

Southeastern Conference Baseball Tournament

Wednesday, May 22, 2024

Hoover, Alabama, USA

Hoover Metropolitan Stadium

South Carolina Gamecocks

Coach Mark Kingston

Garrett Gainey

Cole Messina

Postgame Press Conference



South Carolina 6, Arkansas 5

MARK KINGSTON: Great ballgame. Again, two of the best teams in the country, in my opinion. Could have gone either way. But this guy closed it out at the end, Cole drove in five of our six runs, so that's the team I think we're capable of being on any given day, and we beat one of the best teams in the country.

Again, it's something we'll continue to build on.

Q. Garrett, if you would take us through that ninth inning, what kind of emotions or how do emotions change, or do they?

GARRETT GAINEY: Yeah, I had to settle myself in and just try to dial it in a little bit. Felt like my stuff was kind of getting over the plate more than the other two innings so I was getting hit around a little bit. Being able to focus in and get that last out was huge.

Q. When did you have an idea or a sense that you may be coming into this game today, and when you do come into that seventh inning to keep it tied at four, what's going through your head there?

GARRETT GAINEY: I pretty much knew I was getting the ball today. I knew we were going to have a good chance to win, especially taking an early lead and taking that lead 4-2. I think it was the sixth inning. Especially late in the game like that, I knew I could get the ball.

Being able to just focus in in the bullpen and try to think about my bullpen as a game-type situation and get ready for the game.

Q. Cole, you had a tough matchup in the ninth there, pitcher hadn't given up a homer all year. Were you seeing anything in that at-bat? Take us through the homer.

COLE MESSINA: I knew he had a good fastball and be ready for a good fastball. I sold out for the fastball, and he ended up throwing a slider, and just took my best swing. Didn't really think I was going to hit a slider, but it happened, and took a good swing, and the ball got outta here.

Q. Cole, what's kind of the emotions of that homer there for you when you're rounding the bases and you see all your teammates going absolutely nuts in the dugout there?

COLE MESSINA: I mean, it means the world. It's a moment I'll remember forever. These are my guys. These are people I would kill somebody over -- well, that's a bad way to put it. I would take a bullet for. I love them, love them to death. It meant the world to me, and keep building.

Q. Mark was talking yesterday about these moments, these tournaments are so cool because you see guys have the moments they'll remember for the rest of their life. How gratifying have these last two days been for you?

COLE MESSINA: Like I just said, it's been awesome. It's been fun to watch this team compete the way we have. Had a rough six games before this tournament and turned it all around in two games and feel like we're back to who we are and can make a run.

Q. Cole, Coach Van Horn said it was pretty clear you were sitting breaking ball on that last home run. Does that speak to how well you're seeing the ball right now that you can be sitting fastball and make that adjustment so well? Is this about as well as you've played this year?

COLE MESSINA: I mean, I guess so. I felt like the majority of the time, when I'm geared up for the good



fastball, I just hit with my eyes more than not, and I felt like I hit with my eyes on that pitch and took a good swing.

Q. Garrett, can you take us through that celebration afterwards? That was a little bit different.

GARRETT GAINEY: Yeah, I just explained it to the SEC Network people. We've been playing the Nintendo Switch in the hotel, and that's recently been our go to celebration for a win. So me and Matthew Becker have been going back at it, back and forth. Tyler Dean is in that mix, Drake Quinn is in that mix.

But I told Matthew that if I got the last out -- well, it should have been a strikeout in my eyes. But if I got the last out, I would do the celebration. I caught him coming out of the dugout, and I looked over, and he was doing it, so I had to do it right back at him.

Q. With Gainey coming in today, did you know coming into the game that you were potentially going to have to use him today, and how do you feel like that decision paid off for you?

MARK KINGSTON: Yeah, well, Garrett is one of those guys that either he's going to give you one day with some length or you use him twice with shorter bursts.

So once we had the lead, we decided, okay, we're going to give the ball to Garrett. It's going to be a little bit longer outing, but hopefully he can take us home. That's exactly what we did.

We went into today saying if we're in control of the game and we have a chance to win, we'll give it to Garrett. If it's getting away from us, we'll save him for tomorrow and then he probably would start.

We're just being flexible with a lot of our guys right now. All these guys are right around that between 50 and 60 pitches, so that means they may be able to be deployed later in the week, as well.

It's kind of who we are right now.

Q. You've talked pretty much more two years now about Cole being the leader of this team. Can you put into words or explain how different the vibe is when he's going the way he's going right now?

MARK KINGSTON: Well, we score a lot more runs when he's hitting. That's clear. I'm pretty sure if you dug into the stats, and on the days he has good games, I bet we probably win 90 percent of the time; and when he doesn't, it's obviously not that high.

He's the heart and soul of our team. And when the heart and soul of your team is playing that well, it just allows everybody else to kind of follow suit.

Q. You sort of touched on it, but we've asked you about pitching decisions all year. Garrett Gainey was out there and giving up a few hits there in the ninth. You didn't have anybody warming up in the bullpen. What gives you the confidence in him to be able to do that, and was there any thought to even getting somebody up?

MARK KINGSTON: No, once we went out there for the ninth inning with a two-run lead, we said we're going to ride or die here.

He's earned that right. He's been one of our best guys. We've talked about it. He didn't get the last out in that inning at Tennessee last week, but there's certain guys you're willing to ride or die with, and he's one of them.

We were going to win or lose in the ninth inning with him on the mound, there was no reason to get anybody else up, and he came through.

Q. Is there anything you see different out of Cole these last couple days, or is this just him putting it together on a bigger stage?

MARK KINGSTON: Well, I think his mechanics, when he has his hands high and he has that -- he's got some movements that need to be synced up properly, and when they are, he's as good as any hitter in the country.

And right now he's completely synced up. His timing is where it needs to be. And when he does that, his swing is in the zone for a long time, which is exactly what allows what he was just talking about.

He was looking fastball, he got the slider, but because his bat is in the zone for so long, when he's swinging the right way, it allows you to be back here for the fastball and still be on plane for the slider when it's hung.

That's why it can -- maybe it looks like the guy is sitting on a breaking ball, but when you have a good swing that's in the zone a long time, it can cover the fastball and the slider.

Q. How pleased have you been as much as anything else with the way your team has fought these first two days coming off the way you guys finished the regular season?

MARK KINGSTON: Well, we fought all year. I think sometimes we fall into the trap of thinking if a team is losing, they're not fighting; and if they're winning, they are. Nothing could be further from the truth with this team.

This team has played hard from day one, and whether you win or lose, that's not how you define how these kids are fighting. These kids have played hard all year.

I know every coach that comes in here will say the same thing. It's a damn hard league, and you're going to lose some games. This is a strong-willed team. They've never showed up to the park where I thought: They're not ready to play today.

This team played hard. We had a couple tough weekends against two teams that will be national seeds. It happens. We just keep the train moving.

Q. I know you've got more work to do, but it's the first time since 2017 that the program has won a game in this tournament that was in the double elimination portion of this tournament. Your thoughts on being where you are, facing LSU tomorrow in a winner's bracket final, so to speak, a place that the program hasn't been in a while?

MARK KINGSTON: Yeah, well, I think it's well documented that the history of South Carolina baseball, there's been a lot more great moments outside of Hoover than inside of Hoover, a lot more highlights in Omaha than in Hoover, for whatever reason.

I'm focusing on this team right now. This is a team that's a good team, and we can beat just about anybody in the country, and we're playing really well right now. Just going to ride that wave as long and far as we can.

Q. Y'all played ahead for a lot of the day, and then whenever Arkansas would score, you would come back and score right back. How much of a difference does this make in this game or just in general?

MARK KINGSTON: Yeah, we responded. It was a little bit of a gut punch. We took the 4-2 lead and then they tied it up. Luckily it didn't take too long before Cole hit the two-run homer to give us the lead back.

Look, baseball is a game of flow. It's a game of ups and downs. You have to be able to deal with it, both in game and also during a season, and again, this team generally does that pretty well.

Q. With two games through the SEC tournament now for you guys, how would you evaluate the way in

which you've been able to use the pitching staff with monitoring pitch counts and knowing when to pull guys? How do you feel like this sets things up for the rest of the weekend?

MARK KINGSTON: This is how we have to do it really. This is how we have to do it in a short weekend. Obviously we're playing the tournament now, and you've got to win a lot more games and we'll have to win next week and hopefully the week after that. We're kind of trying to line things up in a way that we think will give us a chance to win the next couple weekends.

It's a little bit of house money right now. I need to go back with Matt and decide, all right, how do we use guys tomorrow, who will start, who will finish the game and everything in between.

So far, again, I think the key for us is to use guys in situations where we don't overexpose them, we don't overuse them now that it's postseason time.

And again, Eli was good today, one earned run. He didn't want to come out, and I don't blame him. He's a competitor. But we thought it was time at 56 pitches, and Ty came in, and Ty probably didn't want to come out, but he was at 60. And then Garrett Gainey gave us 54. Really within that number of pitches for those guys, that's when they're at their best.

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