

Southeastern Conference Baseball Tournament

Thursday, May 23, 2024

Hoover, Alabama, USA

Hoover Metropolitan Stadium

Kentucky Wildcats

Coach Nick Mingione

Ryan Waldschmidt

Trey Pooser

Postgame Press Conference

Kentucky - 9, Arkansas - 6

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions for the players.

NICK MINGIONE: Thought Trey Pooser was fantastic. Those of you that followed us all year, I've continued to say that for us to be the team that we want to be, we have to pitch and defend at a very high level.

Trey did great. Obviously we had the hiccup in the sixth, but I thought the job that Ryan Hagenow did and Evan Byers came in was fantastic. And our infield defense was about as good as it could be. The plays that Mitch Daly made, two good plays. He came in and sat on one, the hard hit in the ninth. I thought Grant Smith played great, a couple slow rollers up the middle. And I thought Pete was fantastic at second base.

And we're at our best when we're getting a ton of ground balls and striking guys out. And I thought Ryan Nicholson did the same thing at first, just played an awesome job defensively. I thought Nolan's play was huge, obviously. And then obviously can't say enough about Waldy and the impact that he had.

And I just thought our offense was on full display. Bunts, bombs, stealing, base running, you name it. And when we're at our best, that's what we're doing.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the players, please.

Q. Ryan, I don't think you notched a hit in the last two games, the series finale and then yesterday. But today you come out, notch two home runs. What was going for you today?



RYAN WALDSCHMIDT: Yeah, the past few weeks -- or not even the past few weeks, the past two games, I guess, I just felt a little bit late. And that, whenever I feel like I'm not on, it usually is the problem, a little bit late.

Today I just made an effort just to be early or on time. And I think that I did that. I think I fought a few balls off down the line pull side, which, when I do that, I feel like I'm good and I'm on it. Then when I got a pitch in the zone, I was on time.

So that was the biggest thing for me was just being on time today.

Q. Guys, talk about just that message amongst the locker room, and just talk about after that loss yesterday, kind of rebounding, and you guys looked like a completely different team out there. Backs against the wall all season long. Lose game 1, you all respond. Talk about the message in the locker room.

RYAN WALDSCHMIDT: Yeah, so this morning we were in our team meeting, and Coach Ming brought up Buster Douglas and how he fought Mike Tyson and he won.

And today we go out there against a really good team, and you're facing a really good starting pitcher, and you just got to do what it takes to win. You got to just find a way.

Especially when your backs are on the wall, you're either going home or you're moving on. I think we did a really good job of just being relentless, just staying on the attack all night and trying to find a way to win.

And when you do that and you just give yourself up for the team and just try and do everything you can to win a game, I think you have a lot of success.

Q. Trey, you had five really good innings today. Any normal game, probably go a little longer. How much does a start like this against Arkansas, they finished second or third in the SEC, how much does this do for you heading into the NCAA tournament?



TREY POOSER: It gives me a lot of confidence. Go out there, obviously gives us a chance to keep moving on and go throughout the tournament. But just going into next week, just having that solid outing behind me and knowing that, having that confidence to go in there and pitch the same way, if better.

Q. Ryan, do you think there's some value in, as you head to the postseason, seeing the arms you saw for Arkansas? Because they used all their best guys regardless of role. So is that something that you go into regionals you see as being helpful?

RYAN WALDSCHMIDT: Yeah, for sure. Anytime when you can face top-end arms, it just makes you better. As long as you have the mindset of failure is okay and failure is a way to learn.

You're going to lose. You're going to have bad at-bats. You're going to just not win a lot of the time. But if you can learn from it and you can grow from it, it makes you a lot better when you go face someone else who might not be as highly considered as a top-end arm.

But it definitely helps when you face these guys every day.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you for your time. We'll take questions for Coach.

Q. We talked about the resilience all season long with this team. Go out yesterday and just notch one hit, and come out today and notch ten hits, nine runs. Just what kind of changed overnight?

NICK MINGIONE: We just challenged them this morning. We started watching the opposing pitcher at 6:50 this morning, and then at 7 o'clock we met as a team. We challenged 'em.

This team has done what it's done all year. Seems like every time we challenge 'em, they respond. What we did was we actually had all the guys that faced him last time stand up in front of the team, and we basically told them that this guy has sat out there, Hagen Smith, for 14 straight weeks and basically has dominated everybody he's played.

And we told 'em that life and the game of baseball is about making adjustments. And we challenged them. And those guys that faced him, they had to use their man voice and tell our team what they were going to do different today than they did last time. Because you guys know this, you keep doing the same thing over and over and over again, expecting a different result, what's that called? Insanity, right?

So we're like: We're not doing that. We might strike out again, but we're not going to strike out and get out the same way we did last time.

We actually paired a pitcher up with 'em, and that was their battle buddy, and we made them tell 'em what exactly we were going to do. And we got 'em face-to-face at 7 o'clock this morning. And we had some stare-downs going on. It was awesome.

And they responded. They were digging it. And I'm like, man, it's just a special team. I mean, for us to challenge 'em at 7 o'clock this morning, they were wide awake, and I thought they responded to it.

Q. We talked about I think in February or March about this team and about how special they are. I want to ask you about the momentum, getting a win in Hoover, having success here. And I know you mentioned this back in February, about having success in Hoover first and then worrying about Omaha as the end goal. Talk about having success in Hoover and how big that is for y'all.

NICK MINGIONE: Yeah, anytime you go into the postseason, you do want to play good. This is a tough tournament to win, as you know. It is a challenge. You do want to feel good about your team. You do want to be clicking on all cylinders.

And, quite frankly, sometimes you're going to face an opponent and an arm that just shuts down and you just don't do as well as you would like. But there's no question that you want to feel good about your team heading into next week, and this is a great opportunity for us to do that.

Q. As you touched on at the beginning, the defense was pretty great today. McCarthy had that great catch in center field. Pitre had a great grab in the first, along with some others, Grant Smith. How important has this team's defensive prowess been all year and then heading into the finals of the SEC tournament this week? And then next week, how important is that?

NICK MINGIONE: Yeah, I mean, when you think about everybody on the field, the game presented them an opportunity to do something great on the defensive end. They responded. When you think about Nolan, the game did not present Waldy an opportunity to not present, McCoy in right, but everybody else it did. Devin had three great blocks throughout the game that I thought saved the bases, and one saved a run.

The job that Mitch Daly did on multiple balls -- to his left, right at him, and coming in -- there's 16 ground balls you

got to master as an infielder, and he dominated those three plays.

Same thing with Grant. He moved well to his left and right. And then Pete was just unbelievable. I mean, the range for him, he went backhand up the middle on a ball that jumped up -- I don't know if you saw it -- and it stuck right in his palm. How many times have you seen a guy do that and the ball jumps up a tad and it falls out, nope, it sticks in.

Nicholson made a great tag. Everybody on our field -- I thought Pooser did a good job covering first base, same thing with Ryan. Those guys, when the game presented an opportunity for them to make a play, they did it.

And we have to have a pitching staff that believes in that; that, hey, look, I can ram that thing in there, and we're going to have a defense. It truly is a nine-versus-one mentality. When we're doing that and they're doing, that's us at our best.

And we got in trouble, quite frankly, in the 6th when we didn't do that. But when we do that, we can compete at a very high level.

Q. A little bit of new territory for your program, knowing going into the next two weeks, we're going to be playing at home, regardless of what happens this week. How are you thinking about, hey, we're competitive, we want to win here, but also we have some bigger fish to fry coming up? How are you and your coaching staff thinking about that?

NICK MINGIONE: You bring up a really good point. And as a matter of fact, we made that decision in the middle of the game with Trey. He was at 76 pitches. If we chose to run him back out the score was 6-0, you know, on an average, you're going to throw anywhere between 16 and 20, 25 pitches in an inning.

So we made the decision, okay, if we do that, what we're saying is we're going to run him up there to over a hundred pitches. And we weren't willing to do that. Sure, was the game 6-0? Yes, it was. Was it in a good spot? But ultimately, to your point, we do have to manage that in the right way.

And I thought that's what they did with Hagen Smith as well, right, I mean, they find ways to chip away his innings and just to keep him down because they know just as well as I do that we need these guys to throw well next week and the week after and then two more weeks in Omaha to do what we want to do.

So it is absolutely in the back of our minds. And we do have to be smart about how we go about it. And it's why we did Hogan and we extended him out to three innings and we built him up. Same thing with Ryan Hagenow. He was able to get two-plus innings and build his pitch count up, but with all the thought in mind that we are trying to win this, but then also to try to protect him and position ourselves to be good next week as well.

Q. I want to ask you about the trust you have in 1-9 of your lineup. Today it was Ryan, other days it's Devin Burkes, or whoever. Talk about that trust you have in your offensive explosiveness in tournament play.

NICK MINGIONE: Yeah, there's six components to offense and when we're at our best, we're doing what we did today. We bunted, we hit bombs, we ran the bases well, we stole bases, we displayed our strike zone discipline, we situationally hit really well.

I thought Lopez, that was crucial, they had runners at second and third, we had runners second and third, he pulls the ball foul, next pitch, a couple pitches later he rams the ball in the right center field gap to get us two RBIs. We situationally hit.

We did really click on a lot of the things. The guys are just great. I had Grant Smith in my room last night because we just felt like, hey, we could try to get him to a little better place, mentally, physically, you know all those things, just to check on him. We had a great meeting with him, and again he responded. I thought his leadership today was outstanding. He was -- man, his desire to win today really showed, and I thought our team fed off of him.

So you're right, and that is our nine-hole guy, but he had great competitive at-bats, flew out to the track, got the two-strike base hit there late. But when we're at our best it is 1-9, and it's a lineup that where I think other teams and coaches have told us and complimented us and said it's a really deep lineup and that is us at our best.

Q. We've seen a lot of balls flying over the fence here. Maybe more than you're used to seeing. What do you attribute that to? Is it carrying better? Hitters taking advantage of mistakes? Are they just locked in? What's going on?

NICK MINGIONE: I think it's a bit of everything. I think I would tell you that this league is filled with people that are just very physical. I mean, when you see some of our guys, if you were to see them with their shirts off, I mean, it is like impressive. So the physicality.

Another thing too is we got pitchers out there with power

stuff, and there's a lot of times, if you can just get the barrel to the right spot, the ball can explode off your bat.

Is the ball carrying, like the actual ball, is it like going pretty good, I think so. And are the bats good? Yes. I think the humidity has a lot to do with it. I looked at it this morning, it was in the low 50s. And when the humidity gets low like that and it gets into the 50s and 40s, the ball actually does carry better.

Yesterday, for example, we got a little higher. So I think it's a combination of all those things.

Am I -- personally, this is a subject for another matter, am I a little concerned with how much they're going over the fence? Yes. I think when you start doing some of the predictions of if these guys in our league played 162-game schedule, it is a little bit alarming. We would set like worldwide universal records in the history of, like -- I mean, it is. But there's some really good players.

I think the strike zone has something to do with it. I just, we -- and I really believe this, we have the best umpires in the country. But I think when you start factoring all of those things, I think it does play a factor into it.

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