

# Southeastern Conference Baseball Tournament

Thursday, May 23, 2024

Hoover, Alabama, USA

Hoover Metropolitan Stadium

## Tennessee Volunteers Coach Tony Vitello AJ Causey Kavares Tears

Postgame Press Conference



Tennessee 7, Texas A&M 4

TONY VITELLO: This tournament is so great for all the teams in our league, and I think the league helps prepare you but the tournament does, too, because you get used to media coverage, fans, chaos, all kinds of different things.

I thought we handled it a lot better yesterday. It's not like we did anything wrong, but everything seemed to be a little more in sync. Great attitude from our guys even though it was definitely not a perfect game.

Both teams made mistakes. I haven't looked at it close enough to know who made one more than the other, but I think because Stam and Causey threw the ball so well, we were able to take advantage of KT's stuff at the plate as well as the rest of the team.

It's nice to be able to play tomorrow because we kind of had a plan A for the pitching. Obviously AJ Russell was a hot topic yesterday, kind of how we wanted to handle Cause. Kirby had to put in a little extra work, but to this point, it looks like we'll be able to check some of the boxes we wanted to.

Whether we're able to win the thing or not, we've accomplished a lot to this point on top of what we did this season.

**Q. AJ, you've been so good after Stamos this year. Is there anything in particular about him and how he pitches that you feed off really well?**

AJ CAUSEY: I think we're two completely different looks, being like an over-the-top lefty, me being a low slot righty. Other than that, I think he comes out and he competes and

kind of calms me, makes me go out there and do what he did basically. Yeah, it's really calming.

**Q. Kavares, Tony last week gave you a challenge to step up in a different way. These last two weekends you've produced at a high level coming up in big moments. How have you been able to produce? How has that challenge ignited a light in you?**

KAVARES TEARS: I think a lot of it is just faith in each other. If somebody doesn't get it done, then you have 100 percent faith in the guy behind you that he's going to get it done. So just believing in each other I think has played the biggest role.

**Q. Kavares, from facing AJ and Stamos in practice, what makes them so effective? How hard do you think it is for an opposing team when they have to face both those guys on the same day?**

KAVARES TEARS: To answer your second question, it's not easy at all. I can tell you that. It's tough facing both of them. But I think a lot of it is just very competitive. They're not going to give batters just free 90s and everything is going to be competitive.

I think that's the biggest part with both of them. Like he said earlier, they just go out there and compete and leave it all out there.

**Q. Who got the better of who?**

KAVARES TEARS: 1-1.

**Q. Where did Stamos' outing stack up with his best this season?**

TONY VITELLO: I think he's been arguably a little more effective at home than on the road by at least a little bit, not a ton. This is a neutral site. It's a big stage. I never even looked, I don't know at Cal what his postseason experience was, whether it be in the conference tournament or in a regional play or anything else. I don't know how much he's had, if any. But he looked like a pro out there.



I think he was, if anything, a really good balance. He gets fired up. I know he's not waving his fists and all that stuff, but he's a pretty intense guy, and I think that's important to manage in a setting like this, and he seemed to have a good balance of the proper intensity but also having his breath under him and things like that.

Where it stacks up, I'm not sure, but I think it was kind of what the doctor ordered after yesterday.

**Q. Have you ever in your career had a team that's used two openers on a weekend, and if you have used openers this much, how effective has that been in your experience?**

TONY VITELLO: No, I mean, I'm just going to piggyback because we just got done visiting with the ESPN folks. To me, we've got, even more so than 2021, was maybe our best depth-wise position player, this is the most unselfish position player group I've ever been a part of.

And so I didn't mean to wave a big flag with the run rule stuff. We've been run ruled. We've run ruled other people. It's frustrating when you don't get as many at-bats spread around some of these guys.

We just kind of take one away from Reese and give one to Bargo there. Peebles is standing on deck if K.T. would have got on base his last at-bat.

But they're the same every day with how they work and their attitude and how they have each other's back. It's the most unselfish group I've ever been a part of. And then the pitchers have been the most willing I've ever been a part of.

This staff has been used differently and done things differently, but they're all very willing to do whatever you ask them to do, including hand you the ball. Stam wanted to talk to me about the movie "Tombstone" out there when I took the ball from his hand, and little does he know, I think you guys know, there's some history with that movie and us.

And then same thing, Causey, as soon as he saw me out there, I've seen that look before. He wanted no part of coming out of the game. But by the time I get to that point, he's talking to his teammates about what they've got to do and he hands the ball off to Kirby.

So I would describe willing and unselfish out of those two groups, and it's nice they're in the same dugout together.

**Q. This may be a better question for the end of the season, but you say willing and unselfish. With those**

**two things, how fun of a group is this to coach?**

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, we're deep into this whole thing, so there's obviously more work to be done, but the way a coach -- a player looks at his season off this thing, with the numbers and all that.

The way the coaches do is the whole thing starts in August, and really even before that. You're trying to recruit so you don't have any major blinds spots and the draft and all that stuff. You guys know how it can be a headache.

It starts way in advance of even opening day, and then how the fall goes and leading up to the season, that probably carries as much weight when you're judging is it fun to get out of your car to walk into the office every day.

And this is -- that was a goal. As far as adding guys like Stam, his whole recruiting process was a big part of that goal. Since we're talking about him, he's a perfect analogy or representation or whatever the heck I'm trying to talk about.

I'm just glad the guy is here. We didn't get one guy and we got him instead, and I don't know who's better. You can't decide that. But I know who's a lot of fun to be around, and so are the other guys. When you park your car at Lindsey Nelson Stadium and you get out of the car, if you're in a bad mood, it changes pretty quickly.

**Q. Kavares Tears is maybe more of an underrated player than he should be, but is that something he feeds into? Or what's allowed him to impress as of late?**

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, I think anything that relates to doubt, failure, adversity, that's when he takes his passion and directs it. He's had some blowups in the dugout, whether it be -- he's done a good job of not being a distraction with it, but it can be a home run or a hit. It can be something good happen or something bad.

But he's got a furnace in there. He's got a lot of fire to him. When there's some challenges like he had on our campus, you come in, you're just kind of a bopper, a guy that's got some power and not that well rounded of a player or athlete, and you've got to sit behind a lot of talented guys, that fire drove him in the long term, too, or over many days, not just moments. But, yeah, he's got a lot of passion to him.

**Q. Tony, Schloss was just in here talking about all the home runs. We're on pace for a record number of home runs this week in the tournament. The Big 12 leaders in the teens, that would be 11th in the SEC.**

**Why do you think that is that this league is -- that the game includes so much power, so many home runs?**

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, I think you look at the best players can tell the story a little bit. The guy that's in the middle of that lineup, Montgomery, was at Stanford. One reason or another, these kids are attracted to this league across the country.

So you're kind of piling them all up into -- I don't know what the average weight of the lineman is in the SEC, but I bet that's pretty high, too, and it probably is the highest in the country. The Big Ten people are going to throw stuff at me.

Then you look at a guy like Skenes, yeah, I'm sure he developed and he worked hard and all that, but you go from what you have to do at the Air Force and what those people do for themselves and for us and for the Air Force Academy, and you switch over to an SEC school where we have all these resources for these kids -- we have nutritionists, we make them get to bed, we can track their sleep, we can do everything -- the better athlete gets even better. That would be two quick ways or two examples.

Then the guy next to us, like C-Mo said to the ESPN guys, if he just touches it, it's going to go because he's strong.

**Q. You talked about wanting to check some of these boxes, and some of the boxes you've already checked. What else are you trying to accomplish outside of winning the whole thing this weekend?**

TONY VITELLO: You know, it's good in my opinion that we get -- Beam is a very routine-orientated guy, and it's good that instead of him coming in and throwing the eighth inning or ninth inning or something, that he gets a start tomorrow.

I don't know what we'll do pitch count-wise. We'll wait to see when the game starts. Combs, we had kind of a set rest plan for him, kind of how we did bullpen stuff. He wasn't really available today. So for Kirby to do what he did was huge for us.

But we'd like to get Combsy a little action tomorrow. And then if you're fortunate enough to win, maybe Zander starts, but I think it would be good to get Zander on the mound. Either way, he's always kind of the same guy day every day.

Those are kind of some things with the AJ Russell, Stam getting a good amount of work, Causey getting a good amount of work but not getting overtaxed because he's done a lot for us this year.

In a decent spot. You're in a much better spot when you win the game that you're sitting here talking about. But in a decent spot.

**Q. How encouraging was the perseverance from the offense to have a couple opportunities with the bases loaded to break it out after yesterday not to be discouraged?**

TONY VITELLO: It was good, and speaking of not discouraged, I've been generous with my phone number. There's oh-so-many hitting coaches out there when the other team scores more than you, but this is a team game, and there's a flow to the game, and yesterday we didn't bounce back after a difficult five-run inning. But the game kind of had a certain flow.

If we pitch better or play better defense, we might score more runs. There's nine innings to hit with. But the thing kind of got out of sorts yesterday.

So this one to me was one that had a little bit better -- if you accumulate all the at-bats overall, there's no question they were better. It is good they didn't get discouraged, but they've been very mature. We joked about that word with the Drew Gilbert thing and all that stuff. They've been very mature throughout the year.

You don't have to get too excited about one day, and you don't have to get too frustrated with another day with this group in particular.

**Q. Kind of building off of that, with the bases loaded obviously Amick gets caught stealing third. Was there anything concerning outside of this game that you want to clear up, the baserunning or taking better advantage of a bases-loaded situation moving forward?**

TONY VITELLO: No, I think, if anything, on the baserunning deal, we had the first and third with Ensley, they bring in their tough submarine guy, and just a hesitation cost us, which can happen this time of year. Kids think about consequences because if you get forward and you start envisioning what am I going to say at this press conference, and if we lose we're out of the tournament, you can start thinking about consequences.

And I'm not saying it happened there, but you've just got to keep playing ball. Normally we don't hesitate on that particular situation. But I think we just kind of had a missed play on the occasion that you talked about.

And again, I think I opened with this one or the last

interview, we certainly made mistakes today, but as strong as they are, we were talking about, and as good of athletes as they are, they're also about 21, 22 years old, and we're going to make mistakes tomorrow, too. It's about just making sure you keep playing ball throughout nine innings, and you want as few as possible. But again, you can overcome them, especially if you've got the talent that's in our league.

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