

Southeastern Conference Baseball Tournament

Tuesday, May 23, 2023

Hoover, Alabama, USA

Hoover Metropolitan Stadium

South Carolina Gamecocks

Coach Mark Kingston

James Hicks

Will Sanders

Postgame Press Conference

South Carolina 9, Georgia 0

MARK KINGSTON: Very pleased with how our guys showed up to play today. Had a 6:00 a.m. wake-up call, 7:00 breakfast. We didn't know if we were going to have a chance to play because the radar looked so bad. I kept waiting for Herb to give us a text saying, hey, we're delayed by a few hours, and I think everybody was wondering when that was coming, but it never came.

They did a good job of keeping us on schedule. We went and took a good BP in the cages, and the energy was good from the minute I saw these guys this morning at breakfast.

I thought that was a good sign, and we just came out and played extremely well in all facets of the game, so real proud of this group. Real proud.

Q. James, if you draw up a game plan against this Georgia lineup, it seems to get it on the hands, keep it low. You did that today. How do you think the game plan went and was it the sinker that really did it for you today?

JAMES HICKS: Yeah, I've been working on the sinker making sure I can get it in on people, and today I just went out there and reminded myself to stay within myself, not try to do anything extra, just relax and throw. And then Coach Parker came up with the game plan, and he's really good at scouting, and that was what to throw everyone. I just trusted him and tried to execute each pitch.

Q. That was your first SEC start if I'm not mistaken. How much did that live up to the hype, and how nice is it to put your team in a position to win?



JAMES HICKS: Yeah, it was awesome. It's something I've dreamed of all my life pretty much and something I've been working towards. Really grateful for the opportunity, and I just wanted to leave it all out there, hold nothing back. So I'm pretty happy with how it went.

Q. James, that was your career high in pitches. It's obviously the most you've had for sure. How are you feeling physically right now?

JAMES HICKS: I felt great. I feel like I got in a rhythm towards the end of it, and Coach Parker came up to me in probably the sixth and asked how I was doing. I said, I feel better than I did in the first and second.

So I felt like I got better as I went, except for that last inning, the wheels kind of fell off. I felt great leading up to that, and I feel great now.

Q. Will, this was the first time you guys have had double-digit hits in an SEC game since the Auburn series. How did it feel to put good swings on balls where it counts?

WILL SANDERS: Yeah, I feel like we stuck to our approach the whole game, and when we stick to our approach, we're a very good offense, and we just work counts, take walks when they give them, and when they throw the ball over the middle of the plate, we mash.

Q. Will, has anything been emphasized differently in approach here recently to kind of get you guys back on track, and just personally how did that triple feel there at the end for you?

WILL SANDERS: Yeah, approach-wise we kind of went back to our roots at the beginning of the season, live middle of the field, outfield gap, and if they hang a breaking ball in there, then we'll pull it to the pull side gap. And the triple felt pretty nice. It was fun running around the bases.

Q. Will, where is your confidence at this point with obviously having to step in with injuries and playing a lot and just the tweaks that you've made batting right-handed exclusively? How has the progression of



your confidence been throughout the last few weeks?

WILL SANDERS: I feel like I'm always confident within myself because if you're not, good things won't happen. I've been sticking to my approach, what King and Monte have been telling me, and I get the opportunity, I take what's given to me. And it worked out today, and hopefully we keep going.

Q. We just talked to Scott about his season. You're somebody who can understand what it's like to coach in this league. Could you help us understand the role as a head coach in the SEC, especially this year?

MARK KINGSTON: Yeah, it's extremely tough. I mean, I think that goes without saying. But I think the best way you could sum up what this league is -- and I say this with all due respect to two guys that I consider friends and consider very excellent coaches -- the two defending national champions didn't make the SEC tournament this week.

What else do you need to know about our league? What else do you need to know? It is a dogfight every week. It's the best players. It's the best coaches. It's the best environments. It's hell on wheels on the road to try to win games. It's hard. It's hard.

Nobody goes through it unscathed. I think there's an effect that it takes on a team having to be on you're a game every single weekend that I think hopefully pays off for a lot of us as we get to the NCAA tournament.

But this is the toughest league in America for players and coaches alike. The scrutiny, the media attention, fans being on you all the time, you have to be built for it. You have to be built for it, and I think generally if you earn your way into this league, you are built for it.

But it's the hardest league in America. It's always a challenge. If you're not on top of your game from a talent, a health and approach standpoint, it'll just eat you alive.

Again, Lemonis and Bianco are two of the best in the business, and they're not here this weekend because this league is so tough. That's the best way I can explain this league to you.

Q. The shut-out, you had 12 hits, played really good defense today, too. Was this kind of your best all-around game over the course of the last month, and how good did that feel going into the tournament needing something like this?

MARK KINGSTON: Yeah, clearly I think this was our best

all-around game, no errors, 12 hits, nine runs, no earned runs given up, we had more walks than strikeouts offensively. That is what it felt like for 40 games for us, truthfully.

Today's game is about what the first 40 or so games felt where we just knew that our offense would be there, our defense would be there, we would pitch at a high level. Then we hit some adversity.

Today felt like us. It felt like how we played baseball for the great majority of the season.

Q. You've got two games here now. Is there any plan for a starting pitcher for Wednesday or Thursday?

MARK KINGSTON: No, not yet. Do you have a coin we can flip? It can be a quarter, a nickel, a dime, I don't care. Does anybody carry change anymore to flip a coin? Going to have to go back to the hotel, look at some matchups. Obviously we know we're going to play LSU, so we'll look at who's available from our side and then who makes the most sense.

We're going to have to find a way to fill the 27 outs within the nine innings, and we're just going to have to put our heads together and try to make the best decision that we could.

Same way we did for today's game. I'm very happy that that process landed us on James Hicks today because he was tremendous and gave us everything we hoped he would and more.

Maybe he can set the tone for the next guy that gets the opportunity tomorrow.

Q. James was obviously a starter last year, and he settled into the bullpen role, but obviously looked good today, as well. Do you take that into consideration when you look at next week, how he performed today in that starting role?

MARK KINGSTON: Damn right. I mean, you have to, right? You have to. You always have to be evaluating what is going on in the trends of your team. Yeah, absolutely we have to look at that. We have to evaluate it.

The reason why James was in the bullpen early in the season was not because he was not capable of being a weekend starter. It was because we just had probably one of the best, deepest pitching staffs in the country. And the best role for James to help our team at that time was to be a swing man, to maybe start on a Tuesday, maybe come in and throw big innings after a Noah Hall or a Will Sanders



or Jack Mahoney.

And his stats reflect that. He's got six wins. He's got saves. He's been everything that we could hope for. Now that we're in the position we are from an injury standpoint, he got the opportunity to start in an SEC game, and he came through with flying colors like we thought he probably would, but I'm really glad that he did.

Q. When you and Coach Parker discuss the starter for tomorrow morning, who are some of the guys you will kick around and look at?

MARK KINGSTON: Trying to use deduction again, huh? Too hard to tell you that. And I'm not saying that to try to be a smart-aleck, but just going to have to go back and look because it may be somebody -- we may have to think outside the box a little bit. I don't know that we're ready to use any of our weekend starters yet, so we may have to get creative tomorrow.

Q. You mentioned the energy being really good this morning with these guys. Do you sense, you've talked about it in the past, maybe a chip on these guys' shoulders a little bit with some of the narratives and discussion around this team the last couple weeks, or what can you kind of credit the energy to?

MARK KINGSTON: Well, they've had that energy all year. I think sometimes we confuse poor performance with poor attitude or poor effort, and that is not the case ever with this team. This team always provides a great effort with energy, and sometimes we just don't play well enough.

But you can never confuse performance with effort and attitude with this team. They always come out with an energy, and I give Cole Messina a lot of credit. I think he's kind of become the heartbeat of this team and provides us the energy and the spark that we need and the leadership. And when one of your best players does that, then everybody tends to follow.

It was great to see it this morning because there's just a small part of you that says how are we going to be with the rut that we're in with a 9:30 game and it's raining out and batting practice is in the cages and we can barely take ground balls. You just don't know for sure. I was hopeful we would come out and play well, and we did. We did.

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