

Southeastern Conference Baseball Tournament

Wednesday, May 22, 2024

Hoover, Alabama, USA

Hoover Metropolitan Stadium

Tennessee Volunteers Coach Tony Vitello

AJ Russell

Postgame Press Conference



Vanderbilt 13, Tennessee 4

TONY VITELLO: Pretty basic. They played better than we did. Coached better. Then a big mark in there is we didn't do a good job against Espinal, but I would flip it and say the last three times we've played them, he's been outstanding and he's arguably been their best hitter. It's nothing out of the norm for him, but he did have a big day.

The result was awful, especially for fans. I think the city of Hoover likes when we're here because a lot of our fans will attend. So, again, a bad result, but as I look at the box score, it was good to get a lot of guys get their cleats in the dirt in a situation that might be new to them or certainly is new to our group this year.

Q. AJ, what have the past couple months been like in terms of setbacks and getting back? And what do you hope to do throughout the rest of the to be able to help the pitching staff?

AJ RUSSELL: I think the last few months have been tough just mentally and all that and getting through it. But the support has been huge just from everybody, friends, guys on the team, the coaches, parents, all that stuff.

It's been huge to me. I think it's a big reason why I've been back. I think a big thing I'm looking to accomplish is just to help out. We've talked a few times, and I'm not coming in to throw six, seven innings, it's more like one, two innings just to try and get a few outs here and there and get to the next guy.

Q. AJ, what was the difference from your first couple batters you faced to the last couple, getting out of that jam, and how do you feel, and how have you felt the day after those bullpens kind of working yourself back?

AJ RUSSELL: I think the big difference was I could breathe a little bit. The first two batters I think I was pretty anxious coming into it, in general, because I hadn't been on the mound in a while.

And then once I could breathe, settling down, just realizing that I hit spots and all that kind of thing, trust Cal behind the plate that good things would come from that.

And just post bullpen, it gets better each time I throw. Soreness-wise, all that, each time I throw, it just gets stronger, and I feel better each time.

Feel good right now, and ready to go for whenever is next.

Q. AJ, what has your buildup looked like, and what did you feel like you had working for you tonight?

AJ RUSSELL: I think the buildup mainly has just been throwing as much as possible and just listening to my body as best I can.

I think each day is different for me. Some days I feel really good, especially early. Some days I was like, I don't even know if I can throw this right now, and it was kind of just -- it was kind of day by day. Each time, like I said earlier, each time I throw, it just got better and better.

I think the fastball was good. There was a few here and there that were rough that didn't really do what they normally do. But for the most part, I think the fastball was the best. And still getting a feel for the off-speed and all that. But I hit spots pretty well and that kind of thing, so I think it was good.

Q. What's helped you get through this season dealing with the frustrations of not being able to be out there on the mound, and how would you assess your outing? Do you feel like you're further ahead than maybe you anticipated, or would you have liked to have seen a little bit more? How do you feel in that regard?

AJ RUSSELL: Like I said earlier, I think just the support



around the team and all that, the coaches, just knowing that when I'm ready, that's when I'll throw.

And we've had a lot of talks about that, not rushing back too quickly, not waiting too long, knowing I've got to get back out there at some point. So that's been huge.

Q. Do you feel like you're about where you expected?

AJ RUSSELL: Yeah, absolutely. I'm super happy with where I'm at right now and how I felt today, and I feel great right now. So I think the post stuff is really what tells me how I'm feeling and that kind of thing.

I'm happy with it, and it went just about how I expected it to go.

Q. Do you think it was a big deal for you to get out of that inning unscathed?

AJ RUSSELL: Yeah, absolutely. Obviously I would have been mad in the moment or that kind of thing, but for the most part, I was mainly just kind of seeing how I was going to feel. I think that was the biggest part for me is runs are going to be given up, hits are going to be given up at some point, it's just kind of part of it. But I think it was huge for me.

Also, just because it was a little bit of a confidence builder, as well. I think there's both sides to it.

Q. What did you see from AJ in kind of the beginning to the end of his inning?

TONY VITELLO: It was good. We didn't have many zeros in the game. We can talk about Snead, but he came out throwing the ball really well in the first two innings, and then Russell not only got a zero but we're an eyelash away from turning a double play where he doesn't even have to face another hitter.

It was kind of what I expected, and you guys have been asking a lot, so tried to be as honest as possible, and there's nothing to hide there. You've got a kid that is being patiently aggressive towards getting to 100 percent, and he's not there yet.

But again, if you're going to take away a positive from the game, talk about guys getting their cleats in the dirt, it was him getting out there. And, again, a zero is nice, but he wants to face the best hitters regardless of how it's going. So I'm not too worried about that. It was just him feeling comfortable, and obviously unless he's lying to us, which he won't do that very often.

Q. You mentioned wanting to get the pitching sorted earlier this week. Does that feel like a discouraging result, the way some of those guys threw, or kind of a one-off situation?

TONY VITELLO: I think it's just more information. We just talked, you could argue I could have done a better job of either sticking to the script or communicating better with Nate, but we honestly were waiting to see who we would play to determine what we wanted to do.

We knew who we were going to throw, which was pretty much everybody that's on the list, one way or another, so we gave Snead a chance, really in the off case that he would have to throw or start later on this year for some reason or another, that he wouldn't have to say it's his first time. So at least we checked that box.

I'll have to watch the video, but maybe I could have communicated a little better. Hey, I had scripted two innings, stick to that, trust first instinct may be better, but he was guns blazing there until he hit a roadblock.

That was going to be his last inning regardless, and maybe he altered the way he was pitching a little bit to be more of a, quote/unquote, starter.

How he's thrown for us all year long has been outstanding. Willing to bet the next go-around will be right back in the role he's earned for us, which he's done an outstanding job of handling.

Q. Similar thought there, but with the look at the pitching depth you got tonight, what was the good you took from it and what was the concerning stuff that you took away from it?

TONY VITELLO: Again, guys getting out there was huge. I think Behnke gets us out of a jam. I think he's capable of doing that. Kirby has kind of been that guy for us. There's some obvious positives in AJ.

Again, the fact that at least Nate has done that, and he got his work in, too, it was a light weekend for him. I don't know where he's at appearance-wise or innings-wise, but he's carried a lot of the weight. At the very least his win-loss record, he's got 10 decisions one way or the other and some saves.

So last weekend was light. He got his work in regardless of how the rest of this tournament goes.

Then the rest of those guys just gave us information. I trust D. Loy when we use him in the situation that's best for him, but I'm willing to bet those first-year guys had a little

bit of a wow moment. Like even AJ, he had a different story, but had to manage his breath there a little bit. It's good those guys got to experience that so there's not a shock the next time it comes around.

Q. How important was it for Reese to see three productive at-bats in terms of how he struck the ball against the SEC competition?

TONY VITELLO: You know, I think beneficial. We communicated to those guys what our expectations are, and I think they get it now. Bargo's at-bat, probably wish he could have a little bit better outcome, but at least he got up there.

The other thing is Robin looked much more like Robin tonight, and if he doesn't leave that ball with his front side early a little bit, it could have been a much better result. Still squared it up.

Bradke is who he is. Would love to say he had 200 at-bats under his belt, but he doesn't, but I think he's still ready to rock and roll for us. Then of course Peebles gets up there too and gets some action behind the plate.

So those guys are all going to share those duties as it relates to pinch-hitting and also DHing. And it's nice Reese had a good night. But they're not going to do one thing or another to sway us too far with what we think they can do for us.

Q. How did you feel about your at-bats 1 through 9 before you made all the changes? And what is it about Vanderbilt pitching that you think has given you guys so much trouble, especially with Game 3 of that series and now tonight?

TONY VITELLO: Well, Thompson was outstanding in Game 3 for us, and we just did not kind of have the same flavor to us. And trust me, I think it wasn't because we had won the first two. I think it was maybe because we won the first two, we were trying so hard to finish off the weekend and got frustrated a little too much.

But, again, we were frustrated because he was throwing the ball well, and then following him was Futrell. I'd be curious where that outing ranks up for his.

Those two guys did a great job. I think this is a completely different deal. Futrell was still sharp, but our guys had good at-bats against him, but when you give up a 5 spot, it's a punch in the gut. You've got to rally together.

I think our guys did that okay. We did have some hard contacts that were right at guys, but that's part of the deal.

I just think as you go through the lineup, some guys were in there fighting, saw the ball well but didn't have much to show for it. And as you look at the box score, there's blank spots that pop up a little too often. A lot easier to hit when you're winning the game.

Q. What was AJ's pitch count tonight, and if y'all were to make a run to the weekend, would you like to use him again here this week?

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, best-case scenario, if we stick around long enough, he would be able to do that. If not, then he'll just jump into a situation where he can face hitters again. We've kind of beat up the whole bullpen situation, so having guys standing in there I think is beneficial for him.

Pitch count-wise was more like 25 to 35. The fact he kind of got in a jam -- maybe if that double play is turned over, we send him back out for a hitter or two, but with the inning kind of going the way it did, it was kind of a group decision led by Frank, let's just move on to the next guy. It was good for him to get out there.

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