

Southeastern Conference Baseball Tournament

Friday, May 24, 2024

Hoover, Alabama, USA

Hoover Metropolitan Stadium

Tennessee Volunteers

Tony Vitello

Drew Beam

Blake Burke

Postgame Press Conference



Tennessee - 6, Mississippi State - 5

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

TONY VITELLO: Drew's sitting next to me, so my first thought is I'm appreciative of obviously him being in our program, but I thought he threw the ball in excellent fashion tonight. I don't think the -- we got this box score here, does it justice for a couple different reasons.

Then it's good to have Blake here too. He's done it time and time again, even as a freshman being surrounded by those guys, but I don't think he could have done it freshman year or have done it the way he's done it the last two years without those guys that he played with. It's a good time to give a shout out to those guys that are killing it in pro ball, but also some of the role players. Some of 'em are even still on this team that kind of help make our jobs easier now that we've been in Knoxville for a few years.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the players.

Q. Drew, what did you have working well for you tonight and what kind of went sideways during that fifth inning?

DREW BEAM: I think, first and foremost, I had -- the fastball and curveball were playing really well off each other. The curveball was spinning really well. So had good command of both going on there for a little while.

And then there in that last inning that I was in on the mound, just things didn't go my way. The coin fell the other

way. So that's pretty much all I can explain it that way.

Q. Blake, take me through the at-bat where you hit the go-ahead home run.

BLAKE BURKE: I don't really remember much. I remember looking at the scouting report before going up there trying to hunt a fastball, and I got it, and I took my best swing and that was the result.

Q. What was kind of y'all's perspective when things kind of got a little tense there in the fifth inning between both teams?

DREW BEAM: We did our best to keep pulling behind our guys, not make it about the other team. Just kind of have each other's back and pull our weight and not worry about the other guys.

BLAKE BURKE: Kind of the same thing. We kind of got off track for a second, worried about them. We just wanted to get Aaron Combs' back and that's what we did after that, and we played our game and ended up winning the game.

Q. Drew, what was it like seeing the work that the bullpen did today, I guess specifically the way Behnke stepped in there and did that 8th inning the way he did?

DREW BEAM: It's really cool in this tournament, you know, Coach has to make a lot of decisions to use different guys in different situations than they might not have been in this year. So it was really cool, Behnke in particular, to come out there and just throw his nuts off and he threw really well and then the other guys that came in behind him, Kirby, Nate, and Aaron, they all came in and just threw really well and cleaned up my stuff for me.

Q. Why do you feel like y'all play so well when you're staring adversity in the face or maybe things don't go your way? Why do y'all maybe play your best baseball at that point?

DREW BEAM: I think it's a testament to the guys who have been here before us and who are still in this program



and stuff. We've been through it. We have seen it before. And they have instilled that we're going to keep pushing no matter what and that's going to -- we're going to band together as brothers and just keep working through things as we tackle 'em.

BLAKE BURKE: I think it's cool that we just accept it and we move on, keep going, and whatever happens happens.

Q. You guys got a lot out of Dean and Reese at the bottom of the order tonight. How big was that and specifically that walk that Reese worked there to load the bases?

BLAKE BURKE: Reese is really good and really fun to watch in the box. There's a lot of guys that don't play sometimes that we trust when they go up there. There's a lot of guys that we love cheering on and we love watching. So, I mean, we kind of expect that from those guys and that's what they did.

Q. Drew, what's key for Behnke to find consistency and what's kind of your message to him as he's trying to find himself within the pitching staff?

DREW BEAM: Yeah, I guess I kind of asked him what he was thinking when he was out there and he said, Nothing, so I guess him just going out there with blank stares and just going out there and being a dog is his key to success.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you. Good luck tomorrow. We'll take questions for Coach.

Q. What has Reese been doing so well at the plate this week?

TONY VITELLO: I think he's calmed down a little bit. You can see it in his takes. He's always been a good two-strike adjuster, kind of taming down his swing. He's certainly aggressive prior to two strikes, so that combo to me has always been there.

But the overall calmness in the box probably kind of comes from now he's racked up plenty of experience instead of this in and out and limited time freshman year. He did play at a very high level in some tournaments in high school, but he's now similar to these guys. He's racked up a lot of experience. The kid works as diligent -- we called him out in front of the team multiple times. He works as diligent -- with as much intent, is the best word, as anyone we have on our team, and so there's no doubt he's prepared.

Q. You were able to get Ariel in in the 9th and the ball found him for all three outs. What's this year been like for him and how has he improved?

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, Liam Spence, our former shortstop, said the ball will find you, which seems to happen when you go in the game, regardless of who you are. But he was in that spot and those are two very difficult plays. Him being able to make 'em was obviously huge for us. But I think he's a kid who kind of caught a couple tough breaks, an injury in high school and then an injury with us, when he was on the fast track to either be a draft pick or one of these rare immediate players in the SEC, but I think is he an immediate player. A few more at-bats under his belt and I think it will click for him.

But right now, he's been tremendous for us defensively and he's anxious to go out there and we're just trying to find ways to use somebody that's a great tool for us to have.

Q. Two guys I wanted to specifically ask about are Behnke and Dean Curley. What did you get from them tonight that really boosted the team?

TONY VITELLO: Behnke was a man possessed. It was awesome. He's shown that a little bit before, where the intent and the approach is exactly what you would want or you would pop a video in and tell a younger kid to watch that. He's got the stuff to go with it. I don't ever see a kid that's timid or scared, but just the approach tonight was outstanding and it made you feel like -- he's obviously -- I've said to you guys many times, he's a great jam guy for us. But to copy my answers with ESPN out there, you're able to add AJ Russell back to the mix, and then Behnke kind of throwing like that is something that I think gives us an edge. It's one more guy to get us out of a situation that maybe Kirby's not available or these other guys that we've used are not available.

Q. What was your vantage point of the tensions brewing and what was communicated to you?

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, well, I think the umpires handled it well, and then I don't know if it's been announced in the other room, but the conference asked us to not shake hands at the end so there wasn't any -- the players -- Blake even said it. All the players -- I mean, Jordan was joking with our dugout, in particular with me, right before he stabbed us in the heart with that RBI. But, again, Blake mentioned all the players that were involved in the game were all cordial and kind of how it's been in the conference. I mean, these guys have a ton of respect for one another.

But from my vantage point, which it's my vantage point, you know, we thought we were out of the inning a couple times. So I haven't seen the video where you actually have better perspective, but from our dugout, we thought we were out of the inning a couple times, and that's our guy. I

mean, I owe a lot, I owe money to Drew Bean. I don't know what the ruling is. Not that I'm going to go hand him any money, but that's our guy, and so I was boiling out there, to be honest with you. I tried to not show it. I didn't say anything to the umpire or anything like that. But with my dad, I'm not used to a bunch of guys hollering out my name and not reacting.

So I'm Italian. Maybe I brought it on myself, but I didn't say anything to anybody. Just not used to that. I mean, if our players are yelling out Dave to the Coach Van Horn in any form or fashion, we got a problem. So that's just me. And, again, maybe I bring it on myself. So I reacted and then they reacted, and then after that, to me, the umpires did whatever they needed to do to handle it.

But if anything, those guys -- first of all, I'm not in the fight. Anyone that wants to try and dig up video, I don't think there is any, but I wasn't a good player at all, so I ain't in the game. The players -- again, these freak athletes are the ones that are going to decide and maybe I make a stupid decision and mess it up, but our players are going to decide who wins and loses from here on out.

And the other thing is, if anything, I should have been -- maybe they were yelling my name to thank me because with that emotional swing Drew had, we should have had somebody ready earlier and should have taken him out of the game.

Q. Blake's home run was the 38th home run hit in this tournament, which ties the record for most home runs ever in a SEC tournament. Do you think it's a good thing for college baseball that we're seeing as many home runs or more home runs hit now than at the height of gorilla ball?

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, I mean, I didn't realize those numbers were like that, but I think as long as player safety is not an issue, and obviously, I showed tonight I'm not the patron saint of anything. But as long as player safety isn't an issue -- I mean, we've had some balls absolutely scalded this year, where a base runner or a pitcher was kind of a scary situation, you know, but I don't know that other people are hitting home runs like some of the guys in this league. I mean, Blake has one of the best swings, and you look at two of their guys in the lineup, and every time Hunter Hines is up to bat you're holding your breath, not just before he swings, but as the pitch is being thrown. So, a little bit of it to me has to do with the guys that are in our league. And then, I don't know, maybe the ball's a little bit hotter, or they have perfected how to make these bats as best as possible.

Q. With the way you had to go about the bullpen

tonight how are you situated entering tomorrow with Zander and some of the others?

TONY VITELLO: Well, funny thing about tonight, Zander hates me and likes me. We had him hot before we tied the game, I just -- I was looking out for him more than anything, and, again, maybe poor execution on my part, or, we had him hot ready to go, because I did not want to leave here without him throwing at least an inning or even at least to a hitter. So, we'll see where he's at. It's not like he can't pitch tomorrow. We'll see where he's at. There's not a whole lot left in general, so we'll kind of probably attack tomorrow in a different way. I mean JJ's on our roster, so maybe we'll start him. But, anyway, back to my little Zander tangent, I did find his air pods he left in the locker room in here, so hopefully those two things cancel each other out.

Q. You talked about being content giving a bunch of different guys opportunity at the DH spot. Has Reese done anything this week to give himself more opportunities and maybe change that thinking a little bit?

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, I think so. I think, whether it's him being relaxed in the box or the relaxed feeling he gives the coaching staff that you're going to get a competitive at-bat. And it's a well-rounded situation, whether it be able to adjust with two strikes, he can certainly get a bunt down as he done a couple times for us. Then, it's not like the other guys aren't like this, but you could hear it in Blake's voice, like those guys got a lot of respect for him. Again, just how he goes about his business and then also his ability.

Q. Looking ahead to tomorrow, what are some keys for your team, do you think?

TONY VITELLO: Get some rest tonight. That was an emotional game. Again, maybe I'm to blame, but I said it out there, I think this is a tough tournament, with what lies ahead and you got to manage things a little bit. But I just don't see how it's a bad thing for either team to be involved in a game where everybody's hooting and hollering. I don't know what triggered it, but the one thing was the crowd was loud, I know that. So, to me, that's really good experience. The catch of the whole thing is, kind of like these guys alluded to, now you got to calm down and you got to play baseball. To me, I may be wrong, but the last three innings was just good baseball, and we were fortunate that something happened in our favor, it certainly could have gone the other way as well. So, get some rest and then we'll kind of see where we're at. Like I said, maybe we'll attack the thing of a little bit of a unique fashion.



Q. How do you assess what Cannon did today at the plate and then behind the plate?

TONY VITELLO: Yeah it was huge. He's kind of been labeled our RBI guy off the bench, and he's done well in those situations where there's a guy at third or potential to get an RBI, and the one thing you always get out of him is some fight in the box. I'm pleased that he's gotten past the, I don't know what you would call it, but the over extending the fight. He's such a Pete Rose-type baseball player, and if that tilts too much to the extreme, maybe there's a little too much fire and a little too much tension ala Drew Gilbert sometimes, but when he kind of gets it back to center you always know you're going to get a fight at the plate. Then he certainly is capable behind the plate when he's catching as well. Has the arm to boot. So it's nice having that option, and it's also nice at this point, I don't know, and again I'm not trying to -- I don't know that we've sorted, the coaching staff has got it sorted exactly where everybody needs to be, but it's nice the picture is kind of clearing to where, this guy belongs in this spot, this guy's role, this guy's role, and that way the kids can come to the park knowing what's expected and we'll see what we can get.

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