowl, and you didn't need any money and I didn't have any. You just walk around to where the SEC fans were at and they're going to feed you.

I think it's a good group of people, and part of the deal is they understand there's times where their team, it's going real well, and then there's times where Tennessee it could be, you get your teeth kicked in and you've got to be able to bounce back. I think regardless of who we're playing, we've got to understand that it's a dangerous, dangerous league, and that's why we talk about what Drew said. If anyone sees me keep laughing, Drew makes me so nervous up here -- sorry, I love you. Make me so nervous anytime he opens his mouth, but I do love him.

I think that's kind of the deal, so that's why you have to stay ready to compete at all times. And then when it doesn't go your way, you've got to ride out the storm. Mr. Johnson in Starkville was putting it on us his bad, and I think the way these guys acted was the way you have to. You have to keep competing and you can't go too far one way or the other.

**Q. Playing the waiting game with you guys are the fans; speaking to a couple of them today, it's kind of become an expectation to see you all perform the way you guys do. What does it mean to still see that sea of orange out there and know they're still here supporting you?**

EVAN RUSSELL: You know, I can't even get on Twitter and scroll through Twitter without seeing Tennessee fans just really on the edge of their seats wanting us to get out here and play. I think that just shows that the fan base has bought into what we're trying to do, and they love it just as much as we do.

DREW GILBERT: Yeah, kind of to piggy-back off what Evan said, it's pretty cool to see how our fan base can travel and the amount of fans that were here tonight. It's easy when we don't know when we're going to play just to not be here, but for them to show up, it's pretty cool.

**Q. You guys have reached 50 wins for the fourth time in program history, and this is just the first game of the SEC tournament and you still have everything else after for the NCAA tournament. How big is that for you guys, and what this team has accomplished this season?**

EVAN RUSSELL: You know, winning is an outcome for what we're just doing. Our approach isn't really to win games, it's just to go out and have fun and enjoy what we get to do. Our approach is to go out and compete as highly as we can, and I think winning is just kind of the effects of it.

DREW GILBERT: Yeah, 50 wins is cool and all. I'd be



lying if I said it wasn't. I think it's just kind of a product of us taking everything game by game, not looking too far ahead or looking in the past. Just understanding that every day is an opportunity to get better, whether it's at practice or at the game, so we've just kind of been using that all year.

**Q. What's the biggest takeaway from today and the performance you had against Vanderbilt moving forward into the SEC tournament?**

EVAN RUSSELL: I definitely thought that our hitters were coming out with an approach of on the attack. We took our walks whenever we needed, but we took some really good swings tonight. I think it was kind of building off of the approach that we had at Mississippi State, and I think as a team we're seeing it really well right now. It's always nice to see some people perform at a high level and kind of takes the pressure off everyone else whenever the whole team is doing it.

**Q. That Jorel 13-pitch at-bat there that really seemed to get things going in the third, I know y'all have a lot of those at-bats where you stay in there for a long time. That was a 13-pitch one and to end it with the RBI double like that, it seem like really opened things up. How excited do you all get when things like that are going on?**

DREW GILBERT: Yeah, I mean, it was awesome. Not only does it help Jorel, but I think it helps the guys behind him too. They had to throw everything at him and that helps us. We kind of used that kind of info that Jorel gave us basically with his at-bat and used it for our next at-bats, and me and Jordan and Trey can help piggy-back off that.

**Q. Tony, how nice was it to see after so many days off the guys get off to a quick start?**

TONY VITELLO: It was great because you're kind of fibbing or lying through your teeth if you don't have some questions on how it's going to go. Now, fortunately the group has kind of been consistent, and any group will give you telltale signs or things you can guesstimate off of how our workout went yesterday and stuff like that. The results were good but the effort was better. When you saw the approach the first two hitters had right out of the chute, the way Blade kind of navigated through -- those four hitters are dangerous. It was a good sign, and the rest went from there.

**Q. I know with Jordan Beck lately, has he been pressing at all or is it just one of those baseball things where he kind of hadn't had his best luck lately?**

TONY VITELLO: I think tonight he did. I think tonight there was maybe something maybe you could diagnose and say he kind of pulled off some pitches he was on. He's a hair away from a homer a couple different times, but it's baseball, they're not going to give you credit, not going to give you a hit because you almost hit it or anything like that.

But if you revert back to the other games like some of those hard contact outs in Starkville, a big home run to start the series off for us, the way he finished the Kentucky series for us where that game was kind of still in limbo, and if he doesn't hit that homer, maybe we don't get out of there with a win.

So the last few weekends have been more productive than the stat sheet reads, but I think there would be something tonight to maybe look at and have a little better approach. Hitters are always kind of -- you don't want to tinker too much, but you do want to have some sort of adjustment you take into each day.

**Q. What makes Jorel so effective hitting with two strikes?**

TONY VITELLO: Man, I'm going to go first instinct or word association, just passion. I know I've said that a lot when you guys ask me questions about Jorel, but why fans like being around him, he's just got passion for life. Why he's a good baseball player, he's got passion for playing baseball. And then I could go on and on why these guys light up when you ask them a question about Jorel. It's kind of the same thing. It's not like he doesn't have a skill set and it's not like he's not a smart kid and other things, but that's the word that's going to be -- he could be back in the program when he's 40 and come back in the locker room -- I'll be retired -- but he can come back in and that's the first word that's going to come to everybody's mind.

**Q. Having Enrique Bradfield, Jr. kept off the bases, Blade held him 0 for 3, he went 0 for 4 in the ninth, how huge is that for this win and the havoc he can cause when he gets on the base path?**

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, there's graphics that ESPN flashes. And I love being around our guys, and I feel like I'm really loyal to them, but you can very easily argue he's the most dynamic player in the country. He stung a couple balls tonight, so it's not like we had a great strategy. I'd say we were fortunate for him to not be on the bases and kind mess things up. But I think too you see those graphics and everything like that, you've got to just play ball. And obviously he changes the game a little bit, but you can't get too wrapped up in what he's doing or he'll make it worse on you.

Again, I think overall just a fortunate night, and he goes home and really evaluates his day, he had a good day at the plate. We were again, just fortunate to keep him off the bases.

**Q. As good as Trey has been at the plate this season, of course, he's made some great defensive plays as well on down the stretch of the season, that one tonight being a great example, how would you say he's grown as a defender this season to become a complete player for you guys?**

TONY VITELLO: It's been a difference maker, and man, like I'm not -- first of all, Cruz almost injured a fan last year with a foul ball he hit right down the right field line. That guy is as explosive as it gets. It's pretty cool being in this locker room, you see some of these names. I got to be around Brian Anderson and recruited Kyle -- like these guys are all freaks that are being honored in this locker room, and Cruz is one of those for sure, and his numbers speak to it.

And then Sonny, Tennessee fans, if they find out how much I like Sonny, they might slash my tires. Those guys are deserving, but if you're going into a courtroom and argue Trey Lipscomb should have won the award -- because my phone got blown up with SEC Player of the Year. Trey knows what he did. And those guys are as good as it gets. Nothing to be ashamed of.

But that one little difference is that guy plays maybe the most undervalued position in college sports. When Frank Anderson was at Texas, they put Huston Street at third just because they didn't want any more errors over there, and Huston is arguably a Hall of Fame pitcher in the Big Leagues. So he plays that position and plays it very, very well.

So that's kind of a difference maker on what he brings to the table every day, and that's the best way I can describe it. Hopefully that makes sense and no ill will towards anyone or anything like that. But Trey is my guy.

**Q. Obviously you come to Hoover to try to win the whole thing, but it's also kind of your final tune-up for the regionals and what comes after that. How important of an outing was that for Blade to get him into that postseason mindset and have him pitch as well as he did today?**

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, sometimes you sit up here and you've got work around what you guys are asking, to be honest with you, but you kind of hit it. It needed to happen. He needed to show he could start because against

Mississippi State, he was arguably -- you could say he was the best reliever for both teams, and both teams got a lot of good arms.

Then tonight he started against a team that played really well to beat Mississippi and dynamic throughout the lineup, not just Bradfield. We needed that. So we'll see what's going on moving forward, but now that he's back in a rhythm and a routine and he's gotten himself where he's more healthy than ever -- I said it when we went out there and talked on the mound when he was coming out of the game, now we've kind of got a weapon that we can choose to use as we see fit. And where he's been great is he's been the one guy -- probably because he's more comfortable, he's been around the program than those other three guys, Do, Burns and Beam, it's just been tell me what to do and I'll do it to make life easier on those three guys and also to be a good teammate, and he just wants to win.

**Q. Is Dollander still the plan for tomorrow on the mound, or has anything changed there?**

TONY VITELLO: Yes, yes, he will start tomorrow.

**Q. Also with Vandy, I know that y'all have your program and they've got theirs, but they've kind of been a benchmark recently in college baseball. For you to go out there, have some success against them this year, how important has that been? I know you might have to play them again in a little bit, but just in terms of having success against them, how important is it?**

TONY VITELLO: No, but I'll be honest with you. It's important because they're consistently a contender. They're consistently a team you have to beat in our division if you want to have a worthwhile spring. So it's important.

But they're different than we are, and that's not a bad thing or a good thing. Coach Van Horn at Arkansas has got his thing going on and Sully at Florida and LSU came into our dugout. Everybody has kind of got their own flavor going on. I think what's important is we kind of try and master ours as best as we can. And if we do that, I think it'll be good enough that we'll be able to get this team in a certain year or compete with one of those kind of top-notch programs or they set the standard.

You're in this league -- I already talked about the individuals, but if you talk about the logos that are next to their name, there's kind of a consistent group that you could say maybe is near the top 5 every year, but there's also teams that might finish in 10th one year but the next year they can win the national championship.



Again, I think the key is keep your head above water, first of all, and then get as many wins as you can against anybody. And it is a little better for your program when it is one of those consistent national championship contenders or however you want to label them.

**Q. Just with the arms that came in at the end of the game with the score being what it was, was that a product of just trying to get them work and not having a midweek game starting on a Thursday? Are you still confident and comfortable that you can kind of get your pitching ready for next weekend with it all still being crammed in this weekend?**

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, honestly we were just kind of worried about tonight. What I was really concerned about is the weather going to flip single elimination and no one here ever said that, it's just the rumors. When you've got downtime, people like to gossip, and so what do we need to do, yada yada. But when it turned out we're playing and it's game on, we were just worried about tonight.

And yeah, we did not have a midweek game and then last week no one was really stretched out because you've kind of got that deal where Blade came in and finished a game, so you could argue you didn't use your bullpen at all one of the nights in Starkville, if that makes sense.

I think him being back, and again, kind of being a swing man for us, has made that difference, where if one of our starters only gets us four quality but we're in contention for winning the game, that's one short of kind of the benchmark, but I like this group in that situation.

**Q. How do you kill four days in Hoover, Alabama, and did you feel any extra anxiousness from the team to get out there and play tonight?**

TONY VITELLO: I honestly didn't sense it from them. I think a little bit of cabin fever or going a little stir crazy. You've got to do your workouts. Yesterday was like a flip the switch, like we've got to go now because the weather may beat us. And then we were a part of a high school graduation over at Sanford when we were there, that came with some comedy for any of our players. They were cheering on the graduates, let's put it that way. So there were a couple things that popped up. But basically we've got a lot of work to do as coaches, and as players you think, hey, what did you do for three days, did you go to the zoo or this -- you're kind of held hostage when you don't know what the next thing is, if that makes sense.

A little frustrating, but this event and the way this city has kind of put it on and continues to get a little better each

year, it's fun to be at, so no complaints from myself.

**Q. You've described this tournament as a gauntlet several times. It's constant back to back to back and just going and going. I got the guys' perspective on it, but yesterday to get out there and have a little bit of fun, get a little loose, what did that do for the team in your eyes?**

TONY VITELLO: I think it gave them a chance to -- this is going to sound a little corny, but make some memories. You're not going to remember what you did every day in Hoover while you were waiting to play, but you'll kind of remember some moments. And I think we did a couple things that were off script and a couple things to make sure the guys are having fun being around one another after we kind of got our work in.

To me it's kind of the definition of what the program is for us and probably a lot of others, like you've got to eat your meat and potatoes if you want your dessert or however the Pink Floyd song goes. We put in our work and they did a nice job, and they've been cooperating with us with all the things we do. Unless they're pulling a fast one, we don't really have to worry about curfew and stuff like that with this group. They earned the right to do that or some of the goofy stuff they do on the field.

**Q. Blake Burke came out of the dugout for a pinch-hit home run. He's had like one out of six at-bats is a home run this year. How important is he as a weapon coming out of the dugout?**

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, I mean, it's incredible. We were just in Starkville and Will Clark is one of the greatest players ever in this league, and I'm not so sure those swings aren't similar. I think Chris Burke is definitely better than I am at diagnosing a swing. I think he brought up Griffey, which to me that's like the epitome of the sweetest swing.

So just bringing up those two names speaks to how people see him, and what he did tonight, that was not a bad pitch, and where he hit it. And this park kind of plays big sometimes, he can really do some special things.

But if you see him in the dugout and the way he acts, if you try and give Russ five before him sometimes, he'll kind of elbow you because he wants to beat you to him. He's a special kid. It's not next year yet, but we'll be at a loss when these two guys are gone for which way to steer the guys and stuff. He's going to be one of those guys.

I could go on and on about the kid, but for now, he's carved out a niche on this team, and I think it's valuable because

you don't want any holes. But no one is going to have a complete team where they don't feel like there's any weaknesses. But there's no doubt the things we ask him to do, he does very well, and he kind of provides a little bit more weaponry if that's the right way to say it.

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