

# Southeastern Conference Baseball Tournament

Thursday, May 23, 2024

Hoover, Alabama, USA

Hoover Metropolitan Stadium

## LSU Tigers

## Coach Jay Johnson

## Fidel Ulloa

## Michael Braswell III

### Postgame Press Conference



LSU 11, South Carolina 10

JAY JOHNSON: Great baseball game tonight. So proud of the team. Really for the last month, every win we've had has been the most important win. Tonight was the best win of the season.

A lot of things didn't go well. I think it's great training ground for where we're headed in the NCAA Tournament. We talked about when we were down 5-1 that in the postseason you get behind if you press, if you panic, the season gets away from you in a hurry, and these guys have not done that the entire season. That was the best example of it tonight.

Really excited about the off-day tomorrow. They deserve it. They've earned it. Get ready for Kentucky or South Carolina on Saturday.

But awesome game. These two were phenomenal. Michael, what a special player and performance tonight. Couldn't be prouder of him. He's been one of the best shortstops in the country, especially over the last three or four weeks he's taken us to a new level since moving him into a lead-off spot.

Jake Brown is going to be one of the next staple players of this deal for a long time, and showed his ability tonight and inserted him in, and the home run jumps off the page. But the other at-bats, including the one in the ninth to set the table and ultimately score the winning run, was awesome.

Good night, and excited for what's next.

**Q. Michael, facing your former team, you get the game-winning hit. What were the emotions for you**

**after you realized what you did?**

MICHAEL BRASWELL III: I mean, I couldn't find a moment where I've been happier in the sport of baseball, honestly. I have respect for the South Carolina program, but I'm an LSU Tiger, and there's been a lot of social media things going on in the last recent days, and to get that hit really kind of gave me satisfaction for a lot of things. It meant the world to me.

**Q. Michael, since you've been in that lead-off spot, you seem to have really thrived. What is it about being in that spot that's really helped you focus and really be able to set the table for the team?**

MICHAEL BRASWELL III: Well, my main thing is when I'm leading off, I know I have Tommy and Jared Jones behind me, and those are two of the most dangerous hitters in the country.

And my job is to get on base so they can drive me in. And that's the only mindset I have when I'm up there. I'm not trying to hit a home run, not trying to do anything crazy. I just want to get on base for my guys.

And it kind of takes pressure off me because when I'm at the lower part of the lineup maybe sometimes I get out of myself. But when I'm in the lead-off spot, all I want to do is just be a team guy, and that's why I think I've thrived in that spot.

**Q. Michael, what were you telling yourself to stay in the moment when there's so many emotions going through you with the game-winning run at third base, you're facing your former team?**

MICHAEL BRASWELL III: Well, our first base coach, Chief, Wanaka, he told me before the game, he said: Play the baseball, not them. And that's what I did my last AB. I said, look, this is no different than maybe in the first, third, fourth or fifth. And if I make it anything more than that, the results won't come. And if I just calm myself down and play like a normal AB and treat it like a normal AB, then the results will come. That's what it was.



**Q. Fidel, you came in there in the eighth. Cole Messina already had six RBIs, and you had to face him. What were the game plan there, and what were you able to do to get a strikeout?**

FIDEL ULLOA: The game plan was to get ahead in the count, attack him with my stuff. When you're facing a guy like that, just kind of trust that your stuff is good enough to get him out and strike one, strike two, strike three.

**Q. Michael, you said when you came to LSU, you wanted to work on your offense. That was a big reason why you came here. The coaching staff said they would help you develop that area of your game. How satisfying is it that you used those offensive improvements to beat your former team?**

MICHAEL BRASWELL III: It's more than satisfying, but I realize there's a lot of season left for us. I truly believe that. I'm not going to act like this is the World Series or anything like that. We might play them again or Kentucky on Saturday.

So I don't want to treat this like -- it happened and it was great in the moment, yes, but we're moving on to Saturday, and that's my next focus.

**Q. Michael, the freshmen, Steven Milam and Jake Brown today, six hits combined in a game like today. What have they meant to this team this season and late in the season, as well?**

MICHAEL BRASWELL III: Man, they meant the world to us. Jake Brown coming in whenever we need him and doing his jobs, and Steven playing Gold Glove defense at second base and squaring up balls.

They have a bright future at LSU and a bright future in baseball, period. I can't wait to watch them for the next two years and see what they can do.

**Q. Fidel, when you came into the game, I think you walked the first two batters. How were you able to find your stuff again and find your command again and lock down those last two innings?**

FIDEL ULLOA: It all came down to taking a deep breath, finding a focal point. Like to look at somewhere. We always pick out somewhere in the stadium. Small focal point, take a deep breath, and attack, first pitch.

**Q. What was the focal point?**

FIDEL ULLOA: It was a comma in front of two words. I don't even know what the words say. I just know it was a

small little comma. Stare at it for a few seconds, take a deep breath, and yeah.

**Q. How big is it to get the day off for tomorrow and then just set up the pitching for Saturday?**

JAY JOHNSON: Yeah, it was big. We've kind of been taking this in increments. Yesterday's game was to get out of the 9:30 slot. We were playing for the afternoon championship. That's what we were going for.

Tonight was the off-day championship. Then we're going to go to Fleming's. We went to Fleming's on Sunday night when we arrived. And I said if we have the off-day on Friday, we'll go to Fleming's again.

It's kind of a postseason tradition here the last couple years. We got the off day, and we got the steak. So a lot of very happy guys going back to that hotel tonight.

**Q. The moment for Michael, I know it means a lot to him. For you as a coach, being his coach now, what was going through your mind about that?**

JAY JOHNSON: Yeah, a lot at the time. It was honestly, okay, who do we have left in the bullpen, left, right, who's coming up. Okay, we're going to go to Paxton at center, we pinch run for Steven, Ben is going to go to second, we're going to shift Jake around.

And then it was like, okay, my man over here, that's a big deal. I've actually done something similar like that. That's a big deal in his life.

I thought about I might need to go talk to him just go play shortstop now. But he showed so much poise the entire game, and he did exactly what Coach Wanaka told him to do: Just play the game. It's about the ball. It's about execution. It's not about that.

We have great respect for them.

It was pretty simple. He went in the portal, and I just -- I said yesterday or the day before, I liked him as a player. That's really all this was about. Didn't compare him to anybody else. I just really liked the way he played. I thought he'd make our team better.

He's playing his best baseball right now this season. That's the story. It's not about this game tonight or that. It's like he's playing his best baseball of the season right now.

**Q. At points this game was reminiscent to Game 3s this season where the bullpen struggles, you get down**



**early. What does this say about the team's resilience to battle back and end up on top here?**

JAY JOHNSON: Yeah, that's a great question. I think I have full confidence in the guys that went out there tonight. I actually think we pitched better than 10 runs. I know that's going to sound crazy or I'm trying to spin a positive. I think we pitched better than what the numbers actually showed tonight.

I think the story is we were down 5-1 going into the top of the fourth inning, and we actually took an offensive time-out and took a meeting. And I did this in the Wake Forest game last year in Omaha when we got down 2-0 in the first championship game with them.

I just said: Hey. We had already talked about this. You get to the postseason, you get behind, sometimes you can press or you can panic, and then the game gets away from you. It's like we can't do that. We have to just continue to play.

Within four hitters the game was tied. It was unbelievable. I don't know that you could do that any better than that.

Then it got to 10-7, and Cole Messina is a beast. Like holy cow. I don't know where to start trying to get him out right now. He single-handedly almost beat us tonight. He gets a big two-run single there, they go ahead again, and they push a couple more across, we're down 10-7 again.

Veach, he had one of the best relief performances against our superstar team last year, so it wasn't necessarily looking great, and then they just did it again. Josh Pearson hit that ball hard. I'm sure it was an error, but he smoked it. Then the freshman at the end of the game, he got base hit, base hit. And Larson, I thought he hit a three-run homer right there when it came off the bat against a seasoned pitcher. So you've got your young guys doing it.

And then Fidel, it was a good question here about how he got it together right there. We couldn't go down two. There's a big difference between one- and two-run lead in the ninth inning, as we saw at Alabama a couple weeks ago. What poise to execute that.

I'm super proud of him. He's really helped us out here down the stretch and is doing a great job.

**Q. You mentioned how coming up in the ninth, you've got three freshmen coming up, and they all execute for you. How impressed are you with them both tonight and throughout the season?**

JAY JOHNSON: Yeah, I'm really pleased with that.

There's none running around the league right now. There's none. And it's a game that is pretty important still for us with where we're trying to go and what we're trying to accomplish, and we've got three of them in the lineup.

I think maybe NM has two in there on a daily basis, but I don't think anybody has three. Jake has kind of been in and out, but we're rolling with Ashton and Steven.

But they've got a lot of potential, and I like the skills that they have. Like they are very wheelhouse players for me is what I call them. We're going to have a lot of fun developing those guys here in this postseason run we're going to have and for the next couple years.

**Q. You mentioned Jake. What sort of inspired you to start him today in center?**

JAY JOHNSON: Yeah, I think he's taken two really good at-bats here. He singled on Tuesday and then he smoked one to left on Thursday on a pitch that was 96 or 97. I don't remember who threw it for Kentucky.

He started off the spring good. He was the opening day starter in the outfield. I like left-handed hitters. Our team is a little bit counter to that, but I like left-handed hitters. I liked the matchup today against Pitzer for him.

So it was a combination of I thought he's taken two good at-bats, he's got explosive tools. It's going to be exciting when he really becomes a great player because there's all the ability there in the world. I could throw out some Major League player comparisons, but it's going to be fun to tackle that next step with him the next couple years.

**Q. Messina almost single-handedly won the game tonight. After the grand slam he comes up again with the bases loaded. You probably don't want to walk him and tie the game, but what was the goal for that at-bat? What did you tell your pitcher?**

JAY JOHNSON: Yeah, Christian has done a great job executing pitches here. Kind of a tough outing tonight, but he had five guys in a row with two strikes during that stretch. So it wasn't -- again, there's four runs on the board, but that's kind of what I'm talking about. We pitched better than the 10 runs that were on the board. We couldn't quite put anybody away there in that stretch.

That's real hitting right there. The guy hits one like 500 feet. I saw both of them on TV yesterday back at the hotel. So to have the self-discipline and control to stay on a slider and rip it in the right center field gap, that looked like Edgar Martinez or early Cardinals years Albert Pujols. That was impressive today.

**Q. Steven, four hits today. We talked about him, but why is he so hard to get out?**

JAY JOHNSON: He's really improved a lot. We have a lot of history together. I've known him since he was in seventh grade. He's obviously undersized for a player in the SEC, but the baseball acumen, the skill is unreal. The aptitude is what I've come to appreciate the most. He's so much -- like if you go backwards five weeks and we're at Tennessee and we're 3-12, you wouldn't even recognize the difference in the player. You wouldn't even recognize it.

That's saying a lot for a guy that might have a ceiling or a perceived ceiling, but he's got unbelievable determination, grit, will, and the baseball acumen is off the charts. The at-bats he's taking, the pitches he's laying off, the pitches he's spoiling with two strikes.

If we're playing at the Box, he'd have four home runs in the three games that we've played here. There's a lot of power in that body, and he's played great defense.

The toughness part of it, he got whacked on the foot with like a 93 mile-an-hour pitch yesterday and he's hobbling around out there and got four pretty big hits in that game.

I mean, I'll never take him out of a game if I don't have to. It's just that was the tying run, and Paxton is the fastest player that I've ever seen. So that's the only reason we pinch ran for him.

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